

The Teacher's Educational Journey



Rural Schools Transformation Network
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Acknowledgment

As KODA, since 2016, we have been working to strengthen teachers and families so that children in villages can receive a quality education. With each program we have implemented, we have gained a deeper understanding of the field, encountered new needs, and developed new solutions together with those who joined our network.

From Muş to Aydın, Bursa to Batman, and Kastamonu to Şanlıurfa, our journey has been filled with diverse experiences from across Turkey. We have witnessed the significance of rural areas, villages, village schools, and every individual within this ecosystem. While working directly in the field with the adults surrounding children, we recognized the need to support our words with data—not only to enhance the impact we create but also to make the needs in this field more visible.

With every crisis, we have seen that rural areas offer countless opportunities to build something better. The motivation to develop rural-specific education policies, ensure fair attention to rural areas, and present the knowledge we've accumulated over the past eight years through data led us to prepare this series of articles. When the idea for this project first emerged, we had just come through the pandemic, but the **February 6 Earthquakes** had not yet occurred. After the earthquakes, our understanding of village schools was tested once again. The initial drafts for this series were erased and rewritten countless times. During this process, we crossed paths with the **STGM team**, and together, we created a video in the villages of Hatay to explain the relevance of this article series.

This series is the product of collective effort. Therefore, we extend our heartfelt thanks to **Demet Taşkan, Gökçen Karaman, Hatice Azın, Muhammed Atalay, Okan Pala** and **Öykü Kocaman**, whose experiences and insights enriched our articles. We also thank the **STGM team members Ezgi Karataş, Hakan Ataman, Murat Özçelebi** and **Özge Azap**, who helped transform our message into a visual and auditory experience.

Lastly, we are deeply grateful to all the teachers, teacher candidates, parents, village heads, academics, and volunteers who, over the past eight years, have opened their villages, schools, and experiences to us.



The Teacher's Educational Journey

Perhaps younger siblings or cousins take their seats first; if they are not around, plush toys step in; and if no one is there, imaginary friends fill the imaginary desks. Chalk, gathered from the classroom floor and stored away for this moment, is taken out to transform a door, a wall, or a cabinet into a blackboard. The game of playing teacher begins—with the subject we understand best or the one we most want to understand. For some of us, this game lasts only a couple of years; for others, it becomes a lifelong journey. One way or another, the path to making the dream of teaching a reality begins when crossing the threshold into faculties of education. And once this threshold is crossed, we know that this journey of learning never truly ends.

In this article, we aim to examine the sources of motivation for reaching that threshold, the opportunities available during the teacher preparation process, and the resources offered—viewed through the lens of rural education. Considering that village schools are often the first assignment locations for many elementary teacher candidates, we seek to examine the current state of preparation from multiple perspectives.

The Teacher's Teacher

Teaching requires not only theoretical knowledge but also a range of skills, such as public speaking and presentation, creativity, identifying needs and resources, persuasion, and effective communication. The most significant steps toward acquiring both this knowledge and these skills occur within faculties of education at universities. In Turkey, until 2020, the curricula for teacher education in these faculties were developed according to standards set by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). However, in August 2020, under YÖK's decision to delegate authority to universities, the determination of courses, curricula, and credits in teacher education programs was assigned to the relevant councils of higher education institutions. This autonomy decision was certainly positive in terms of enabling the development of course content focused on rural education for prospective teachers¹. However it also raised this question: are faculties of education—many of which are not yet ready to take the initiative in designing their own programs and lack the necessary academic expertise—truly equipped to prepare future teachers for all the conditions they may encounter in rural settings?

To answer this question, it is essential to first outline the current situation from the perspective of those directly involved. When conducting the analysis, it is important not only to consider prospective teachers but also to take into account the circumstances of the academics providing the education.

"Here in Turkey, the process is somewhat twofold. You're required to train teachers while also publishing academic works. There are other academic responsibilities as well... I constantly question myself. I'm not sure of my own competence. I seek validation—be it from my professors, students, family, or the dean's office..."

An Academic at a Faculty of Education

¹ Council of Higher Education (YÖK). (2020, August 18). A historic decision by YÖK regarding the curricula of faculties of education. Council of Higher Education website.



In addition to the heavy workload stemming from the dual responsibilities of training teachers and producing research, academics highlight several challenges in the teacher preparation process. These include the disconnect between curricula and real-world practice, the lack of enthusiasm among students, the high enrollment quotas in elementary education departments, technological inadequacies in faculties, and the overly theoretical nature of mandatory courses. Nearly all the academics interviewed also emphasized the lack of real-life stories and experiences when discussing rural education, leading to theoretical knowledge that feels abstract and out of touch for students.

“The most common question I get from students is, ‘How do we teach reading and writing to children whose native language is different?’ Since I don’t have experience in this area, I struggle to answer. Explaining multigrade classrooms is also challenging; students find it unfamiliar and abstract, especially those who grew up in urban areas.”

An Academic at a Faculty of Education

Many teacher candidates anticipate that their first appointment will be at a rural school. They ask questions to understand this area—when they find time amidst the larger, looming question: “Will I even get appointed?”

“We’ll probably go straight to work in rural schools next year. For instance, there’s a chance we’ll end up in a village, and honestly, we’re inexperienced and unaware of how to handle that.”

A Teacher Candidate

“If I Could Just Get Appointed...”

For many teacher candidates, the most challenging part of the process is perceived to be securing an appointment. The difficulty of this process is undeniable, but what happens afterward?

“Some of our graduates have gone to villages in the East. Their schools have many students who don’t speak Turkish. If I were assigned to such a school, I wouldn’t know what to do. It would’ve been helpful to learn about this in advance, but no one mentioned it.”

A Teacher Candidate

According to the Regulation on Teacher Appointment and Relocation² teachers are required to fulfill a mandatory service obligation in Türkiye. The duration of this obligation and the service points awarded vary depending on the socio-economic level, geographical location, transportation opportunities, and access to services in the assigned school’s region, which is categorized into three service regions and six service areas. Teacher candidates typically prefer schools in the 4th, 5th, and 6th service areas, most of which are in rural regions, to meet their mandatory service requirements and increase their service points.

² Resmî Gazete. (2015, April 17). Regulation on teacher appointment and relocation by the Ministry of National Education (No. 29329). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.



Newly appointed graduates face numerous questions: How will I get to the school? Who do I contact first? What are the physical conditions of my school? How do I communicate with families? If I have to manage administrative tasks, how do I handle the bureaucracy? How do I create a plan for multigrade classrooms, and what methods and tools do I use? How do I communicate with a child who doesn't speak Turkish? From whom can I seek personal and professional support? After the monumental question of "Will I even get appointed?", these might seem like mere details. But for eager new graduates who are committed to doing justice to their profession, every single question demands an answer.

Another Way is Possible

For teacher candidates who encounter these questions even before graduating and strive to find answers before stepping into the profession, the search begins in the lecture halls of their faculties. The shift toward online education during recent global and national crises has made alternative development opportunities a necessity rather than a choice. For prospective elementary school teachers aiming to start their careers with professional and personal strength, development opportunities are not limited to formal institutions. At the forefront of the alternatives where candidates can establish themselves as educators are civil society initiatives. Since the inclusion of the Community Involvement Practices course in teacher education programs in 2006, familiarity with this field has become inevitable. Additionally, university clubs, community activities, university projects, and mobility programs for young people provide alternative platforms for teacher candidates to develop personally and professionally.

"I could've developed myself after starting my career, but it would've taken much longer. This process happened for us in an accelerated way. If I hadn't participated in volunteer activities, the faculty alone couldn't have prepared us for this."

A Teacher Candidate

Alternative development opportunities appear to offer practical benefits for teacher candidates. In an era of unlimited access to information and predominantly theoretical curricula, access to practical experience fosters growth. Especially for rural schools, involvement in projects or activities shifts candidates' perspectives from romanticizing rural education to truly understanding its dynamics. Practical experiences, such as managing a multigrade classroom, planning lessons, and developing innovative teaching methods, often motivate candidates to engage with the reality of rural schools—perhaps by sharing a cup of tea in the village square.

"When we were there, the principal was trying to handle everything. He met with an organization to arrange breakfast for the children and even asked the gendarmerie for toner."

A Teacher Candidate



Back to the Future

The areas for improvement in teacher education are not limited to rural education. However, the needs and suggestions outlined here are confined to the focus of this series: ensuring quality education in rural areas.

For elementary education students to begin their careers stronger in rural schools, gaining experience in this area or learning from those with such experience is critical. Another essential need is incorporating theoretical and practical knowledge about rural education into the curricula of faculties of education. Finally, it is crucial to introduce teacher candidates to alternative platforms for professional and personal development.

The perspective of teacher candidates toward education is equally important. Internalizing the belief that providing equitable access to education for all children, breaking the cycle of poverty in rural areas, and ensuring the sustainable development of rural regions are essential can help candidates remain resilient when facing challenges in rural schools.

Providing a definitive solution to these needs is not possible. Perhaps, the opposite—avoiding fixed solutions and presenting suggestions that remain open to change and transformation—is the key. For instance, faculties could involve individuals with rural teaching experience to contribute to coursework.

“Our professor explained what we should do when designing education and preparing content for multigrade classrooms. He talked about how we can prepare ourselves for both the positive and negative aspects of the village environment. He also mentioned that we could create materials using natural resources. During the lecture, he even called his former students, and we had a Q&A session with them. Some of them had become teachers, while others had pursued different careers, but they all still lived in the village.”

A Teacher Candidate

The introduction of teacher candidates to projects and activities aimed at rural areas, along with their initial guidance toward these regions through certain incentives, can help them discover themselves both as individuals and as teachers. Particularly, their involvement in fieldwork can not only contribute meaningful answers to the challenges of this area but also open the door to the emergence of new, thought-provoking questions. Lastly, it can be proposed that the curricula in education faculties responsible for training teachers be enriched with content, programs, and courses that consider rural education. To achieve this, it is essential to support faculty members who possess knowledge and experience related to rural contexts and to enhance collaborations with experienced non-governmental organizations.



The Ministry of National Education (MoNE), representing the fieldwork aspect of this process, should conduct regular research on the needs of newly graduated teachers appointed to rural areas. The data obtained from these studies should be shared with relevant institutions, enabling the adjustment of education faculty programs to better align with these needs. Additionally, it is crucial to monitor the extent to which the recently developed National Education Academy³ model —introduced by MoNE to support the professional development of prospective teachers— effectively addresses the needs of rural education.

Let us imagine for a moment that all our recommendations are implemented immediately and flawlessly. Even if they are perfectly executed, they cannot definitively lead us to the ideal of the "teacher ready for rural education" that we have envisioned since the beginning of this article. This is because the suggestions we have outlined are merely the paving stones leading toward that ideal. It must not be overlooked that the ones who will walk this path are the teacher candidates themselves. None of them are simply teachers of tomorrow; each has been trying to set the rules of the game since the very first day they entered the field. The foremost task, therefore, is to return to the imaginary desks we have left behind and to never stop listening to the thoughts of those who are still playing the game.

³ The National Education Academy is a newly established educational institution under the Ministry of National Education in Türkiye, aimed at supporting the professional development of teachers. The academy plans to provide prospective teachers with 550 hours of mandatory training before starting their careers. Candidates who successfully complete the training will be appointed on a contractual basis and will have the right to obtain tenure after three years.

