

Being a Teacher in a Village



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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.



Being a Teacher in a Village

The person we never forget among all the people we meet throughout our lives is our elementary school teacher. This may be because, after the adults who raised us during our childhood, they are the ones we spend the most time with, or because they introduced us to many "new" things. In both villages and cities, parents entrust their children's education and teaching to elementary school teachers. But is the teacher who later becomes part of village life and is responsible for the education of village children truly prepared for life here, as we outlined in our first article?

In this article, we will discuss the personal and professional journey of the village teacher. The scope of this discussion will also try to include the teacher's life in the village with an objective perspective. We will share the stories of village teachers who, after being assigned to rural areas, chose to become village teachers, improved the physical facilities of the school they worked at, involved families in the educational process, and proved that better education is possible in the village by not ignoring local resources.

What kind of guide does a village teacher need? This article does not claim to be a guide. It has been written with the awareness that every village has its own dynamics, opportunities, and challenges, and it contains humble suggestions.

40+1¹: Choosing Village Schools

Since the first article in our series, we have explored the changing nature of villages, the current state of education in rural areas, the significance of schools for village communities, the educational opportunities offered to village children, teacher training programs for prospective educators, and the processes that prepare them for their profession. We have done so primarily in the hope of viewing villages and rural life through the same lens as our readers. Attempting to fit villages into a single mold or searching for one ideal method to achieve better education is unrealistic. Our goal has been to break free from our biases about rural areas, step outside the dreams we've been shown or taught, and truly understand the challenges, strengths, and advantages of rural life.

"This was my dream: On the first day, I would dress nicely. I would walk into the classroom, and the children would be waiting for me. I would greet them with, 'Good morning, children,' and begin my lesson. However, when I arrived at the school for the first time, I unlocked the door only to find a terrible scene. The roof was leaking, the desks were dusty, and the school was in ruins. There were no students. One by one, curious children began to appear. I couldn't tell whether they were my students or not because we couldn't communicate—they didn't speak Turkish."

Village Teacher

¹ The Ministry of National Education (MEB) assigns individuals who were not placed in any school after making 40 choices to vacant schools that were not selected, through a lottery system, provided that their scores meet the requirements.



Teacher candidates often prefer urban schools in their placement choices. Village schools are typically chosen for two reasons: fulfilling mandatory service obligations or avoiding unemployment. Many prospective teachers, upon being assigned to a village school as their first post, face a dual reality—realizing their dream of starting their teaching career while confronting their fears. Sometimes, the challenges begin even before reaching the village, with initial concerns about how to get there or where to stay when the term begins.

“I imagined an elderly woman in the village welcoming me into her home, offering me a room, and I’d sit by an oil lamp reading my book. What I encountered was entirely different.”

Village Teacher

Beginning: Half the Battle in Village Teaching

It’s said that starting is half the battle, but for village teaching, this saying needs to be redefined. From being mentally prepared to teach in a village, to finding or creating a classroom ready for lessons, bringing students to the classroom, and determining methods to teach students of varying levels, every stage represents preparation before a village teacher can truly begin their work.

“The village headman wasn’t there, so I had to enter the school through a window. On the second day, when I got the key and opened the classrooms, I saw how terrible their condition was. The desks were broken, the blackboard was inadequate, there was only one toilet outside, and there was no running water. My father and I spent a week cleaning the school to make it usable. It was then ready to accommodate children, but it was still far from ideal.”

Village Teacher

When considering rural education, it is impossible to limit the discussion to schools alone. A village teacher’s responsibilities extend beyond the classroom to encompass the village’s economic activities, cultural dynamics, migration patterns, infrastructure, and even neighborly relations. These factors often require intervention to ensure that education fosters the holistic emotional and physical development of children.

“In the district where our village is located, there is a conflict and ongoing dispute between two families. Some members have moved to our neighborhood, while the other family and those close to them reside near the other school. The municipality is controlled by the latter group, which causes disruptions in services. Since they do not get along, they refuse to provide services to each other. How can we bring these people together? To improve education in the district, this issue needs to be resolved first.”

Village Teacher



Defining the Job: Village Teacher

The Turkish Language Association defines a “village teacher” in its current Turkish dictionary² as an “educator.” While terms like “educator” or “a teacher working in a village” are accurate, they fall short in scope and content. The scope is insufficient because thousands of villages, despite their rural characteristics, are referred to as neighborhoods. As mentioned in our earlier articles, with the 2012 “Metropolitan Municipality Law”³, villages located in provinces with metropolitan status were reclassified as neighborhoods regardless of their population, production relations, or geographical structure. Similarly, village schools were absorbed into central schools. The content is inadequate because the daily professional routines of a teacher working in a village school differ significantly from those of a teacher in a central school.

“It was my eighth year as a teacher, but I had never been the sole educator at a school. I had never been the only adult with the students. I had to manage administrative tasks and teach four different grades simultaneously. It was overwhelming.”

Village Teacher

These differences can be discussed under certain main headings. The first is the practice of multigrade classrooms, frequently seen in village schools. Due to the low number of children in villages, children of different academic levels and age groups attend classes together. Here, the village teacher must follow the same curriculum as in standalone classrooms and sometimes teach the objectives of two or even four different levels within a single classroom. However, the teacher lacks sufficient tools, time, and training from their education faculty to bring out the advantages of this method. Nor is there specialized support available for this purpose.

“If a week is allocated to a topic in the central school, at least two weeks should be allocated here. Half of the class time is spent on one group, and the other half on the second group. The curriculum is the same. When we teach one group, the other group’s attention wanders. I’d prefer a single classroom with 40 students over a multigrade classroom of 10.”

Village Teacher

As an alternative to the challenges of multigrade classrooms, the bussed education model, which we discussed in detail in earlier articles, has been introduced. However, this approach introduces its own set of issues, such as young children struggling to adapt to school, transportation difficulties negatively affecting children, and an inability to establish healthy communication with families. Teachers are left to solve these problems and must visit different villages to meet the parents of their students, who come from various locations, or make an effort to visit parents who cannot attend parent meetings.

² Turkish Language Association (TDK). (n.d.). Dictionaries of the Turkish Language Association.

³ Resmî Gazete. (2012, December 6). Law on the establishment of metropolitan municipalities in thirteen provinces and twenty-six districts, and amendments to certain decree laws (No. 28489). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.



“But mobile education has its own problems, like frequent issues with transportation providers. For example, absenteeism is common among girls.”

Village Teacher

Another significant difference is that village teachers must take on multiple roles to meet the needs of the school. As rising agricultural costs push rural residents to migrate to cities and village populations dwindle, village schools are often seen as candidates for closure. Consequently, providing the minimum conditions for quality education often falls to the village teacher, who must sometimes act as an administrator, painter, repair person, fundraiser, or janitor. This requires teachers to develop themselves in various ways.

“Even the renovation of the school is handled by the teacher. There’s no budget. The school is small, and, for example, they tell villagers to cover heating costs. If the villagers collect money, it happens. If not, it’s up to the teacher.”

Village Teacher

One of the challenges village teachers face is absenteeism. Common reasons for absenteeism in villages include children participating in seasonal agricultural work, girls taking on caregiving responsibilities in extended families, bussed education, child or early forced marriages, families’ lack of belief in education, and financial difficulties. In such conditions, ensuring student attendance becomes another critical task for village teachers.

“Families want their children to get an education but don’t make any effort to achieve it, especially for girls. Bussed education is one of the reasons. Students are transported to other schools, and families don’t consider this safe for girls.”

Village Teacher

“It Takes a Village to Raise a Child”⁴

Up to this point, we have tried to present the village, the village school, and its conditions from the perspective of a village teacher. Leaving out the most important stakeholder of a teacher in the village—parents—would render the discussion incomplete. Therefore, let’s bring the experience of parenting in rural areas into the conversation through the eyes of village teachers.

“At the end of the first month, I organized a parent-teacher meeting. I was excited. I dressed differently to welcome them, swept and prepared the classroom. From my school, I could see the village road. As time passed, I started watching the road to see if anyone was coming. That day, no one showed up.”

Village Teacher

⁴ An African proverb.



In some villages, families do not believe in the necessity or importance of education. In others, families may harbor prejudices against the school and the teacher due to frequent changes in teaching staff. The intensive labor required for activities like agriculture and livestock farming limits parents' time and energy. Parents who do make time for their children's education may feel they cannot support them because they are illiterate.

"I categorized families into two groups: those who wanted to engage with their children and those who didn't. Parents are illiterate. Even if they want to help, their support is limited."

Village Teacher

We stand by our claim: Parents are the village teacher's greatest allies. However, convincing parents that teamwork is essential for education also falls to the village teacher. Encouraging adults, whose time and energy are limited, to start supporting their children's education requires the teacher to put in considerable effort. This involves maintaining constant communication with parents, serving as a role model for them, visiting their homes and sharing meals, listening to their concerns and working to solve their problems, and being present for them at their weddings and funerals. When the village teacher succeeds in building this relationship, not only does the school advance, but a significant step is also taken toward improving the village as a whole.

"In a village where people said nothing could grow, I planted a small vegetable garden in the schoolyard. A few weeks later, vegetable gardens started appearing in front of villagers' homes. We can take the initiative to make the impossible possible."

Village Teacher

"Which Is Harder: Leaving or Staying?"⁵

For a country to produce and develop, it needs its villages; for a village to fully realize its potential, it needs a school; and for a school to provide quality and sustainable education, it needs a teacher. Given this, it is not right to lose hope in villages just because "the population in villages is already decreasing".

We dedicated the final section to the inspiration we drew from village teachers who continue this journey with hope, determination, and faith. We also aimed to compile suggestions from those who see the opportunities in villages and join hands with other village teachers to overcome challenges.

"Village teachers often hold onto each other tightly; their bonds are strong."

Village Teacher

According to village teachers, one of the most significant opportunities of village schools is the small class sizes. This allows teachers to get to know each of their students more closely and monitor their development more thoroughly.

⁵ Lyrics by Yusuf Nalkesen.



The second most important opportunity is the respect for the teaching profession in villages.

“[During home visits] you enter the house, and everyone stands up. I felt like someone very important.”

Village Teacher

Another key opportunity is that schools in villages are deeply connected with nature. In cities, schools with large, green spaces are rare, but in villages, every school is surrounded by nature with expansive gardens. Additionally, many outdoor learning methods utilize the resources nature provides, and these can be enriched further through peer teaching.

Finally, the mutual familiarity between families and children, the village community’s need for the knowledge and expertise the teacher can offer, and the opportunity for teachers to gain cultural experiences stand out as other important opportunities.

By leveraging these opportunities, village teachers can overcome various challenges. However, they believe that providing quality education in villages should not rely solely on the conscience or initiative of teachers. They propose systemic changes to address these issues.

According to village teachers, improving the physical conditions of village schools is the first step. Beyond this, offering diverse educational opportunities to village students to support their holistic development is essential. Some steps in this direction include providing guidance counselors and subject-specific teachers in schools, organizing extracurricular and after-school activities for children, and developing an educational program tailored to the rural context that reflects its heritage and meets its needs.

Universities should also allocate more focus to rural education in teacher training programs and offer teacher candidates opportunities for professional experience in rural areas. Another suggestion relates to education policies: designing a curriculum suitable for village schools, implementing various incentives for village teachers, ensuring the Ministry of National Education supports village schools, and raising awareness on this issue.

At first, going to the village is hard for village teachers; after discovering the potential of rural life, leaving the village becomes even harder. Just as it might be difficult for readers to begin exploring this topic, it becomes equally challenging to let go once it is discovered. For this reason, we refrain from putting a definitive endpoint to this piece, just as we cannot attach a final point to village teaching. Despite the shared challenges, we continue sharing these stories in hopes of inspiring more companions for village teachers on their journey to make a difference in lives.

“My family didn’t want me to go. I wanted to go and see for myself. I had no intention of staying. I’m so glad I went. I stayed, and I realized that wherever I am, children need me as a teacher.”

Village Teacher

