KODA
Köy Okulları Değişim Ağı

The Role of the Family in Rural Education

Rural Schools Transformation Network
Date of establishment: December 5, 2016

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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 S**TGM 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 Role of the Family in Rural Education

"The school, family, and child can be imagined as a three-legged trivet."

A Mother Living in a Village

If there is one truth that climate, geography, socio-economic status, or cultural structure cannot alter, it is how critical the role of adults is in a child's learning process. The reason we prefer the term "adults" is that it is not possible to limit a child's learning environment to the school. Therefore, every adult encountered in daily life is part of the child's educational ecosystem. In rural areas, where environmental stimuli are fewer, and direct relationships are more common, the role of adults, particularly families, becomes even more critical. In this article, we will discuss the final leg of the three-legged trivet supporting the role of schools and teachers in the education of children in villages: families[1] . We will focus on the contributions of families to the education process, as well as the unique approaches and needs of families in rural areas. Additionally, based on our field experiences, we will offer various recommendations to encourage parents in rural areas to actively support their children's education.

While we cannot confine a child's learning process to the school, we also cannot limit families' contributions to their child's education to merely sending the child to school. An effective learning environment for a child is built through parents' involvement in education and the family-child relationship outside school. Numerous theoretical and empirical studies in the literature highlight the fundamental role of families in their children's education[2, 3]. Parents who attend school activities, participate in parent-teacher meetings, communicate with teachers, talk with their children about school and classes, and engage in home-based educational activities are more likely to see their children succeed in education.

Furthermore, the level and quality of communication between parents and their children, parents' attitudes and behaviors toward their children, and their understanding of discipline shape the ecosystem in which children grow and influence their academic success. Routines at home, adequate nutrition, and hygiene habits play critical roles in children's healthy development and directly impact their educational lives. Studies show that malnutrition among primary school-aged children can lead to decreased academic performance and increased absenteeism[4].

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[1] In rural areas, children are cared for not only by their parents but also by older siblings, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Volunteers who support the formation of educational groups and work with children can also be involved in the process. Therefore, when referring to "family," it is important to consider that it sometimes includes adults who take on caregiving responsibilities for children.

[2] Castro, M., et al. (2015). Parental involvement on student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. Educational Research Review, 14, 33–46.

[3] Porumbu, D., & Necuoib, D. V. (2013). Relationship between parental involvement/attitude and children's school achievements. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 76, 706–710.

[4] Küçükkaraca Zakkour, H., & Yıldıran, H. (2022). The effect of parental nutrition education on the impact of school-age children's nutrition education. Gazi Journal of Health Sciences, 7(3), 135-148.

While parents' modeling is essential for children to develop proper hygiene habits, regional research indicates that children aged 6-15 in rural areas may exhibit inadequate hygiene-related behaviors[5]. Children who grow up in supportive and loving family environments develop better social-emotional skills such as confidence, empathy, responsibility, self-expression, and a sense of belonging. When children carry these skills, positive discipline, and healthy living habits into life, their enthusiasm for learning and discovery increases. So, how do the critical roles of family involvement and parent-child relationships manifest in villages and rural areas?

A Portrait of the Family in the Countryside

Starting this section by outlining the profile of a family living in a rural area—exploring who they consist of, how their daily lives unfold, and how their family relationships are shaped—could provide meaningful insights into how rural dynamics influence education. However, it is difficult to present a fixed picture, as assuming homogeneity among rural families would be misleading. Variables such as socio-economic characteristics, culture, geography, proximity to city and town centers, sources of livelihood, agricultural production methods, and labor structures shape the diverse dynamics of villages. Even two villages within walking distance of each other can have vastly different family structures. In one family, the father might leave early in the morning to work in a nearby factory or mine, while in another, the father, mother, and children may head to the fields together for agricultural harvesting. Households with a steady income may prioritize domestic chores and elderly or childcare over agricultural production, whereas families engaged in farming or gardening structure their daily routines around tending to livestock and preparing goods for market. In some villages, families may withdraw into their homes due to language barriers, lack of roads, or distance from town centers. Meanwhile, in others, proximity to the city may enable them to gain new perspectives through interaction with different lifestyles. Although the final say regarding children in most villages often belongs to fathers and grandfathers, the varying attitudes and disciplinary approaches of mothers, grandmothers, relatives, or other adults from neighboring households establish different ecosystems for children in every village. Despite these differences, one thing remains constant: the critical role families play in their children's education.

A Cautious Approach to Education

In rural areas, families' attitudes toward education determine how they embrace this important role. For rural parents, ensuring their children's access to education is undoubtedly a significant issue. In fact, education ranks among the top three reasons for internal migration in Turkey[6]. A considerable portion of this migration stems from families in rural areas relocating to cities or town centers, believing their children cannot receive adequate education in villages.

[5] Oğuzöncül, A. F., Bulut, İ., Pirinçci, E., Yurt, N., & Deveci, S. E. (2020). Evaluation of hygiene and nutrition behaviors of primary school-age children living in rural areas. ESTÜDAM Journal of Public Health, 5(1), 73-83.
[6] Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (2024). Internal migration statistics 2023.

For instance, one of the factors behind the dramatic decline in Turkey's rural population—from 56%[7] of the total population in 1980 to 17.3%[8] in 2022—is the "bussed education system" implemented during the 1990-91 academic year. This system, detailed in the third part of our series, has contributed to migration from rural to urban areas for decades as families sought to avoid its drawbacks and provide better education for their children[9].

On the other hand, one of the most common complaints from teachers working in rural areas is the lack of family support for the educational process. For villagers, the school is more than just a building where education takes place. It's a place they pass by on their way to the fields, graze their animals nearby, or rest under its shade. Yet, how can something so close feel so distant?

Our field experiences reveal that rural families' perspectives on education, schools, and teachers are shaped by various prejudices and a sense of learned helplessness. Negative memories from their own schooling, the frequent turnover of teachers at their children's schools, the departure of beloved teachers for city postings, weak communication between teachers and rural families, and the lack of resources and knowledge to improve this communication often contribute to deeply rooted prejudices against schools and teachers. This suggests that teachers in rural areas must make greater and more tailored efforts to engage families and other adults in the educational process compared to their counterparts in urban settings. The contributions rural families make to education, the resources they require, and their motivations differ significantly from those of urban families.

"In rural areas, one shouldn't evaluate the family only as the mother and father. Since we work in farming, we leave our children with their grandmothers and grandfathers..."

A Mother Living in a Village

Although the profiles of families living in rural areas and their perspectives on the place and importance of education in their children's lives may vary, it is possible to identify some commonalities that shape their participation in the educational process and their needs in this field. First, it should be emphasized that households in rural areas are often structured as extended families, and children interact with a broader group of adults compared to their peers in urban areas. A second commonality worth highlighting is that, since production in villages relies on agriculture and livestock, every family member participates in the production process, leaving caregivers with very limited time for their children. Third, caregivers' access to information about educational resources, curriculum changes, extracurricular activities, and academic support programs may be limited. Fourth, families living in rural areas require more direct and face-to-face communication methods to support their children's education.

[7] Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (n.d.). General population census database. Retrieved from https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/nufusmenuapp/menu.zul

[8] Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (2023). Urban and rural population statistics 2022.

[9] Güven, O. Ö.(2023). A practice of compulsory urbanization:Transportation-based education. Society and Science, 166,76–94.

Lastly, it is important to remember that in a small community like a village, families' attitudes influence one another positively or negatively, making it crucial to foster mutual support among families.

Rural Family Engagement

Given these circumstances, how can parent-child relationships in rural areas be made as healthy as possible, and how can families' roles in their children's education be made as supportive as possible?

Family engagement is a dynamic field. Central government, local governments, professional associations, non-governmental organizations, cooperatives, unions, universities, private companies, and media organizations are all involved in a variety of initiatives in this area, whether narrow or broad in scope. While it is impossible to cover all these efforts, a few notable examples can be highlighted. Central government conducts its most intensive family-related work through the Ministry of Family and Social Services and the Ministry of National Education, focusing on family education. These programs aim to increase caregivers' knowledge about child education and improve their parenting skills. Meanwhile, the Velivizyon (Parentvision) platform launched by the Ministry of National Education in August 2024 and its 27-episode series Ailem (My Family), which focuses on different themes, are significant for their aim to strengthen school-family collaboration directly.

On the local government side, municipalities organize awareness-raising activities on topics such as the family life cycle, intra-family communication, and children's school success through their relevant departments. Simultaneously, many non-governmental organizations carry out initiatives aimed at supporting children's development and turning home environments into spaces where children can thrive.

When it comes to rural families, the primary focus of family engagement initiatives tends to be on equal opportunities and rural development, alongside limited efforts to support family participation in the education process. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of National Education launched the Family School Project to reach families in villages and neighborhoods through headmen. The project provided training on effective communication skills, peer relationships, conscious and safe technology use, conflict and stress management, and moral development. Similarly, the Family Engagement Program we implemented at Rural Schools Transformation Network (KODA) targets families living in rural areas with the goal of strengthening children's relationships with their families and extending the learning process beyond school and teachers. In the implementation of the program, alternative methods such as teleconferencing are used for training sessions that cannot be conducted face-to-face due to the living conditions in rural areas. Training schedules are planned with consideration for families' production processes, and the content is shaped around their unique experiences.

This is because programs designed based on the dynamics of urban centers may not always align with the differing ecosystems of villages. For family education to be effective, it is crucial to incorporate examples from daily life and provide concrete, actionable steps.

Teacher and Family Collaboration in Rural Areas

"The thing that surprised me most in the village I visited was how beautifully the children expressed their emotions. When I met their mothers, I understood why."

A KODA Program Volunteer

Whether in the city or the village, the essentials for a child's development—just as vital as bread and water—remain unchanged. Beyond meeting basic physical needs, children thrive when they feel valued, receive healthy support from their environment amidst changing conditions, and experience daily life shaped by positive discipline. However, in rural areas, the boundaries of the school extend beyond its walls; the whole village—grandparents, local leaders, teachers, older siblings—plays a role in raising a child. At this point, personal or institutional activities aimed at involving adults in the educational process in rural areas become critically important.

"I play chess or rummy with my son. He plays differently with me than with his father. Usually, while I'm hanging laundry on the terrace, he comes to help. We live just above his grandparents. If his grandfather is in the garden, he immediately runs to assist him; he's very fond of gardening. When he comes home from school, we talk for 15–20 minutes. Sometimes he says, 'Mom, enough with the questions,' but I tell him, 'No, son, you need to share; I need to know what you did at school.' For example, setting and clearing the dinner table is the responsibility of my two sons. If I start sweeping, they immediately start dusting. They've embraced this division of labor."

A Mother Living in a Village

When conducting activities for families in rural areas, it is essential to provide space for them to recall the knowledge they already possess, build upon their existing experiences, and offer new information only where it is genuinely needed. After all, no one understands the dynamics of a place better than those who live there. It is important to design efforts around this core perspective and focus on fundamental points. In doing so, building mutual trust with families is the best approach. Based on our field experience, we aim to outline several recommendations for fostering the active participation of families living in rural areas in the education process.

Recommendations for Working with Families in Rural Areas

The first step in launching family-oriented initiatives in rural areas is recognizing that each village has its own unique dynamics and approaching them with this awareness.

Rather than relying on novels or reports, make an effort to learn about the village directly from its residents. Social and economic relationships, family structures, climate conditions, and the role of education in that particular village can only be fully understood through active communication with those who live there. As a second step, family meetings and community discussions can help establish a shared understanding of the importance of education. However, it is crucial to emphasize that neither side should assume the role of instructor or arbiter in this process. Villages should not be expected to function "like the center," nor should rural education dynamics be defined merely by their similarities to or differences from urban areas. Instead, communication and activities in villages should begin with an open-minded approach that embraces all possibilities.

A third step could involve diversifying the methods used to communicate with parents. Families accustomed to production-based collaboration can be encouraged to engage with schools through joint decision-making, planning of actions, and organizing activities together. The final recommendation might best be described as the starting line of a marathon: all these efforts require persistence with a touch of gentle insistence. Rural life is demanding and the tasks are never-ending. To sustain engagement among families who are convinced of the value of collaboration in education, a consistent and patient approach can open up many opportunities.

Conclusion

While it is challenging to make definitive statements about families in rural areas, it is possible to identify their common strengths and needs, as we have attempted in this article, and take action based on these references. The key is to convey that children need to feel heard, supported, and not compared to others; to remind families of the importance of being consistent in communication with children and dedicating as much time as possible to them; and, in doing so, to enhance the strengths families already possess. This enables children who feel valued to generously share this sense of worth and their individuality with the entire village.