

THE INDISPENSABLE ROLE OF EDUCATION FOR THE CENTENNIAL GOALS OF THE TURKISH REPUBLIC

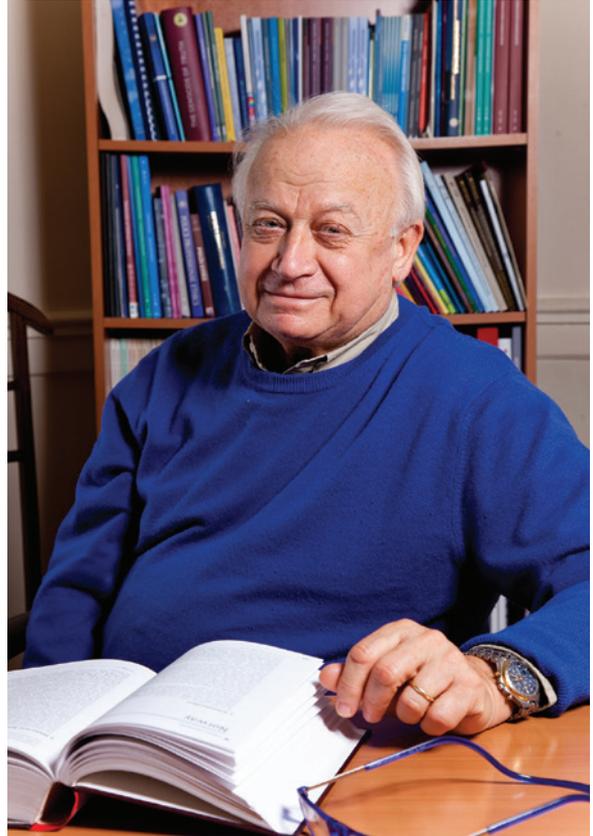
Turkey demonstrated remarkable economic performance over the last decade. In order to meet the goals set for 2023, however, the Turkish economy must shift to a new paradigm in which human capital is the main driver of technological advancement and economic development. As figures show, the quality of a country's education system plays a major role in that country's economic performance, including GDP. As Turkey still remains far behind OECD levels in education, Turkish policy makers need to transform their approaches to education. Prioritization of K-12 and early childhood education (ECE), along with a broad consensus on a human rights-oriented education system, are vital if goals set for 2023 are to be reached.

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Turkey has set very high goals for itself by declaring that it will be among the top-10 world economies by 2023, the year that will mark the centennial anniversary of the Republic. The performance of the Turkish economy has been quite remarkable following the devastating economic crisis of 2001. This crisis was instrumental in leading to a series of measures that made economic recovery both possible and sustainable. The coalition government in power at the time (composed of the Motherland Party, the Democratic Left Party, and the Nationalist Movement Party) somehow managed, albeit reluctantly, to put into effect the structural economic reforms that Washington and international financial bureaucracy (namely the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) were advocating for Turkey. Dr. Kemal Derviş, a vice-president at the World Bank, was invited to join the Turkish cabinet as an expert, and took the reins of the structural reform process in March 2001. The main objectives of these efforts were to increase the role of the private sector in the Turkish economy, to enhance the efficiency and resiliency of the financial sector, and to place the social security system on a more solid foundation.



The elections of 2002 spelled the end of a long period of unstable coalition governments in Turkey as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power alone with a parliamentary majority. In terms of economic policy, the AKP continued working within the boundaries of the structural reform process initiated by Kemal Derviş. Furthermore, during the two general elections that followed (2007 and 2011), economic policy was not subjected to the kind of electoral populism that political parties in Turkey were guilty of in previous decades. Predictability and stability of economic policy were key factors in helping Turkey achieve strong economic

performance and in weathering the 2008 economic crisis that hurt European and U.S. economies. The reforms of 2001-2 helped strengthen the macroeconomic structure of the economy, while economic policies adhering to the boundaries of these reforms helped the economy expand with an average annual real GDP growth rate of five percent between 2002 and 2012.

Amidst such solid economic performance, however, Turkey was faced with an “Achilles’ heel” poised to bring down this growing economic power: its current account deficit. In other words, analysts of the Turkish economy were arguing that Turkey was spending beyond its means on goods and services and financing this deficit with overseas capital imports. Such arguments essentially stated that this good economic performance was resting on thin ice. If the flow of capital imports from overseas dried up, the Turkish economy would face yet another crisis, as it would struggle to finance the current account deficit. Furthermore, it was argued that domestic savings would have to increase, and that these savings must be invested in order to boost industrial production.

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Today, high value-added production dependent on new technologies as well as research and development is the order of the day. This is probably the most important challenge the Turkish economy will have to face in the next decade in order to meet the ambitious goal of ranking among the top-10 world economies by 2023.

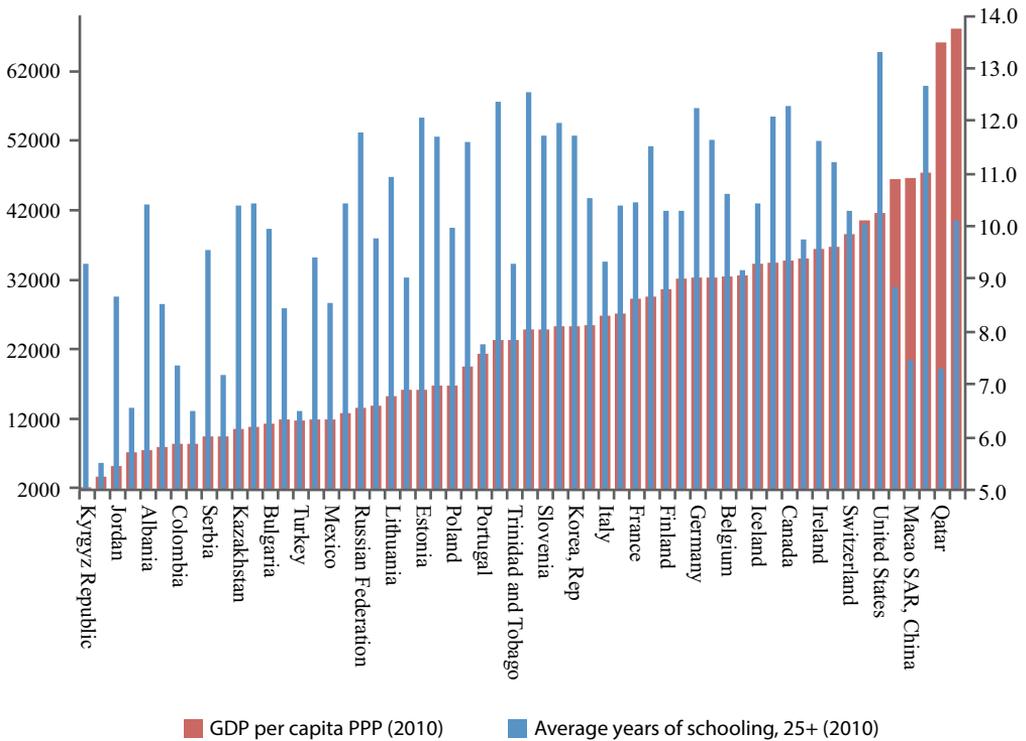
This paper argues that to meet the goals set for 2023, the Turkish economy has to shift to a new paradigm in which human capital is the main driver of technological advancement and economic development. Investment in human capital is also important for the consolidation of democratic citizenship and participatory democracy in Turkey. The establishment of “inclusive institutions” through which citizens have access to public decision-making will also contribute to economic development and growth.¹

¹ See: Daron Acemoğlu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012). The authors argue that “inclusive” political systems that are based on citizen participation and sharing of economic rewards are more sustainable and prosperous.

Why is Education Important for Economic Performance?

Available country-wide education data suggests that access to education is critically important for technological advancement and economic development. Countries in which adult populations have more years of schooling exhibit higher levels of GDP per capita. Yet, the connection between years of schooling and GDP per capita is modest as depicted in Figure-1.

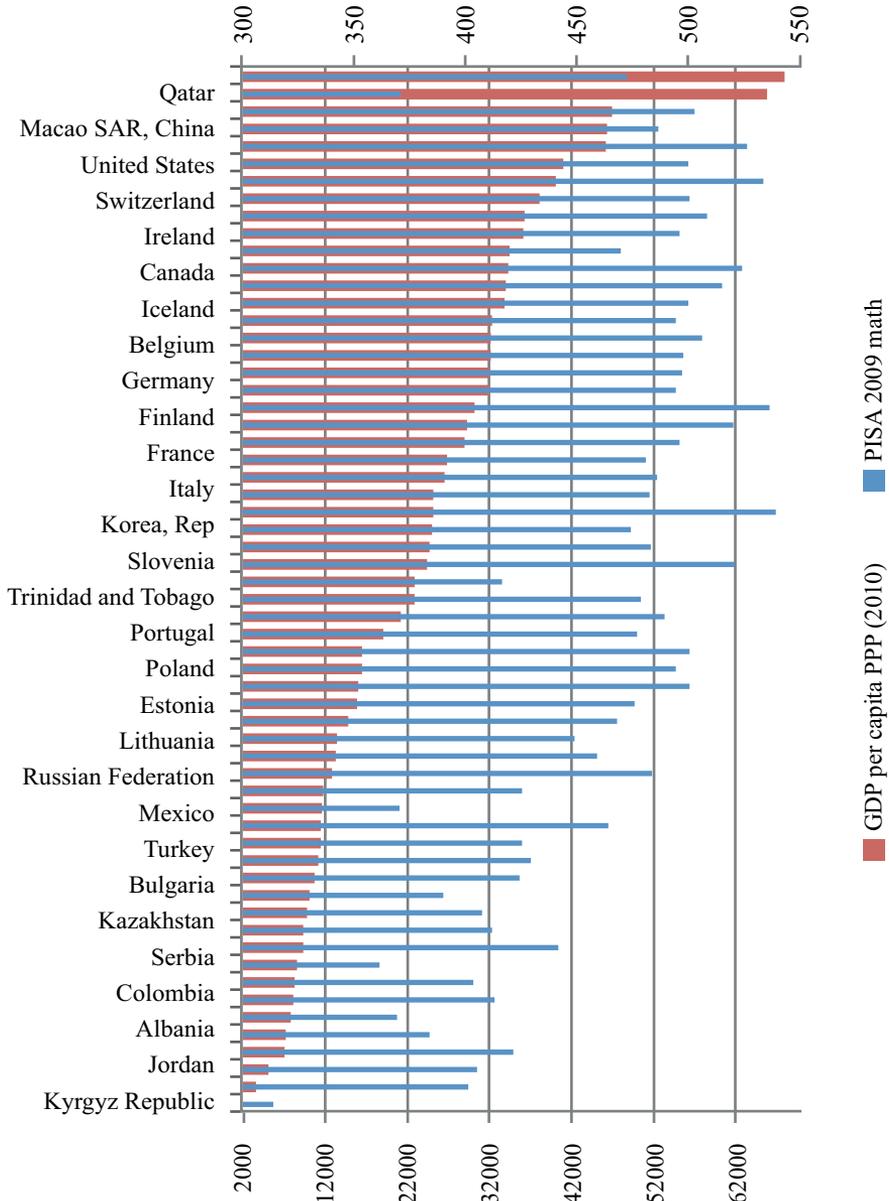
Figure-1: Years of Schooling and GDP Per Capita



Source: The World Bank Education Statistics.

However, if we take the quality of education into account, its impact on GDP per capita becomes much more pronounced. In the international education arena, OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is widely regarded as a reliable measure of quality. PISA mathematics achievement statistics, as shown in Figure-2, reveal a much stronger association with GDP per capita and suggest that access to quality education is an essential ingredient of human capital accumulation.

Figure-2: OECD PISA Scores and GDP



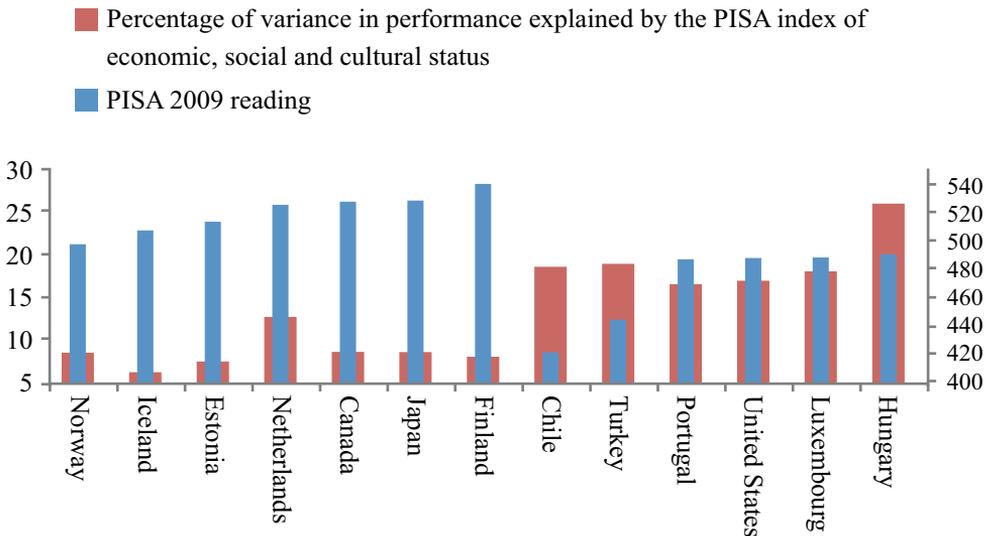
Source: Based on World Bank Education Statistics and OECD PISA Statistics, 2009 Database.

“Educational standards in K-12 education in Turkey are lower than the group of countries Turkey is targeting to be among by 2023.”

Another key finding of PISA is that high-performing education systems combine equity with quality. Equitable education systems are fair and inclusive and support their students in reach their learning potential without either formally or informally pre-setting barriers or lowering expectations. Equity as fairness implies that personal or socio-economic circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin, and family background are not obstacles to educational success. Thus, as Figure-3 shows, in countries

where socio-economic factors are highly predictive of academic achievement, the overall quality of the education system is lower.

Figure-3: Socio-Economic Factors, PISA Score, and Student Achievement



Source: “Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools,” *OECD* (2012).

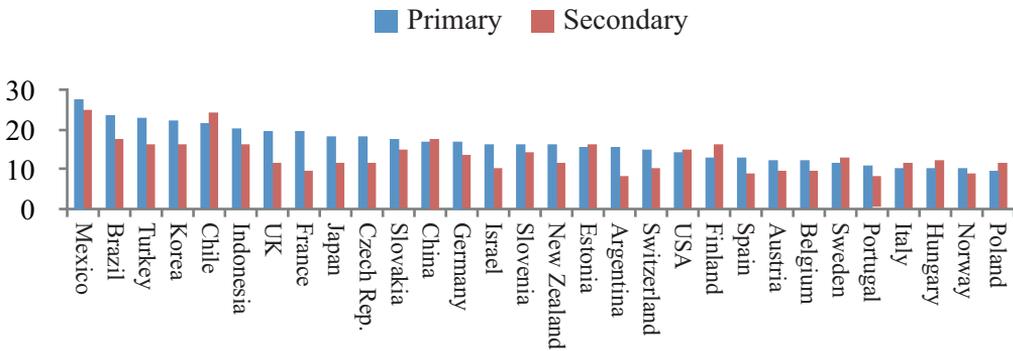
Will Turkey’s Educational Standards be Sufficient to be Among the Top-10 Economies in 2013?

There is not enough data or research comparing the educational standards of Turkey with high performing economies/education systems. Yet it is safe to argue that educational standards in K-12 education in Turkey are lower than the group of countries Turkey is targeting to be among by 2023.

“Among OECD countries, Turkey has the most centralized and top-heavy system, leaving no room for local innovation and initiatives by schools.”

Studies by education scientists as well as economists highlight that teachers constitute the most important school-related factor, which has a pronounced impact on the quality of education. However, as Figure-4 indicates, student-teacher ratio in primary and secondary education is still very high in Turkey compared to other developed and developing countries.

Figure-4: Teacher Student Ratios in Turkey from a Comparative Perspective

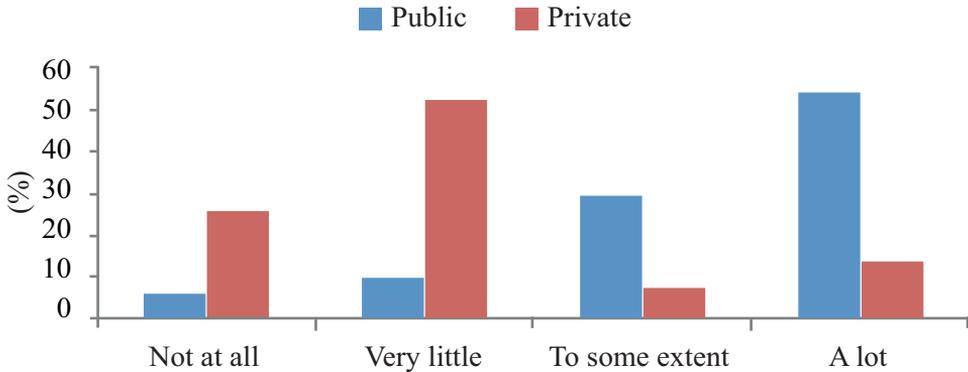


Source: Andreas Schleicher, *Building a High Quality Teaching Profession: Lessons from Around The World* (Paris: OECD, 2011).

In addition to the quantity of teachers, public schools also suffer from low teaching quality (see Figure-5 below). Eighty-four percent of public school principals in Turkey state that their school’s capacity to provide instruction is hindered by lack

of qualified teachers, whereas those children whose parents' who can afford private schools' fees are more likely to benefit from high teaching quality. However, less than three percent of K-12 students in Turkey are enrolled in private institutions.

Figure-5: Is Your School's Capacity to Provide Instruction Hindered by Lack of Qualified Teachers?



Source: OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2008 Database.

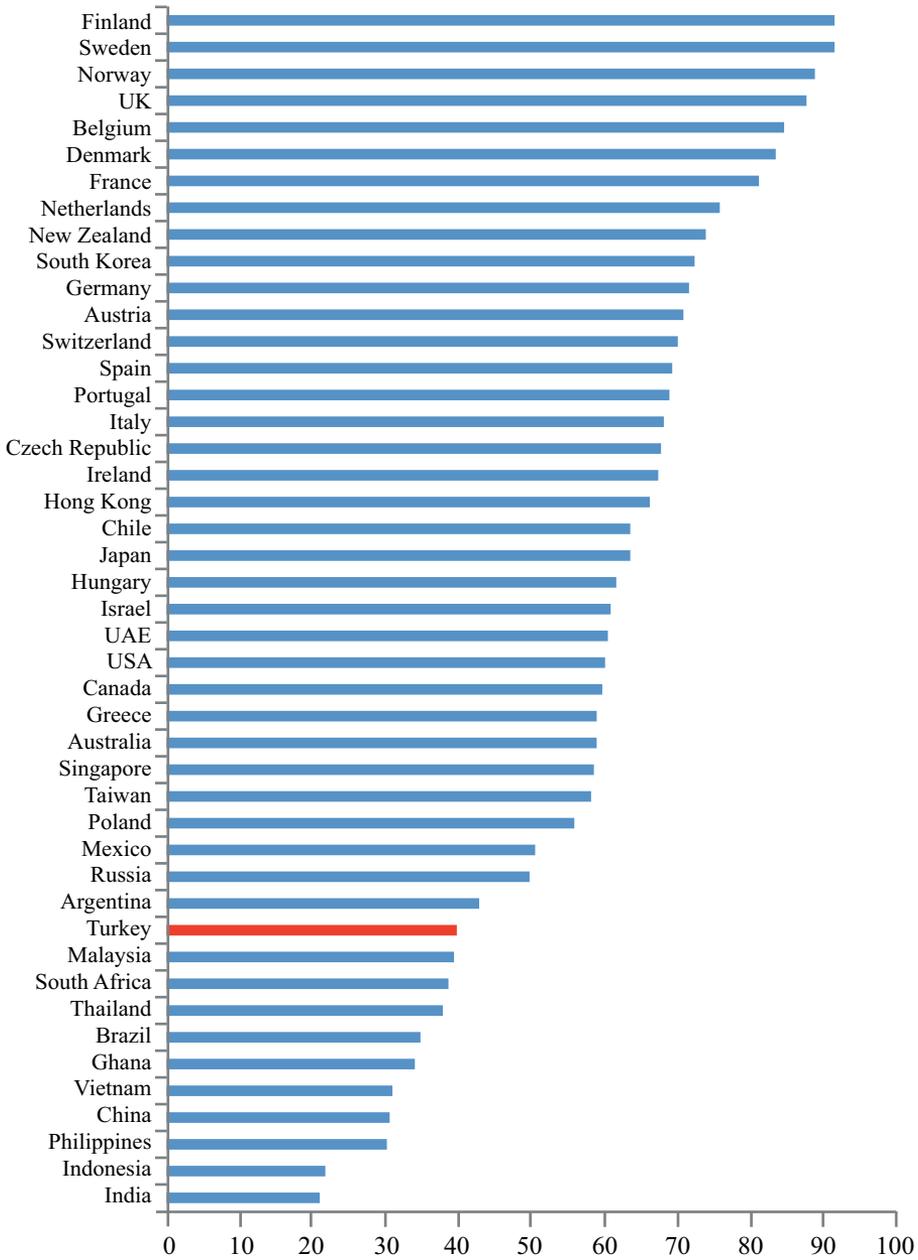
Another indicator pointing to problems in the quality of education in Turkey is related to early childhood education (ECE). Research of economist Mehmet Kaytaz points to the close and positive relationship between ECE and success both in and out of school later in life.² Even though important improvements during the past decade helped Turkey move up in the rankings of ECE, there is still a long way to go as ECE standards call for large-scale improvements.³ The Starting Well Index, which ranks 45 countries in terms of provision of quality ECE services, uncovers the dramatic gap between OECD countries and Turkey (as Figure-6 indicates). This picture is not surprising, however, as OECD countries' governments spend on average 0.4 percent of GDP on ECE services. In striking contrast, this rate is only 0.02 percent in Turkey.⁴

2 See: Mehmet Kaytaz, *Erken Çocukluk Eğitimi Fayda-Maliyet Analizi*, [Early Childhood Education Cost-Benefit Analysis] (Istanbul: Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı-AÇEV, 2005).

3 In 2001, 5.4 % of children in the 36-72 month age group received early childhood education. This percentage went up to 30.9 in 2013. Similarly the respective percentages for the 48-72 month group were 8.1 in 2001 and 44 in 2013. These statistics are based on the data obtained from the Early Childhood Education division of the Ministry of National Education.

4 See: "Social Justice in the OECD – How do the Member States Compare?," *OECD* (2011).

Figure-6: The Starting Well Index



Source: “Starting Well: Benchmarking Early Education Across the World,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2012.

What needs to be done for the system to transform itself and meet such high expectations and compete internationally?

Five Policy Recommendations

K-12 and ECE should be prioritized in terms of resource allocation

“The system is geared to impart an ideology that emphasizes a reverence for the state versus the individual, and learning by rote at the expense of critical thinking.”

Given its young population, Turkey should prioritize K-12 and ECE in terms of resource allocation and mobilization. According to a report prepared in 2004 by Can Fuat Gürlelel,⁵ the European Union will face a problem of aging as its working population (20-44 age group) will decline from 165.2 million to 136.3 million within 25 years. Comparatively, the Turkish population of the same age group will rise from 26.5 million to 33.7 million in the same time period. Furthermore, despite this increase, Gürlelel estimates

that between 2000 and 2025 young population growth will stop and, eventually, “the share of the young population will start decreasing both in absolute terms and its share in the total population.” Based on this estimate, Gürlelel points out that Turkey’s school-age population (3 to 22 year olds) will fall from 27.7 million in 2000 to 24.9 million in 2025. The share of Turkey’s school-age population to its total population will decrease from 40.8 percent in 2000 to 27.7 percent in 2025.

A conclusion one can derive from Gürlelel’s estimates is that the pressure of student numbers on the Turkish education system will decrease, enabling policy makers to shift their emphasis on raising the quality of education. This means that there will be a window of opportunity to improve human capital, provided the necessary improvements in quality and access to education are made.⁶ Whether policy makers will take advantage of this window of opportunity is another question that will be addressed in the concluding remarks.

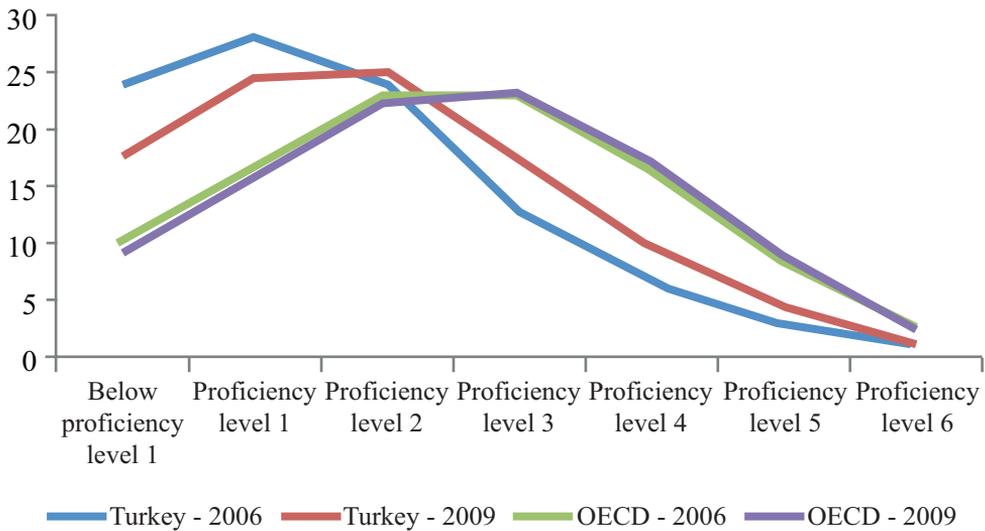
Why, then, ECE and K-12 should be prioritized instead of higher education? When PISA results for Turkey are examined from a comparative perspective, one can safely infer that the quality of education is very unevenly distributed in the country.

⁵ See: Can Fuat Gürlelel, *The Window of Opportunity Awaiting Turkey: Demographics, Education and New Perspectives Towards 2025* (Istanbul: Education Reform Initiative, January 2007), p. 37.

⁶ Gürlelel (2007), p. 51.

Even though the performance of Turkish students in PISA tests has improved since 2006, the shape of the curves in Figure-7 (see also Figure-3 above) suggests that quality of education is very unevenly distributed when compared with OECD averages. This means that some, but only a few, students performed above OECD levels, while a substantial majority kept performing below OECD levels in 2009. Figure-7 summarizes the math scores. The performance of students in reading and science skills reveals a similar pattern with respect to the performance of students in comparison with that of the OECD average.

Figure-7: Percentage Distribution of Mathematics Proficiency in Turkey and OECD (2006-9)



Given data indicating such discrepancies in quality, K-12 education should be prioritized by Turkish policy makers. This will also help improve the quality of higher education in the long run, as the quality of students flowing into higher education improves. Furthermore, social justice in the country will better be served by providing K-12 quality education for all. In this sense, the public good aspect of K-12 education is much greater than that of higher education.⁷

Another argument is that, by nature and tradition, higher education institutions should be much more autonomous in pursuing their missions in research and

⁷ For a more detailed analysis see: Bruce Johnstone, "The Economics and Politics of Cost Sharing in Higher Education: Comparative Perspectives," *Economics of Education Review*, Vol.23 No.204 (2004), pp. 403-10; Üstün Ergüder et al., *Neden Yeni Bir Yükseköğretim Vizyonu?* (Istanbul: Istanbul Politikalar Merkezi, 2008), pp. 58-9.

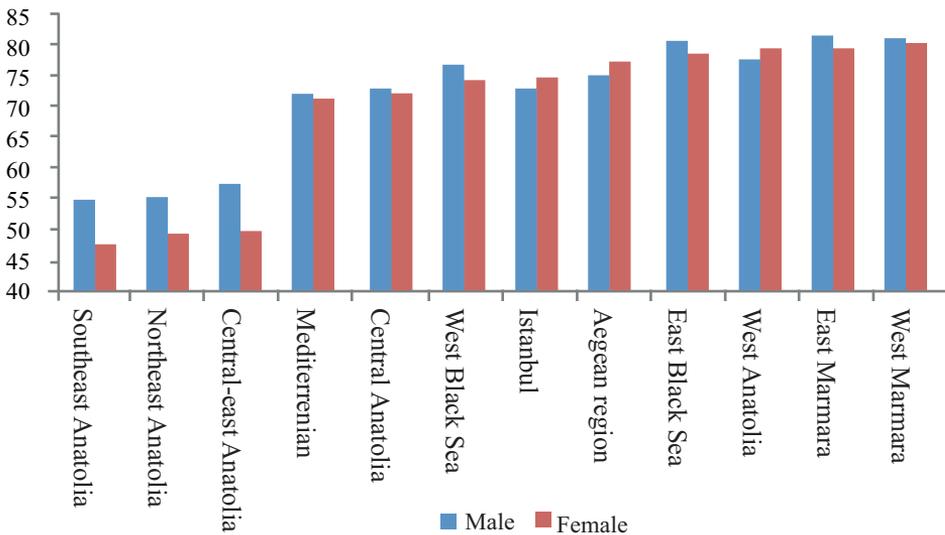
“An education system that is human rights-oriented with a major emphasis on the individual student should be a vital part of the strategy for 2023.”

education – and thus less dependent on state regulation and funding. Based on better student input, an autonomous higher education system would be more effective in helping meet research and innovation goals for 2023. It is also expected that higher education institutions will be able to generate funds, as they produce applied research and lifelong education in service to society.

Access to K-12 education has to improve

If these large regional discrepancies are not corrected, it will be very difficult for Turkey to reach its 2023 goals and be competitive among OECD countries. For instance in the West Marmara area, the net enrollment rate in secondary education is higher than 80 percent, whereas the same rate is almost 50 percent in Southeast Anatolia. The gender disparity in access to secondary education is even more dramatic, especially in eastern provinces (see Figure-8). Improving access will be one of the most important factors in making the “OECD learning skills curves” for Turkey look more like the bell-shaped curve of the OECD average.

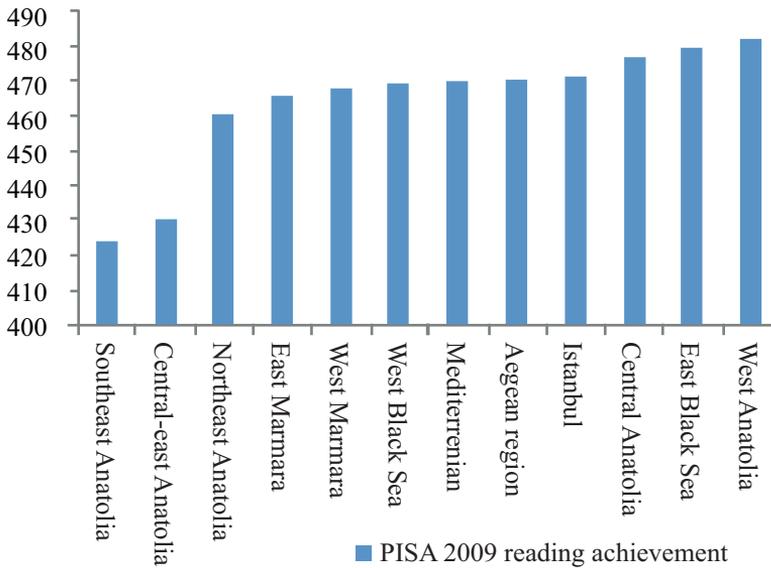
Figure-8: Net Secondary Enrollment Rates (percent)



Quality of education should be improved

The other most important factor that will help bring Turkey closer to OECD averages is quality. The overall quality of education should be increased and the achievement gaps across regions should be reduced. The quality of education in West Anatolia, East Black Sea, and Central Anatolia is not different from that in Italy, Spain, Portugal, or Greece and is close to OECD averages. In Southeast and Central-East Anatolia, however, students perform 70 points lower than the OECD mean in terms of reading achievement. This difference is roughly equal to two years of additional schooling (see Figure-9).

Figure-9: PISA Reading Achievement



Source: OECD PISA 2009 Database.

Policy making must be rationalized

In *The Pedagogical State*, Sam Kaplan points out that “education, childhood, and child development have become tropes with which a whole variety of social and political imaginaries are woven in Turkey.”⁸ There is nothing unusual with the role that was assigned to education in building a “Turkish nation” from the ashes

⁸ Sam Kaplan, *The Pedagogical State* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 10.

“Frequent and politically-motivated tampering with the system only retards and hampers the task of increasing children’s access to the school system and hinders quality in education.”

the Turkish Republic. This in turn made education an important political bone of contention between secularists and those who opposed the radical implementation of secularist policies in Turkey.⁹

In 1998, while Turkey’s political system was under military tutelage following the February 1997 intervention by decree, eight years of uninterrupted basic education was adopted by MONE. Islamists viewed this as a measure to cripple religious schools. February 2012 witnessed the introduction of a 12-year compulsory education system by the governing AKP. This system replaced the uninterrupted eight-year compulsory education with a system that can be broken down into four-year primary, four-year middle school, and four-year high school periods. The merits of both of these reforms were not sufficiently discussed in rational, goal-oriented policy terms. Instead, ideological polarization played an important role in motivating this frequent tampering with the education system.

Since the founding of the Republic, the education system has served a very important function: socializing students according to a particular world view. A highly centralized and large bureaucracy was created with the purpose of controlling in detail whatever went on in the classroom. Among OECD countries, Turkey has the most centralized and top-heavy system, leaving no room for local innovation and initiatives by schools.¹⁰ Furthermore, the system is geared to impart an ideology that

9 Please note the longstanding debate on religious schools in Turkey.

10 According to the World Bank Education Sector Study of 2006, compared with Europe and most of the world, Turkey’s public schools have the least autonomy over resources, staff deployment (at the school), textbook selection, allocation of instructional time, and selection of programs offered. It is only natural that without any autonomy, schools cannot be held accountable for their results, nor do schools have the incentive to improve quality. Did centralization work? The points raised and the data analyzed in this paper strongly suggests that it did not. Quality and access to quality is the most important problem of the K-12 system in Turkey.

emphasizes a reverence for the state versus the individual, and learning by rote at the expense of critical thinking.

An education system that is human rights-oriented with a major emphasis on the individual student should be a vital part of the strategy for 2023. This paradigm will require individuals who have a capacity for continuous learning, as well as the ability to sort through and critically analyze the vast data that will be at their disposal through the advancement of technology.

A broad consensus is necessary

The bottom line of this analysis is that Turkish policy makers need to transform their approaches to education if goals set for 2023 are to be reached. A broad consensus on the education system is thus vital. Frequent and politically-motivated tampering with the system only retards and hampers the task of increasing children's access to the school system and hinders quality in education. Turkey needs to rationalize policy-making and implementation processes and prioritize learning. This requires a transformation in education governance from its current highly centralized and bureaucratic state towards a decentralized and data-driven, evidence-based strategic framework approach.



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