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## 11. PRIVATE TUTORING AND INEQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES IN TURKEY

*Challenges and Policy Implications<sup>1</sup>*

### ABSTRACT

This chapter considers private tutoring in relation to two national, high stakes selective examinations in Turkey, and the way these three interact in such a manner as to negatively impact the quality of education for all, as well as equity. Drawing on previously published research, the chapter focuses in particular on the influence of Private Tutoring Centres, and the way these collude with students and parents in developing strategies that seek to ensure success in entrance examinations. The chapter argues for the need to critically rethink the inequitable layers of educational structures, policies and practices prevalent within public education, pointing to the need for reforms that transform education into a meaningful enterprise for all social groups in Turkey.

### INTRODUCTION

Private tutoring is one of the most important issues in countries where there is a large demand for higher education but access is limited by entrance examinations. Passing these competitive examinations becomes the exclusive goal for prospective higher education students. In this chapter I argue, with others such as Gök (2010), that with an emphasis on selection, the quality of teaching and learning practices in school are impoverished, hampering the educational rights of individuals. In such a situation, both parents and students become overly concerned with entrance examinations, an attitude which inevitably reinforces reliance on private tutoring.

Not all students have equal access to private tutoring, given that the use of such a service depends on the ability of parents to pay. This exacerbates socio-economic inequalities. In Turkey, students from wealthy backgrounds attend the most prestigious private tutoring institutions that prepare them for the University Entry Examination (UEE). Students from less wealthy backgrounds cannot afford private tutoring to the same extent, or even the same type of tuition. Günçer & Köse (1993) examined the effects of family background, high school type and private tutoring on the academic achievement of Turkish high school seniors. They found

that family background is more important than other factors in explaining academic achievement. Dinçer and Uysal (2010) reported similar results.

In Turkey, inequities in the provision of educational services are evident when comparing private (household) and public (government) expenditure on education. The total private educational expenditure is higher in Turkey than in most other countries, estimated to stand at 2.5% of the GDP in 2002 (TURKSTAT, 2011). The OECD average of private educational expenditure as a proportion of GDP was 0.9% in 2008 (OECD, 2011). Private educational expenditure includes expenses on private tutoring as well as fees for private schools. In contrast, Turkey's GDP share of public educational expenditure was 4.8% in 2002 (TURKSTAT, 2011), lower than the OECD average of 5.0% for 2008 (OECD, 2011). The high private expenditure and the low public expenditure in Turkey are indicative of socioeconomic inequity in the provision of educational services. In the academic year 2001-2002, parents spent 1.4% of Turkey's GDP on private tutoring (Tansel & Bircan, 2006). In 2005, per student expenditure on private tutoring in preparation for the UEE was equivalent to US\$5,322 (Turkish Educational Society – TED, 2005). According to Özel Dersaneler Birliği – or Öz-De-Bir as the largest and oldest Private Tutoring Association is commonly known – the average annual private tutoring expenditure for the academic year 2010-2011 from the primary education level to preparation for UEE ranged from about US\$1,300 to US\$6,500, depending on the number of hours of instruction and the number of students in the classroom (Öz-De-Bir, 2012). The extent of this expenditure becomes more obvious when one takes the official minimum wage into account. Thus, in 2012, the annual Turkish net minimum wage of a worker (16 years of age and over) was just under US\$5,000 (Turkish Accountants Association, 2012). It is clear, therefore, that a worker earning the minimum wage would be unable to afford private tutoring for even a single child. The Education Initiative Report (*Eğitim Reformu Girişimi*, 2011) observes that, for many, private tutoring is a response to poor public education. An increase in public education expenditure to improve quality of public schools may reduce the demand for private tutoring, though this is not to be taken for granted: Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea have excellent public schools, but private tuition is widespread nevertheless, spurred on by social competition.

#### PRIVATE TUTORING CENTRES

There are three main forms of private tutoring in Turkey. The first is one-to-one individualised teaching delivered either by students from prestigious universities or by teachers, whether retired or still active. This is the most expensive form of tutoring. Tutors often guarantee the success of their students, and are thus able to charge high fees. The second form of private tutoring takes place on school premises, and is offered by volunteer teachers for a nominal pay, outside formal teaching hours in support of students needing help in mastering specific aspects of the curriculum. A nominal fee is charged for this service, which is organised by school boards with the permission of the Turkish Ministry of National Education.

Such private tuition tends to be more common in primary rather than in high schools. The third and most prevalent form of private tutoring is provided by Private Tutoring Centres (PTCs), known as *dersane* (which literally means ‘house of courses’) in Turkish. Licensed by the Ministry of National Education, these centres are similar to schools, with professional teachers working for a fee. Teachers who work in public schools are prohibited from teaching in PTCs. PTC courses supplement the teaching of mainstream school subjects, but the main activity of the centres focuses on preparing students for the national examination for entry to elite high schools and for the national UEE. They also provide counselling and guidance on the choice of universities, study pathways, and the selection of a future career. Individuals applying to enter a PTC need to sit for a test, with the best-performing candidates paying reduced registration fees or being exempted from them altogether. In this way, PTCs attract top students whose eventual success in the high school examination or in the UEE is used to advertise the effectiveness of teaching in a particular centre – though of course these students were already high achievers *before* entering the PTCs.

The first Private Tutoring Centre association was established in 1985 under the name of Öz-De-Bir, then representing 174 centres across the country. The association claims two important functions for PTCs: the first is to support students in the subjects in which they under-achieve; the second is to prepare students for the national selective examinations (Öz-De-Bir, 2012). Öz-De-Bir is not only the oldest but also the largest of PTC associations, and represents its members in official meetings and in public fora. One of the current topics of discussion between Öz-De-Bir and state officials is the reduction in tax payments of its members, bringing them down to the same level as that paid by private schools.

A review of state policies reveals the constantly shifting approaches by Turkish governments towards PTCs, ever since the state legalised private tutoring in 1965, and before and following the establishment of Öz-De-Bir. The 1980 military government in Turkey banned PTCs, citing equity considerations as its motive. A 1983 law required the closure of the PTCs within one year. The ban was lifted before it took effect because of the lobbying activities of PTCs. In April 2010, newspapers reported that the Prime Minister considered closing down PTCs. Öz-De-Bir responded by pointing out that PTCs are treated as scapegoats for the educational problems of the country, and complement the education provided by mainstream schools (Öz-De-Bir, 2012). At the same time, the strategic plan of the Ministry of National Education for the period 2010-2014 considered the possibility of transforming 70% of PTCs that reached adequate standards into private high schools or primary schools by 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2009). Indeed, in a recent interview on 25 March, 2012 the Prime Minister re-iterated plans to eliminate the UEE and convert PTCs into private high schools (Hürriyet, 2012).

A typical PTC provides 500-700 hours of class time instruction annually (Vatan, 2009). Teaching takes place after school hours during the weekdays and during weekends. In 2009 there was a 25-30% increase in the number of PTC-registered students. This was mostly due to the registration of vocational high school students who were allowed to sit the UEE during that year (Cumhuriyet, 2009).

Ever since its establishment in 1985, Öz-De-Bir has organised annual ‘mock’/‘pilot’ examinations in the run up to the national selection examinations. These mock examinations are run on the same date and at the same time across the whole country, and are meant to familiarise students with the official examination, thus helping them cope with anxiety, identify weak areas, and have sufficient time to improve. Öz-De-Bir is run like an educational NGO, and organises conferences and workshops on social, cultural and educational issues for its members and for the general public, whom it keeps updated through its newsletter. It conducts studies to develop teaching standards which increase the effectiveness of its members. It also follows worldwide developments in the field of private tutoring and even organises trips to countries such as the UK, Japan and Greece in order to learn how private lessons are delivered in these contexts. The association publishes various guidebooks and test banks which help students prepare for the national examinations. In 2010, Öz-De-Bir celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary by holding conferences across the country for parents, students, and school counselors on such topics as ‘Success in Examinations and in Life’ and ‘Psychological Support for Children’ (Öz-De-Bir, 2012). More generally, Öz-De-Bir sees the future of PTCs in providing lifelong learning opportunities.

With the expansion of enrolment in primary and high schools over the years, the growth of PTCs followed apace, registering an increase of 148% between 1997 and 2006. The number of primary and high school students receiving private tutoring increased by 198% (TED, 2005). In the academic year 2010-2011, there were 1.235 million students registered, with services provided by 4,099 registered PTCs and 50,209 private tutors (Ministry of National Education, 2011). The extent of the phenomenon can be better appreciated through comparison with the total number of students for the same academic year: 10.981 million primary school pupils, and 4.749 million general and vocational high school students (Ministry of National Education, 2011). All in all, the potential market for PTCs is over 15 million students, though the most likely clients are students from the senior years at the primary and high school levels, given the national selection examinations they have to sit. For the academic year 2010-2011, the number of final year primary school students (8<sup>th</sup> Grade) was 1.367 million, and of final year high school students (12<sup>th</sup> Grade) 1.552 million (Ministry of National Education, 2011). Hence, close to 3 million students from the senior years of both the primary and secondary cycle are most likely to resort to PTC services. The attractiveness of such services for students and their parents becomes even more evident when we consider that, in a survey conducted by Turkish Educational Society – TED (2005) as many as 44% of high school seniors, 65% of high school graduates, and 34% of university students believed that the quality of teaching was better at the PTCs when compared to that offered by mainstream schools.

While Tansel and Bircan (2006, 2008) have pointed out the reproductive social role of private tutoring, Öz-De-Bir officials have counter-argued that PTCs provide services for middle- and low-income families at prices which are affordable, when compared to the cost of private, one-to-one tuition. The association also points out that PTCs are required to register 5% of the total number of students from lower

income families free of charge – and that indeed, this social obligation is taken so seriously that the figure is closer to 10% (Öz-De-Bir, 2012). Clearly, the controversies over private tutoring in Turkey are deeply enmeshed with social class dynamics and interests. Notwithstanding, social class represents only one axis of demarcation with regard to the nexus between private tutoring and educational inequities. There are other axes of demarcation along which these inequities and inequalities operate. These include gender, region, rural/urban background, type of high school. Girls have only a small advantage over boys in terms of attending private tutoring (Tansel & Bircan, 2008). A comparison of the geographic distribution of PTCs and general high schools per high school age population is found in Tansel & Bircan (2008). PTCs operate mostly in urban areas. Moreover, students from the Black Sea region, as well as Turkey's east and south-east regions, are somewhat less successful in UEEs compared to other parts of the country, even if these regional differences are not significant when it comes to the 1999-2002 UEEs and the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) examination results (Berberoğlu & Kalender, 2005).

#### SCHOOL TYPES, SUBJECT STREAMS, ACHIEVEMENT, AND PRIVATE TUTORING

Differences in school quality represent additional facets of the larger question of equity. A vicious circle thus feeds on inequalities between schools, raising the demand for private tutoring. There are large differences in school quality in Turkey. In particular, high schools differ according to type, differences which become quite visible when one considers student performance in national and international tests. According to UEE and PISA results, students from science high schools, Anatolian high schools,<sup>2</sup> and private high schools are more likely to succeed in the UEE compared to their peers in general high schools. Their performance in PISA is well above the international average. In contrast, students from general high schools are less successful in the UEE and their performance in PISA is below the international average. Several studies indicate that socio-economic and family backgrounds are important determinants of UEE performance (Dinçer & Uysal, 2010; Günçer & Köse, 1993). Students from science, Anatolian, and private high schools generally come from more affluent family backgrounds (World Bank, 2011, p. viii). There are only a few élite, high quality high schools compared to the number of general high schools. Therefore, students compete with an entrance examination for access to élite high schools for which it is common to prepare by taking private tutoring.

Since the academic year 2010-2011, the Turkish high school curriculum has included a core group of obligatory courses common to all students, as well as elective courses which students are required to choose from. Choices are made on the basis of student interests and higher education and career plans. The first year in high school now includes all the common, obligatory courses. The following years now include both compulsory and elective courses. This curricular reform is meant to provide a degree of flexibility in selecting educational pathways. However, before the reform, there were four major general high school subject

streams that students could choose from, namely Mathematics-Natural Sciences, Turkish-Mathematics, Turkish-Social Sciences, and Foreign Languages. Prior to the reform, students who were at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade in high school, as well as high school graduates, could sit for the UEE. Mathematics-Natural sciences and Turkish-Mathematics were the most popular streams, and students from these streams were perceived as being more likely to succeed in the UEE. These students were offered a more intensive Mathematics curriculum when compared to that offered to students in the Social Science and Foreign Language streams. Among high school seniors and graduates who applied to sit for the UEE in 2008, 33.3% had Mathematics-Natural Sciences background, 31.2% had Turkish-Mathematics background, 13.3% had a Social Sciences background, and 23.1% graduated from Foreign Language streams (Berberoğlu & Tansel, 2012). Analysing 2008 data supplied by the Student Selection and Placement Centre, Berberoğlu and Tansel (2012) found that 85% of UEE applicants from the Mathematics-Natural Sciences high school stream had received private tutoring. This was true for 71% of the applicants in the Turkish-Mathematics stream, and for 53% of the applicants in the Social Sciences stream. Thus, students from the more popular high school streams of Mathematics-Natural Sciences and Turkish-Mathematics were more likely to receive private tutoring. This may be due to a more rigorous Mathematics curriculum in these streams. The presence of these streams before 2010 were thought to contribute to inequities.

Berberoğlu and Tansel (2012) also compared students who received private tutoring with those who did not, focusing on differences in parental background. They found that students who did not receive private tutoring typically came from modest socio-economic backgrounds, while those who did receive private tutoring more often than not had more affluent parents. Students who attended private lessons also tended to have a higher interest in academic success, which they valued more highly than students who relied only on mainstream schooling.

Ekici (2005) investigated the attitudes of a group of high school students from various schools in Ankara towards UEE. He found that students who attended PTCs developed positive attitudes towards the examination, compared to students who did not go to the centres for private tuition. This finding did not differ by gender or by the type of high school attended. These results suggest that students attending PTCs tend to experience an increase in self-confidence in relation to the UEE. Within this larger context, and despite 12 years of formal schooling, parents and students tend to have a strong belief in private tutoring, considering it as the main solution to performing well in the entrance examination to élite high schools and university. Kuban (2011) observes that, as a result, regular schools and teachers lose their status and influence in society at large, given that PTCs are valued more (TED, 2005) – even if PTCs actually emphasise memorisation of sample question formats and their answers (Gök, 2010). Private tutoring, therefore, seems to have less to do with imparting a true education, and more to do with training for entrance examinations. Given that such services are most accessible to the better off, what we have here is an exacerbation of social inequalities, with

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service providers selecting the higher achieving students, measuring success in terms of examination passes, thus consolidating their own prestige and standing.

#### EDUCATORS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS PTCs

Baştürk and Doğan (2010) investigated how Mathematics teachers in Istanbul view PTCs. These teachers explained that, in their view, students attend PTCs in order to learn about the techniques of taking multiple choice tests and gain experience in taking such tests. Teachers expressed concern both about the profit motive driving the powerful PTCs, and the fact that students' success in the university entrance examination was often solely attributed to the centres, thus discounting the contribution made by the regular teachers at school.

According to Morgil et al. (2001), teachers think that attending PTCs has a negative effect on students' attitudes in their regular class. Teachers argued that some students do not pay attention in class, thinking that they will learn the topic at the PTC. Students who have already learned a particular topic at the PTC can become disruptive when the regular teacher tries to cover the subject in class. Teachers also think that two groups of students end up forming in the classroom, namely those who attend PTCs and those who do not. Such a division reinforces the perception that PTCs are important, consequently relegating mainstream schools to second place. Teachers reported that they too felt the pressure exerted by the UEE, ending up focusing more on topics that were likely to feature in the UEE (Morgil et al., 2001). Tutors in the PTCs, however, enjoyed more freedom and could more flexibly respond to student demands, such as teaching test-taking techniques, coaching for the examinations, and helping students overcome examination anxiety by taking a lot of mock tests.

The question of course arises as to how much such coaching and teaching to the test constitutes a 'good education'. From the perspective of students and their parents, of course, the fact that performance in PTC mock examinations predicts the actual score obtained in the UEE – a fact corroborated by Morgil et al. (2001) – carries much weight, suggesting as it does that the probability of UEE success increases with attendance at the centres. However, the same researchers also note that the examination-centred nature of the teaching experience leaves students without much opportunity to develop self-expression skills. Similarly, higher education faculty members point out that first year undergraduates lack the skills needed to explain, analyse and interpret, given that they had hitherto, and throughout their primary and high school student careers, concentrated on answering multiple choice questions – a practice reinforced by PTCs (Ortaş, 2006).

#### NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS AND THE QUALITY OF HIGH SCHOOLS

As already noted, there are two high-stakes national examinations in Turkey. The first is that taken at the end of compulsory schooling on the basis of which students gain access to elite and high quality schools, thus opening up a pathway to accessing the best universities. The second is the UEE, taken at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup>

Grade, determining which programmes in which universities can be attended. Lucrative careers depend on success in both examinations. With so much at stake, students invest heavily in private tutoring. This investment intensifies during the last years of compulsory school and of high school. The preparation process for these two national examinations often leads students to avoid attending regular schooling, particularly during the second semester of the senior years of primary and high school in order to attend PTCs. To that end, some students pay expensively for false medical reports in order to justify their absence from their school. But that is not all: national examinations do not cover all high school subjects. Sports, the arts, music and foreign languages do not feature in the UEE. They tend to be given short shrift in high school teaching. It therefore does not come as a surprise that most high school graduates lack foreign language skills – with the exception, of course, of those graduating from the foreign language stream. Moreover, the competitive nature of the examinations adversely affects social relations among students, leaving little possibility for mutual trust and cooperation to develop.

The number of students affected by the race for university seats has increased over time, given the growing number of high school graduates, and the shifting policy regarding quotas imposed on university admissions. In 1980, the number of students sitting the UEE was 466,963; of these, only 41,574 – or 8.9% – were selected and all were placed in a four-year university programme, given that at that time there were as yet no two-year programmes. However, the number of applicants to the UEE and the proportions of those who are placed in a university programme have increased over time, along with the increase in the number of high school graduates. In 2008, only about a third of all 1,574,928 applicants were selected and placed in the two or four-year higher education programmes. In 2010, there were 1,587,866 UEE candidates, and of these 874,306 were admitted, representing 55.1% of the total number of hopefuls (Student Selection and Placement Centre, 2012). The increase in the proportions of those who were placed in a university programme was due to the increase in the quotas of the universities and the foundation of additional public and private universities. In such a context, private tutoring is hardly likely to diminish: if anything, the boom in private tuition services will increase, given that more and more students are participating in the ‘race’.

#### CONCLUSION

Private tutoring is deeply entrenched in Turkish society. It can be considered as a remarkable societal and institutional phenomenon. It operates at the juncture of social class divisions, regional economic disparities, the inequitable distribution of schooling opportunities in a context of highly stratified school system, and a rigid set of national examinations. Against this backdrop, it is not uncommon for students to start resorting to private tutoring centres when they are barely ten years of age (World Bank, 2011, p. viii). Notwithstanding, access to private tutoring remains largely contingent on parental income and wealth, exacerbating social



stratification and inequitable social and educational opportunities in Turkish society.

The main challenge facing policy makers in Turkey is not so much to fight the manifestations of private tutoring. Rather, the challenge is to critically rethink the inequitable layers of educational structures, policies and practices prevalent within public education, in ways that build sustainable reforms for an education worth wanting, equitably accessible and equally meaningful to members of all social groups. In that sense, addressing the manifestations of private tutoring in Turkey means first and foremost redressing the structural, social and educational inequities that underlie the current educational system in ways that render schooling an empowering venue for a robust participatory enactment of Turkish citizenship.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the comments and suggestions of Giray Berberoğlu. Any remaining errors are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> Anatolian high schools are public schools that cater for high-achieving students. Most of their courses are taught in a foreign language. They are the equivalent of private grammar schools, though free of charge.

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