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Evaluation of Policies to Provide Educational Equality of Opportunity in Türkiye[1]

Mücella Savaş Yalçın*
Atatürk University, Erzurum, Türkiye

Didem Koşar
Gazi University, Ankara, Türkiye

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reveal out the policies to ensure equality of opportunity in education for economically disadvantaged students in Türkiye and how policies reflect on disadvantaged students. Qualitative research method was used in this study. The data sources of the research consist of top policy documents, national and international reports, education statistics, and the opinions of individuals working in education trade unions, think tanks, and academics specializing in education policy. Through content analysis, three themes emerged which are equality in access to education, equality in access to opportunities, and equality in educational outcomes. The targets set and the practices implemented were evaluated within the scope of fighting against poverty and discussed in terms of social policies that include interventions to eliminate their economic disadvantages by aiming to break the cycle of poverty. Policies and practices targeting poor students have been

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***Corresponding author**
E-mail: mucella.savas@atauni.edu.tr

addressed from a limited perspective, without a holistic approach. When the equality of opportunity policies in education are examined, it has been implemented to cover all students in the education system. Therefore, it is evident that the Turkish education system requires policies that promote justice rather than equality.

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Introduction

Compulsory education is provided as a public service in Türkiye. However, it has been stated in some studies that the provision of compulsory education as a public service does not mean that access to and utilization level of all social segments are equal (Dinçer & Uysal Kolaşin, 2009). So that regulations and practices aimed at providing equal opportunities in education for the disadvantaged, the discriminated social groups, the poor, the disabled, girls, etc. constitute the basic component of education policy around the world. Especially in recent years, it is seen that efforts in this direction have intensified. This was significantly due to the abandonment of the 'welfare state' in the West and the 'social state' in countries with lower income levels (Uluocak & Çoban, 2011) and the new right-wing economic policies put into practice in the late 70s. These policies advocate for the restructuring of public services within a market logic, transforming education from a public right into an area of individual investment

(Ball, 2007). Combined with the deepening impact of income inequalities, this process leads to structural inequalities in education (Gürses, 2007).

These transformations experienced to date have made it more visible that especially poor groups cannot access and benefit from education. Almost, children from poor families do not benefit from equal educational opportunities as children from wealthy families, and poverty continues at different stages of individuals' childhood, adolescence and adulthood as the chances of education decrease (Hirch, 2007). Therefore, poverty continues through generations (Braveman & Gruskin, 2003) and hinders sustainable development by increasing inequalities in society. According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), factors such as unemployment, skill mismatches, social exclusion, and the loss of economic opportunities that stem from underinvestment in human capital can create long-term problems and higher costs for society (OECD, 1997). This reveals out the importance of increasing educational opportunities for children from poor families.

The negative effects of poverty on all social segments have revealed the necessity of combating poverty at both the national and international levels. In this context, international organizations consider education as an important component in the fight against poverty and evaluate it as a tool to ensure human development and reduce poverty (Maile, 2007). Therefore, these organizations have pioneered the implementation of various policies and programs in many countries to reduce the negative effects of poverty on the use of the right to education, aiming to break the cycle of poverty with education. The fact that the anti-poverty policies put into practice by the World Bank, one of the architects and implementers of the

aforementioned policies and programs in the 90s, became an integral part of the country's programs in the next period can be exemplified as a finding to confirm this determination (World Bank, 1991). The organization considers policies to ensure equal opportunities in education as an important pillar of the fight against poverty, and gives priority to financing projects aimed at implementing policies to improve access to lower levels of education (World Bank, 2005). In Türkiye, the financial support provided by this institution has been effective in the implementation of practices such as increasing the duration of compulsory education and access to early childhood education, improving educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, and conditional cash transfer (World Bank, 2001; 2013a). Similarly, international organizations such as the European Union Commission, OECD, United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) are involved in education improvement efforts with technical cooperation and financial support.

Within the framework of the social state, the provision of education services is among the primary duties and responsibilities of the state in Türkiye (Güngör, 2009). The positive contributions of education to social life and its regulatory role have caused this public service to be among the social duties of the state. For this reason, it was important to take measures to ensure that all segments of society benefit from education equally, and it was necessary to ensure equality of opportunity in education. In this direction, educational practices aimed at providing equal opportunities in education for disadvantaged students in Türkiye have a long history. The provisions in Article 42 of the Constitution that no one will be deprived of the right to education and training, and that primary education is compulsory and free for all citizens, male and female, in public schools,

are the legal guarantee of the importance given to equality of opportunity in education. In the 4th and 8th articles of the Basic Education Law No. 1739, all kinds of discrimination against religion, language, race and gender are prohibited. Within the framework of the aforementioned legal bases, the fact that education is free for many years and the granting of scholarships to financially poor students are practices that support these provisions. In addition to this, it is observed that many education policies have been implemented in order to provide equal opportunities in education for economically disadvantaged students, and more efforts have been made to eliminate the barriers in front of the poor people's access to education, especially in recent years.

However, despite the legal framework and regulations, the reflections in the field contain significant differences. Research conducted in the Turkish context reveals that although education policies include regulations aimed at increasing equal opportunities, structural factors such as socio-economic differences, regional inequalities, and gender constitute significant obstacles to this goal (Çelik & Gür, 2014; Önder & Petek, 2021; Petek & Önder, 2020; Sarıer, 2010; Şahin, 2019). Analyses of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results indicate that the families' socio-economic status is a significantdeterminant factor in student achievementin Türkiye (Esen & Adıgüzel, 2023). This situation is further exacerbated by the segregation of students into different types of schools (Science High School, Anatolian High School, Vocational High School, etc.) based on their academic achievement when transitioning to secondary education. Çelik and Gür (2014) emphasize that the differences in quality and achievement between these school types mean that the system itself functions as a mechanism of inequality. In other words,

socio-economic segregation between schools transforms inequality from an individual problem into a systemic one, compounding opportunity inequality for disadvantaged students. Therefore, the fundamental challenge facing education policies is not only to compensate for individual disadvantages but also to transform the system's segregating structure (Özer & Perc, 2020). Furthermore, studies show that factors such as the centralized exam system reproduce inequality through schools (Şahin, 2019). On the other hand, research by Suna et al. (2021) has revealed that the socioeconomic level of the school and variables such as teacher seniority, school size, and class size are more strongly related to academic achievement than the individual socioeconomic level of the student. In this context, the academic literature in Türkiye reveals that inequality in education is deep-rooted and multi-layered.

Equality of opportunity in education means that individuals have equal opportunities in terms of access to education, attendance, and success, regardless of their socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds (OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2015). The concept of "equality of opportunity," in particular, is central to this study. However, it is clear that this concept can have different meanings within the framework of different theoretical approaches. For example, while the liberal approach views equality of opportunity as a prerequisite for justice, critical theory argues that this concept ignores structural inequalities and legitimizes superficial solutions (Gewirtz, 2001). In this study, equality of opportunity is addressed through a multi-layered justice perspective that considers not only legal regulations or school access but also the effects of individuals' socioeconomic backgrounds on the educational process (Fraser, 2009).

Despite the serious social, economic and political problems experienced in the 90s and the need for large-scale reforms in education before and during this process, the lack of realization of the desired reforms led to the intensification of these efforts in the 2000s (Çelik, 2011). In the 2000s, under the influence of international organizations, social policies gained renewed importance, and various interventions were implemented for disadvantaged groups in education. In this context, the aim of this study is to critically examine the educational policies implemented since the 2000s for economically disadvantaged students in Türkiye. The study aims to analyze the extent to which these policies ensure equal opportunity and the concepts and discourses underpinning them. Thus, it aims not only to describe the current situation but also to question the capacity of education policies to transform social inequalities.

Research on educational inequalities has generally focused on factors affecting inequality, frequently discussing regional, gender and disability-related inequalities in education (Ataç-Kavurmacı, 2017; Çelikkol & Avcı, 2017; Çavuşoğlu Deveci, 2010; Demirel Kaya, 2019; Gökkaya, 2019; Gümüş & Chudgar, 2016; Önür, 2013; Özdemir, 2015; Sağlam, 2020; Şahin, 2019). Other studies have conducted comparative analyses of educational inequalities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Arslanargun et al, 2016; Çelikkol & Avcı, 2017; Ferreira & Gignoux, 2010; Kandemir & Kaya, 2010; Özaydınlık, 2014). However, there are only a limited number of studies evaluating education policies for economically disadvantaged students (Atmaca, 2019; Bacaksızlar, 2014). Therefore, there is a need for studies evaluating education policies for economically disadvantaged students. In this context, this study will contribute to expanding the literature on economically disadvantaged students.

This study examines education policies not only as technical regulations implemented but also as an ideological and discursive field. The study is structured within the framework of Ball's (1994) policy cycle theory and Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. According to Ball, education policies are a process consisting of the phases of textualization, interpretation, and implementation, and the socio-political positions of different actors influence this process. Fairclough, on the other hand, argues that policy texts are not only informative but also discourses that reproduce and legitimize ideological orientations. Therefore, this study examines not only the content of policies but also how these contents are articulated and the concepts through which they are legitimized.

Although education services are a constitutional right in Türkiye and equal opportunity in education is accepted as a fundamental principle, there are serious obstacles to the effective access of economically disadvantaged groups to this right. While education policies, in particular, aim to increase access to education for disadvantaged groups, their effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability are questioned in various aspects (OECD, 2012; World Bank, 2013b). In this context, the fundamental question is identified as "To what extent were the education policies implemented in Türkiye between 2002 and 2020 effective in ensuring equal educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students?". The findings of this study can contribute to the evaluation of policies for economically disadvantaged students and, if necessary, the improvement of existing policies. Furthermore, it can provide a general framework for equal opportunity policies in education for economically disadvantaged students and provide education stakeholders with a broader perspective on the policy

priorities necessary to ensure access to education for all segments of society.

Method

Qualitative sampling and data collection

This research aims to understand how educational policies were applied for economically disadvantaged students in Türkiye between 2002 and 2020, and how these policies were linked to the discourse of equal opportunity. Qualitative research approach was adopted for this purpose. Qualitative research was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of individuals' or institutions' experiences, structures of meaning, and contextual dynamics (Creswell, 2020). The study covers the period between 2002 and 2020. 2002 marked the beginning of a period in which education policies in Türkiye were restructured, with policies aimed at combating poverty, social assistance programs, and increasing access to education gaining momentum. Therefore, the period is significant both in terms of political transformation and the context of the research. First of all, the top policy documents in the post-2000 period were examined in order to determine the policies on the relevant issue. The main purpose of this is to determine the policies determined at the macro level to provide equality of opportunity in education to economically disadvantaged students. The documents published between 2002-2020 were examined. In this context, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2018 election declarations, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64, 65th government program, 2019 and 2020 presidential annual program, 8th, 9th and 10th development plans (DP), 2010-2014 and 2015-2019 MONE strategic plan are the policy documents examined.

Then, in order to determine which policies have been implemented, the websites of the relevant general directorates of the Ministry of National Education and many national and international policy documents were scanned and projects and practices for economically disadvantaged were examined. The following criteria were used to select documents:

1. Published between 2002 and 2020,

2. Referencing equal opportunity policies for disadvantaged students,

3. Published in public and official sources,

4. Proposing practices or policies encompassing the education level. The programs, projects and practices included in the working group are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Projects, programs and practices examined in the research

Projects and programs realized with external financing	**Projects and applications realized with public financing**
Social Risk Mitigation Project (SRAP)	Free Textbooks Project
Basic Education Project II (TEPII)	Movement to Increase Opportunities and Improve Technology (FATIH)
Basic Education Support Program (TEDP)	Transition to 12-Year Compulsory Education
Catch-up Education Program (CEP)	Support and Training Courses

Education Program in Primary Schools (IYEP)	Education and Training Support Measures to ensure a balanced distribution of teachers (obligatory service obligation)

In the next step, it was evaluated how the described macro-level situation was carried out by examining the relevant literature and referring to various published documents and different participant opinions. In this context, thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to analyze the implementation of the policies. Participants were selected from three groups:

- 5 education union representatives,
- 2 think-tank experts,
- 6 academics (some of whom worked or currently work for the Ministry of National Education).

Education unions and think tankswere selected from the formations whose field of activity is education or who work in the field of education policies. The reason for choosing education unions and think tanks is that these organizations not only conduct research on the problem areas of education, but also follow their education policies with regular monitoring studies. These organizations publish many reports that analyze and evaluate special fields of education, as well as general evaluations of education. At the same time, these

organizations organize symposiums and conferences and try to contribute to improving the quality of education in Türkiye. In this context, it is foreseen that the views and observations of the people who contribute to the education service in these institutions and organizations can provide a realistic perspective on the evaluation of education policies. In addition to this, 6 academicians working in different universities who have published studies and studies related to the subject of the research were interviewed. Some of the academicians stated that they contributed to the work of various education unions and think tanks. Three basic strategies were used to select participants: maximum variation, criterion sampling, and snowball sampling. Participants were coded as K1, K2, and their institutional information was not disclosed due to confidentiality.

The interview questions were designed to obtain additional and new information, as well as to supplement data not previously available or obtained through document review. Within this framework, three main questions were prepared: a general assessment of progress made in accessing quality education and practices aimed at ensuring equal opportunities. Participants were asked to suggest relevant questions regarding equal opportunities in education for economically disadvantaged students. The subheading "Progress made in accessing quality education" included questions on access to education, school attendance and dropout, school quality, academic achievement, and their monitoring and evaluation. The initial draft interview form was developed by making necessary adjustments based on feedback from three academics in the field of educational administration. As a result of these processes, the interview form was developed around eight main questions. These interviews aimed to assess the impact of the objectives and practices outlined in the policy documents on the field

and to identify shortcomings and strengths in equal opportunities in education.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used as a data analysis method in the present study. Qualitative content analysis allows for the systematic examination of written materials such as policy documents and official reports, while interviews helped understand the practical implications of policy statements in these documents. The analysis process was conducted in three stages:

1. Preliminary coding: Policy documents and interview transcripts were analyzed and categorized into meaningful units.

2. Theme identification: Based on the literature, the themes "equality in access to education," "equality in access to opportunities," and "equality in educational outcomes" were developed.

3. Discourse analysis: Definitions of equality, target groups, and rhetoric used in the documents were analyzed.

Data triangulation, repeated analyses at different times, and consulting experts were employed to ensure reliability and validity. Furthermore, the researcher's notes and decision-making processes were recorded in detail throughout the analysis process, ensuring transparency and traceability of the research.

Findings

Policies for Ensuring Equality of Opportunity in Education for Economically Disadvantaged Students

Increasing access to education, improving both the quality of education and teachers, disseminating information technologies, and

increasing the share of the private sector in education are among the common goals for in policy documents since 2000s. It can be said that in government programs and election manifestos, targets for education are addressed in a limited manner, concrete targets are not included much and there are parallel targets. In development plans, the situation is determined and targets for education are included in more detail. With the preparation of strategic plans, activities for education are addressed in a more systematic structure and these plans have guided the actions to be taken. The policies determined under the themes created within the scope of the research are as in Figure 1.

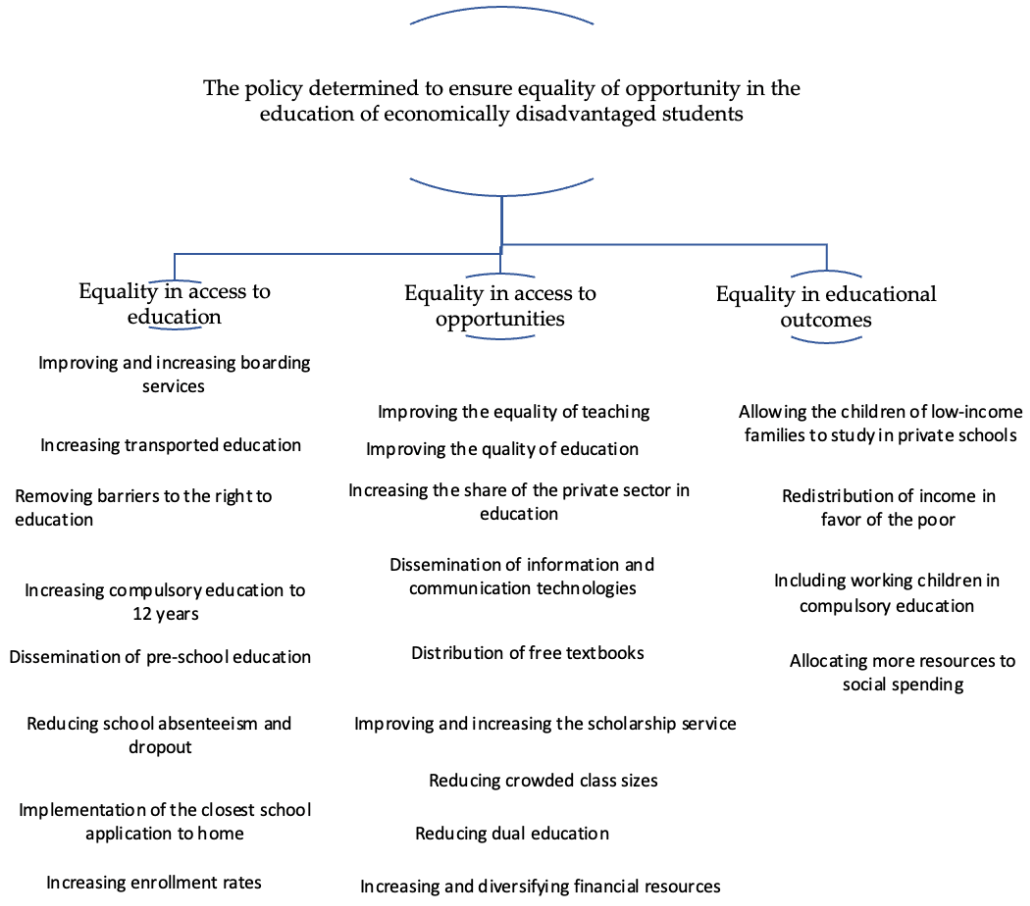


Figure 1. The policy determined to ensure equality of opportunity in the education of economically disadvantaged students.

In the early 2000s, in the first, second and third AK Party periods, educational objectives were mostly included in the context of access to education. Access to education was addressed with the aim of increasing schooling rates. These goals were determined to cover the general student population and to ensure equality of opportunity in education. Among the targets determined for poor students, it was determined that educational aids would be provided only to ensure

the access of these students to education. For example, it was seen that measures such as attendance to education, success or social-emotional support were not determined. Since the 9th development plan, schooling rates have been numerically addressed, and access to education has been assessed with more concrete targets compared to previous periods. It is seen that in the 2011 and 2015 election manifesto, the 10th Development Plan (DP) and the 2010-2014 MEB strategic plan, efforts were made to keep children in the system with the aim of reducing grade repetition, absenteeism and school dropout by expressing the need to increase school enrollment rates in primary and secondary education, and access to education was not addressed in a one-dimensional manner. It is also seen that the 10th DP includes the goal of increasing access to school for children with financial difficulties. However, there are no concrete targets on how this will be achieved.

> Necessary arrangements will be made to provide assistance to poor families in order to alleviate the burden of education expenses on the family (DPT, 2003, s.82).

On the other hand, in policy documents, priority is given to lifelong learning and the goals of increasing access to preschool education. In policy documents published in recent years, it is noteworthy that preschool education should be included in compulsory education, this will be achieved by expanding early childhood education, and equality of opportunity in education will be achieved by increasing its quality. Some statement in policy documents are as follows;

> It will be ensured that early childhood education is compulsory for the age of 5 and common quality standards will be brought to increase the quality of this education level (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı, 2018, p.74).

However, the 2002 election manifesto included goals for poor children to attend private schools;

> Successful children from low-income families will be supported by the state to be able to study in private schools (AK Parti, 2015).

Improving the quality of education and teachers is among the most frequently emphasized concepts in policy documents. In the first period documents, the quality of education was mentioned in a limited framework due to the problem of access to education at all levels, and it is seen that the emphasis on quality increased in the following processes. In the 64th government program, it is stated that measures will be taken to minimize the quality differences between schools and regions in secondary education. As for increasing the quality of teachers, similar targets for employing teachers on contractual status and increasing their productivity are frequently seen in the policy documents examined. In addition, it has been stated that it will be distributed in a balanced way according to the places, regions and settlements where there is a shortage of teachers.

> In order to achieve a balanced distribution of teachers among the provinces, a differentiated wage model will be developed and qualified and experienced teachers will be employed primarily in disadvantaged settlements (AK Parti, 2011, s.82).

The emphasis on the dissemination of information technologies was frequently mentioned in almost all of the documents examined. On the other hand, it is seen in the documents examined that it is aimed to increase the access of individuals who have been excluded from education through methods such as e-learning, open education and distance education to educational resources. In the 2010-2014 MONE

strategic plan, it was stated that information technologies would be used to eliminate regional differences.

In the 2002 election manifesto, the 58th government program and the 8th DP, it was stated that the resources allocated to education would be increased in order to make arrangements in areas affecting the quality of education, as well as actions to be taken for the efficient use of these resources and different types of financing other than public resources would be sought. In this period, it is seen that in all the documents examined within the scope of the research, the aim was to increase the share of the private sector in education by providing incentive opportunities for the private sector to invest in the field of education. In the 2011 and 2015 election manifesto, the 64th government program and the 10th DP, similar targets were foreseen such as the resources allocated to education would be distributed among schools in a balanced manner by taking into account the situations of the schools and the diversification of financing by developing education financing models such as providing contributions from families outside the state budget and increasing the resources allocated to education. It was reiterated as in the previous period that a school-based budgeting system would be adopted. In addition, in the 2015 election manifesto, it was stated that incentive mechanisms such as public-private partnerships would be developed for the private sector to contribute to education financing.

> The share of the private sector in education is 3 percent. The private sector will be encouraged to invest in this area in order to increase this to 10 percent (T.C. 58. Hükümet Acil Eylem Planı, 2003, p.98).

It is seen that the emphasis on the fight against poverty is frequently made in the policy documents. In The 58th government emergency

action plan, the anti-poverty program has been comprehensively evaluated and 3 main targets have been determined to ensure fairness in income distribution. These are expressed as follows.

Families under the hunger limit will be determined urgently,

Effective assistance programs for families under the poverty line will be initiated (within three months),

> Basic education and health assistance will be provided to the children of poor families (T.C.58. Hükümet Acil Eylem Planı, 2003, p.10).

Practices Implemented to Provide Equality of Opportunity in Education for Economically Disadvantaged Students in Türkiye

When the programs, projects and practices implemented to ensure equal opportunities in education for economically disadvantaged students are evaluated, most of them were carried out by addressing the general student population. Projects such as "Free Book Distribution Project in Primary Education" in 2003 and Movement for Increasing Opportunities and Improving Technology (FATİH) Project (2010), All students are trying to provide access to resources. Educational support is given especially to disadvantaged students in order to provide equal and qualified education to everyone, with applications such as the Catch-up Education Program (CEP), Education Program in Primary Schools (IYEP) and Support and Training Courses.

The Social Risk Reduction Project (SRAP) 2002 project is a program that specifically aims to provide access to education for poor students. Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), which includes the most important component of SRAP, is a social assistance program designed to

increase access of children from poor families to basic health and education services. CCT was implemented and included financial aid to poor families on the condition that they send their children to school (Esenyel, 2009). The content of conditional education aid is to ensure that children at risk of poverty attend school by covering school expenses that cause poor people not to send their children to school due to school expenses (UNICEF, 2014). Today, conditional education aid is implemented in Türkiye due to its positive results.

With the 2002-2007 Basic Education Project II (TEPII) by the World Bank, and the Basic Education Support Program (TEDP) by the European Union in 2002-2007, to reduce poverty, increase access to education by ensuring the participation of children out of basic education and children at risk to education, and to improve the quality of education. Apart from this, Education and Training Support was implemented in 2014 to enable poor students to benefit from private schools.

Participant views on ensuring equality in access to education

As a result of the analysis of the interviews, the participants who expressed their opinions on the policies implemented to ensure equality of opportunity in education for economically disadvantaged students expressed that they had difficulties in accessing education in the last 20 years and emphasized access to quality education, especially within the concept of access. The majority of the participants stated that privatization practices in education increase the access of economically advantaged children to quality education, while limiting the access of disadvantaged students to education;

> *Especially with the privatization of schools and the increase in infrastructure problems in schools, this disadvantageous situation of*

> *disadvantaged children has become even higher. Equal access to education is starting to get a little harder. The biggest reason for this is the privatization of education. K5*

On the other hand, the majority of the participants stated that the most important factor preventing access to education was the socio-economic status of the student and emphasized that the conditional education aid given to poor students in this context was insufficient. participants evaluated access to pre-school at a low level when compared to other levels, and the fact that pre-school is not free and not compulsory is an important factor preventing access. The participant views on pre-school education are as follows:

> *There is an increase in the in the preschool enrollment levels. When we look at the last 20 years, it is seen that the schooling rate has been much higher. However, although it has been targeted for years, pre-school education is not free, it is not compulsory, and the Ministry of National Education has aimed to make it free and compulsory for at least one year, but this has not been realized for many years. But even in public schools, the fact that there are official dues is an important obstacle, especially in the access of socio-economically disadvantaged children to education. The family of a child who will start preschool education in a state institution is asked for materials with a list that exceeds an A4 paper, and the total cost of these materials varies from school to school. There are pens, paints, toilet papers, A4 papers, colognes, everything in very good brands. Usually very expensive brands. Of course, it is not made accessible to poor families. K6*

While participants evaluated educational policies aimed at reducing absenteeism and dropout were insufficient, while some participants stated that implemented educational policies increased absenteeism and dropout of economically disadvantaged students.

> *As the hope and the expectation for education decreases, absenteeism and school dropouts increase. As the chances of promotion from the bottom to the top and, in general, the merit-based assignment system among graduates deteriorate, the hope and expectation of the individual disappears as the chance of being able to rise from the lower sections to the top through education decreases. Thus, they either tend to create a chance through congregation and so on, or they drop out of school altogether. So he gives up hope of school… K8*

On the other hand, infrastructure problems in education and the socio-economic status of the school was evaluated as a factor that increases absenteeism and dropout. Emphasizing that poor children study in schools with insufficient socio-economic status, it has been stated that the disadvantaged schools' inability to provide social opportunities to children causes these children not to attend school. It was stated that school opportunities should be rich, especially since poor children can only socialize at school.

> *Schools are the only environment where poor children can socialize, so it is very important to improve school conditions. Since the opportunities for children to socialize in disadvantaged areas are generally limited, certain opportunities should be given in schools. For example, maybe that child will be able to have opportunities such as cinema and theater through school, or maybe if there is a swimming pool, the child of the school will want to be at school. Therefore, the school needs to give the child more than academic skills. Since such opportunities are limited in our schools, school does not appeal to children. Therefore, he does not want to come to school. K1*

Participant views on ensuring equality in access to opportunities

In terms of access to opportunities, the majority of the participants stated that the school facilities were insufficient and there were great differences between schools in terms of opportunities. The participants criticized the inefficient use of the budget for some practices and stated that the allocated budget could be spent in different areas. Some participants stated that the school facilities were better but insufficient compared to previous years. However, it has been stated that school gardens differ between schools and there are no suitable school gardens for children, especially in metropolitan cities. It has been emphasized that the capacity of boarding schools is weak and they do not have the necessary equipment. Participants expressed the view that reduced public spending on education would hamper efforts to solve infrastructure problems and improve the quality of education.

> *I think that the development in the physical infrastructure is very slow. The library is an important problem, it is not an indicator that is followed very much. There is a library in some schools, but we did a research, for example, that library door is locked or there are no books suitable for children in it, or milk and raisins are distributed in schools and stored in the library. Because there is no warehouse in the school. In schools, these libraries are also changed and used as classrooms. There seems to be a laboratory problem, so there is statistics on paper. The dining hall is important, it's a big deal. Not in most schools, not in many schools. He also has no data. There are many differences from garden to garden between schools. Since there is a land problem in big cities, it seems very difficult to find a school with a meaningful real garden. K6*

Ensuring equality in educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged students

Participants stated that the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students is getting worse. For this reason, the participants put forward the success of students in national and international exams. it was stated that the difference in achievement among the students was very high and the majority of the students were successful in sub-learning areas.

When we look at the PISA, TIMSS and ABIDE reports, there is always a clear difference between socio-economically disadvantaged students and other students. The difference is huge and even if there has been an improvement, the basic skills of the children in the lowest socioeconomic status are at such a low level that even if there has been an improvement, unfortunately it is still at the very bottom, so that segregation needs to be further reduced. I think that separation continues. K6

Participant views on about the implementation of policies for ensuring equality of opportunity in education for economically disadvantaged students

Regarding the practices implemented for economically disadvantaged students and how these practices are carried out, the majority of the participants stated that the policies implemented deepen inequalities in education. They stated that the policies implemented do not get to the root of the problems, that most of the policies are implemented superficially and that there are no interventions that can eliminate inequalities. However, the quality of the practices and implementation processes have been criticized, arguing that the efforts have not been made in a coherent manner and that the policies have not been stable and sustainable and have not spread throughout the system. As a

result of some policies, schools have become increasingly segregated in recent years and inequality of opportunity has increased as a result.

> *The biggest variation is between schools. It has come to the position of a country where schools are segregated, highly divided into classes, divided into neighborhoods, divided according to income level, and it does not reduce it in education. In the past, students used to go to a teacher's high school and more qualified vocational high schools at least through education. By getting into a university, the kid would have gotten away with it a little bit. Now he loses all his chances. In this sense, there has been no improvement in Türkiye, education is getting worse. K8*

Some of the participants stated that the policies made under equal opportunity are not made for economically disadvantaged students and that the policies applied increase the disadvantage. The participants stated that poor children could not benefit from this practice by exemplifying the education-training support to support their views.

> *The state, the public does not have any special measures for these children…. To what extent does giving money to a person without money solve the problem? Maybe just the things that will keep him alive. For example, a child wants to deal with music and art. How will it be? In other words, in these twenty years, our education, especially painting, music and physical education, has regressed tremendously. Courses were brought as elective, weakened. K1*

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of our study is to evaluate the policies and practices implemented to ensure equality of opportunity in education for

economically disadvantaged students in Türkiye. When the data obtained within the scope of the study are evaluated, access to education has increased at all levels since 2000. However, the inaccessibility of 4% of students in basic education, the low level of schooling in pre-school education and Although the schooling rate in secondary education increased with the passage of the compulsory education law in 2012 (MEB, 2021), there are significant differences between provinces and regions. Similarly, Bakış et al. (2009) and Education Reform Initiative (ERG) (2016) also stated that regional inequalities are concentrated in secondary education. In this context, Although the AK Party reforms mentioned by Çelik and Gür (2013) increased ensure equality of opportunity in education in some regions, our qualitative data reveals that disadvantaged students still face barriers in access and achievement. At the same time, it is seen that the aim of eliminating the differences between regions in the 2023 Education vision document has not been realized (MEB, 2018). Therefore secondary education show us the picture of inequalities in access to education in Türkiye.

Similarly, low enrolment rates in pre-school education also exacerbate the issue of equality of opportunity. To address this problem, the Ministry of National Education has implemented various programmes in recent years aimed at increasing enrolment at this level. Four models are used: "summer schools", "mobile teacher classrooms", "mobile classrooms" and the "transport centre nursery model". In addition to these fundamental policies, the Ministry also has various projects and local-level initiatives that support pre-school education (Madra, 2017). However, as the coverage of these models remains limited, access to pre-school education continues to be a significant problem. Although preschool education is financed by the state by providing some

support such as free educational materials and cleaning materials, a certain fee is usually charged to parents (EURYDICE, 2021). Therefore, the fact that not all children can access preschool education is attributed to the fact that this level is not compulsory and free (Korlu, 2019). In this context, it can contribute to equal opportunities by increasing the access of economically disadvantaged students to preschool by seeing that there is a need for a preschool fee and its inclusion in compulsory education.

The documents examined appear to include limited policy objectives aimed at ensuring the participation of poor students in education. Conditional education aid, in particular, stands out among the objectives set for poor students. The documents state that these educational aids will be provided solely to ensure students' access to education. Indeed, it has been observed that criteria such as educational participation, achievement, or social-emotional support are not clearly defined in the documents. This approach demonstrates that education policies are shaped solely at the technical and administrative level, ignoring structural inequalities. At this point, according to Ball, policies are not merely texts to be implemented but also a reflection of ideological preferences and social power relations. In this context, conditional aid for poor students, which focuses solely on access, limits education's role in ensuring social justice. Similarly, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach focuses on how education policies are constructed at the linguistic and discursive levels and how these discourses reproduce social relations. Within this framework, discourses emphasising access to education appear to relegate more comprehensive steps towards transforming structural poverty to a secondary position. Interviewees frequently highlighted the impact of the Conditional Cash Transfer program on school

attendance, which aligns with national policy objectives stated in the 2013 World Bank report (World Bank, 2013b). However, participants also emphasized the lack of academic success outcomes, which challenges the assumption in existing policies that access alone ensures equity. Indeed, research conducted in Turkiye on such aid programmes has revealed that these policies increase school access and participation and reduce dropout rates (Dama & Toklucu, 2018). Therefore, these findings support the existing literature by highlighting positive contributions to access and participation and limitations in terms of academic achievement.

Despite the decline in the national poverty rate recorded in Türkiye between 2002 and 2020 (TÜİK, 2021), the persistence of income inequality and poverty, particularly concentrated in regions such as Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia (World Bank, 2020), remains a fundamental obstacle to equal opportunities in education. Concrete national policy steps that further deepen this obstacle include the closure of village schools, the expansion of the transport-based education system, and increased support for privatisation. As a result of these policies, the educational burden on poor households has increased (Gümüş & Bellibaş, 2020), and even the Ministry of National Education's (2021) reports acknowledge this situation as a factor that increases inequality. When these data are brought together, they reveal how the intersection of income inequality and regional poverty distribution has deepened inequalities in disadvantaged regions rather than reducing them through current education policies.

Another emerging finding is that school dropout and absenteeism are a significant problem in Türkiye. This problem is frequently emphasized in many studies (MEB, 2018; MEB SGB, 2019). In studies on early leaving, children's having to work has emerged as one of the

reasons for leaving school (Gökşen et al., 2005). In the study of TÜİK (2020) on working children in Türkiye, it was revealed that economic inequalities are one of the most important factors that cause children to drop out of school. In the aforementioned study, many of the working children who could not attend school stated that they had to leave school because they could not afford the school expenses. From this point of view, it is seen that the low income level of the family is an important factor for the child to drop out of school. On the other hand, the high level of dropout and absenteeism among students attending vocational high schools shows that inequalities are reflected in schools, considering that economically disadvantaged students are concentrated in these schools. In a study by Bakış et al. (2009), it was revealed that the socioeconomic status of the family in Türkiye is an important determinant of attending secondary education compared to primary education. In this context, the fact that the social and income status of the family is determinant in access to education requires public intervention.

One of the most important national policy developments affecting the course of this problem is the 4+4+4 education reform, implemented in 2012, which extended compulsory education to 12 years. However, this reform allowed the last four years of compulsory education to be completed through the 'Open High School'. A documented outcome of this flexibility is the risk that it may become a path that indirectly encourages early dropout from formal education and child labour, particularly for students under economic pressure and girls. Indeed, reports by civil society organisations such as the Education Reform Initiative (ERG, 2014) indicate that the increase in the transition rate to open high schools during this period could be interpreted as a 'hidden school dropout' and challenges the ideal of continuity in formal

education. High absenteeism and dropout rates in vocational high schools also gain meaning in this context; students may prefer to enter the workforce earlier by transferring to open high schools rather than pursuing formal education options they deem inadequate. Therefore, the fact that the family's socio-economic status is a key determinant of participation in secondary education (Bakış et al., 2009), combined with the undesirable consequences of a centralised policy such as 4+4+4 in the field, increases the need for public intervention.

Moreover, it demonstrates the limitations of national policy interventions such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs), which aim to encourage children in poor households to remain in formal education, at the secondary education level. The documented outcomes of this policy show that, while it has been successful in increasing enrolment rates in primary education, it has not had the same effect in reducing dropout rates, particularly in schools with a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students, such as vocational high schools. Therefore, it is evident that existing financial support policies are insufficient to prevent school dropout on their own unless the structural problems of the education system (e.g., the quality of vocational high schools and their relationship with the labour market) are resolved (OECD, 2021). This situation requires more comprehensive public interventions.

Physical infrastructure and resource disparities between schools in Türkiye constitute a significant source of inequality in access to opportunities. One of the most concrete national policy objectives in this area, clearly stated in official policy documents such as the Tenth Development Plan (2014-2018) and the MONE Strategic Plan (2015-2019), was to completely end dual education (morning/afternoon) throughout the country (MEB SGB, 2015; T.C. Kalkınma Bakanlığı,

2014). However, the documented outcome of this goal shows that it was not achieved by the target date. The Ministry of National Education's (MEB SGB, 2021) own data confirms that, despite the passing years and the construction of thousands of new classrooms, dual education continues at high rates, particularly in large cities and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions, and that significant regional disparities in the number of students per classroom persist. Therefore, the inadequacy in developing physical infrastructure is not only a lack of resources but also an indication of failure to achieve even the most fundamental policy objectives set at the central level and, consequently, the persistence of inequality.

The international benchmarks established under the Sustainable Development Goals recommend allocating at least 4-6% of GDP or at least 15-20% of total public expenditure to education in order to ensure equal opportunities in education (UNESCO, 2016). Despite these international commitments, Türkiye's national policy preferences, particularly as shaped by annual Central Government Budgets and Medium-Term Programmes (MTPs), present a different picture in terms of public spending priorities. A direct outcome of these policy preferences is that education's share of Türkiye's total public expenditure remains below 11% (OECD, 2018). This ratio falls well short of the 15-20% reference range set by UNESCO. In a country with high economic inequality, public spending at this level constitutes one of the most fundamental barriers to access to quality education for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Therefore, aside from whether expenditures are being used effectively (Korlu et al., 2021), Türkiye must first implement a resource allocation policy that is consistent with its international commitments and its own policy objectives.

Ensuring equality of opportunities in education depends not only on physical infrastructure and budget, but also on equal access to a quality teaching workforce and education for all students. Indeed, according to the findings of Suna et al. (2021), the socio-economic level of the school, along with teacher seniority and school size, are among the key factors associated with academic achievement. One of the most chronic problems in this area in Türkiye is precisely the unequal distribution of experienced teachers across the country and the long-standing teacher shortage, particularly in disadvantaged regions. The most concrete national policy step taken to address this problem is the contract teaching system, implemented in 2016 and outlined in the Teacher Strategy Document (MEB ÖYGM, 2017). The main objective of this policy was to reduce teacher turnover and ensure continuity in education by retaining teachers in their assigned regions for a mandatory period (at least four years). However, the documented outcomes and field implications of this policy show that while it offers a quantitative solution to the problem, it creates new qualitative problems. While the teacher shortage in disadvantaged regions appears to have decreased numerically, reports from unions such as Eğitim-Sen and academic studies (Akpunar & Erdamar, 2020; Bozbayındır, 2019) reveal that this practice has created status differences between permanent and contract teachers, reduced teachers' professional motivation and job satisfaction, and fuelled the desire to leave the region as soon as the mandatory service period ends. Therefore, although the contract teaching policy is an attempt to solve the teacher shortage problem, its outcome has negative effects on motivation and stability, which are the most important components of teacher quality, causing educational inequality in disadvantaged regions to continue in a different dimension. Furthermore, our qualitative data indicates that socio-economic support programmes

such as DYK and İYEP attempt to compensate for these quality gaps at the local level, but this situation demonstrates that the problem is being managed through local and fragmented interventions rather than a systemic solution.

The policy documents examined and interviews reveal that the privatisation trend is presented as a two-pronged strategy. The most concrete national policy step in this area is the "Education Support" programme launched in the 2012-2013 academic year. The primary objective of this policy was to provide “equalty of opportunity” by enabling successful students from low-income backgrounds to attend private schools; however, this approach reflects a perspective that reduces equal opportunity to merit and implicitly accepts that state schools are of lower quality. The second objective of the policy was to reduce the burden on the state by transferring funding to the private sector, thereby improving the quality of public schools. However, the documented outcomes of this policy clearly show that it has failed to achieve its intended goals. Reports prepared by Eğitim Bir Sen (2017) and the ERG (2016) reveal that children from genuinely poor backgrounds did not benefit from this incentive scheme, that the support went mainly to middle-income families, and that the scheme therefore did not contribute sufficiently to equal opportunities. Consequently, despite being presented with well-intentioned goals, this policy development has, in terms of its outcomes, become a mechanism that supports private schools with state resources but excludes the most disadvantaged groups, rather than reducing existing inequalities.The reasons why specific interventions such as the policy analysed above have been insufficient become clearer when examining the extent to which inequalities in Turkiye are structural and deep-rooted. Student performance in national (e.g. ABIDE) and

international examinations not only shows that the vast majority of students are below the proficiency level but also confirms dramatic differences between regions and school types. The fact that students in the Southeast and Eastern Anatolia regions and in boarding schools systematically perform the worst (TEDMEM, 2020) proves that the problem is socio-economic and regional, rather than individual. This situation parallels researchers such as Çalışkan (2008), who argue that the segregation in the education system reflects the class structure in society. Indeed, this study uses qualitative data to reveal how macro-level problems, such as the socio-economic segregation between schools identified by Özer and Perc (2020) and Çelik and Gür (2015), are reflected in the daily lives of families and students, and how they create disappointment and obstacles. In this context, as İnan and Demir (2018) also emphasise, the path to ensuring equal opportunities lies not in fragmented incentives but in comprehensive public interventions aimed at reducing structural differences between schools and centralised examinations.

When the policies, projects and practices implemented in general are evaluated, especially some of them have been implemented without being considered holistically. Since the applications and projects are not well planned, it is seen that the allocated resources are used inefficiently. It has been revealed that some of the projects and applications have not been undergone by impact analyzes and some of them have not been shared with the public despite the impact analysis. For example, the budgetary aspects of the practices included in the documents (e.g., FATİH Project, education and training supports) were either included in a very limited way or their effects were not evaluated. Despite the FATİH Project's cost of approximately 1.4 billion TL, no independent impact analyses have been found that

assess teacher competencies or project outcomes related to technology use (ERG, 2016). This demonstrates that the projects are problematic in terms of planning, transparency, and sustainability principles. The criticisms about the effectiveness of the FATİH Project expressed in the interviews are parallel to the cost-effectiveness discussions of the project by Gümüş and Bellibaş (2020). From Fairclough's (1995) perspective, the failure to transparently share impact analyses and budgetary details with the public in such large-budget projects is not merely a technical shortcoming but also an ideological practice. Leaving the economic discourse vague in this manner conceals which groups benefit from these enormous resources, while also distancing the policy from accountability.

It is aimed to increase the access of poor students to fields such as education by providing certain public goods and income transfers, especially targeting the poor, with the developments and changes in the policy of equal opportunities in education for poor students in Türkiye (Sarısoy & Koç, 2010). In the reports examined, it was observed that it was aimed to eliminate the obstacles arising from the disadvantages of the economically disadvantaged students in order to benefit from the education service. In conclusion, while its policies (free textbooks, conditional cash transfers, scholarships, etc.) play a partial role in alleviating the symptomatic effects of poverty on education, they do not address the fundamental structural problems that generate inequality. As noted by the Education Reform Initiative (ERG, 2009), although affirmative action programmes create a certain 'equalising' effect, they are insufficient to eliminate the consequences of deep-rooted inequalities that permeate education as a whole. Therefore, it has been concluded that the targets and practices regarding poor children are addressed in policy documents with a

limited approach that is far from holistic view. In general, equal opportunity policies in education have been implemented in Türkiye to cover all students. Therefore, it is seen that there is a need for policies to ensure justice, not equality, in the Turkısh education system. While it is seen that some applications made in this framework need to be developed, it is clear that there is a need to produce more policies for the economically disadvantaged.

The findings of the research indicate that Turkish educational policy discourse addresses the concept of "equality of opportunity" within a framework largely limited to "equality of access," rather than justice and differentiation based on need. This is consistent with Ball's (1994) thesis that policy discourse is shaped by power relations and Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis approach, which argues that language choices reflect ideological tendencies. Indeed, the prominence of market-oriented and logistical solutions such as "private school support" and "transportation-based education" in policy texts, coupled with the absence of a definition or proposed solution that questions the structural causes of poverty, points to an ideological preference. This discourse obscures the socio-economic dynamics underlying inequality, reducing the problem to individual "disadvantages." Therefore, for genuine equality of opportunity in education, the policy focus must shift from the superficial principle of "equal support for all" to affirmative action practices that offer "differentiated support according to need."

Moreover, at the theoretical level, this study expands Ball's (1994) policy cycle model by applying it to Türkiye's unique administrative and social context. Our findings reveal that the gap between policy text and implementation is not merely a general theoretical problem; it is shaped by contextual factors such as structural barriers specific to

Türkiye (e.g., deep segregation between schools, a centralised but locally differentiated administrative culture). This situation strengthens the argument that, in order to understand the reasons for policy failure, one must look not only at the text but also at the context in which the text is implemented.

The fundamental contribution of this study to the literature is that it bridges the gap between studies analysing the "structural dimension" of educational inequality in Türkiye (Özer & Perc, 2020; Çelik & Gür; 2015) and research examining specific policy texts. Our findings reveal the inconsistency and inadequacy between the "problem"and the "policy presented as a solution," shifting the debate on policy effectiveness from the question "Is there a policy?" to "Does the current policy focus on the right problem?". The findings obtained in the policy context are parallel to Çelik and Gür (2015) assessments of the AK Party's education policies: While the progress made in infrastructure and quantitative access is significant, this progress has not been matched in terms of quality, equity and inclusiveness.

In conclusion, this study critically examines the complex relationship between the educational policies implemented in Türkiye since 2000s for disadvantaged students and their reflections in the field, with the aim of ensuring equalty of opportunities. The findings reveal significant discrepancies between the intentions and outcomes of the policies implemented, demonstrating how even well-intentioned interventions can prove inadequate in the face of structural inequalities and how policy discourse itself can function as a mechanism of inequality. Ensuring equal opportunity in education requires a multilayered and holistic approach encompassing not only financial support but also pedagogical, institutional, and cultural dimensions.

Limitations and Future Lines of Research

This research has various limitations. The documents constituting the study group of the research are limited to high-level policy documents. When the policy documents were examined, since some of the government programs could not be accessed, programs were accessed through different sources. However, as a result of the removal of some reports belonging to the examined projects, programs and practices from the system by the Ministry of National Education, it made it difficult to answer the research problems and make comments. The data obtained to answer the second research question of the research is limited to the data shared by national and international reports. Some of the individuals who were invited for interviews did not respond, while others declined, and some agreed to participate in the research. When some think tanks requested to be interviewed rejected the interview request, the study was conducted with a limited number of think tanks. However, another limitation of the research is that statistical information defining poor students could not be obtained. Therefore, evaluations regarding poor students were evaluated through interviews.

Various suggestions can be made to researchers in this research. Within the scope of this study, policies and practices for economically disadvantaged students were addressed from a macro perspective. In this context, high-level policy documents were examined and interviews were conducted with think tanks and academics who have academic publications in the field related to union studies. In future studies, policies and practices can be evaluated from different perspectives by conducting research with provincial and district MONE administrators and interviewing micro-level school administrators and teachers. In addition, a synthesis can be made by

conducting interviews with civil society organizations, local governments and members of different parties.

The themes of access to education, access to opportunities and equality in educational outcomes have emerged. Each of these themes can be supported by more comprehensive and detailed research. Another suggestion for researchers is to conduct research focusing on the educational success of poor students in particular. In addition, by conducting interviews with poor students and observing poor regional schools, the needs of economically disadvantaged students can be determined and policies can be developed. Research to be conducted within this scope can contribute to the process and literature on equal opportunities in education in Türkiye.

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About the authors:

Mücella Savaş Yalçın completed her master's degree in Department of Educational Administration at Atatürk University, Turkey in 2013-2016 and her doctorate in Department of Educational Administration at Hacettepe University in 2016. She worked as a research assistant at Atatürk University in 2013-2023. He started working as an Associate Professor in 2023, Atatürk University. The author's areas of work are education policies, inequality and equality in education, disadvantaged students.

E-mail: mucella.savas@atauni.edu.tr

Authorship Credit Details: Initiated the paper's topic, conducted the literature review, co-designed the methodology, and co-authored several sections of the manuscript.

Didem Koşar is a Professor of Lifelong Learning and Adult Education in the Department of Educational Sciences at Gazi Faculty of

Education, Gazi University, Türkiye. Prof. Koşar's research focuses on lifelong learning, leadership, organizational behavior, teacher education, and educational policies. Prof. Koşar has taken part in various conferences and commissions, as well as seminars organized by several public institutions. She has national and international journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, and chapter translations in the field of educational administration and lifelong learning and adult education.

E-mail: didemkosar@gazi.edu.tr

Authorship Credit Details: Delved into the curriculum and background, co-designed the methodology, co-authored several sections, and took on the responsibilities of manuscripts' editing and formatting.