

## **DO PRIVATE TUTORING CENTERS PROVIDE EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND QUALITY IN EDUCATION?**

Private tutoring (fee-based tutoring outside the formal education system) is a common phenomenon in countries where students are ranked through high-stake and competitive exams in transitioning to higher levels of education, especially when the formal education system is considered to be inadequate in preparing for exams. Turkey is a typical case where private tutoring has grown significantly in size and scope over the last 30 years. It is calculated that households devote a notable portion their budget to privatize tutoring. In tandem with the prominence of private tutoring in the education landscape, the public debate on it also grows. Recently, Turkish government declared a strong political will and a policy proposal that will either close private tutoring centers (PTCs) down or convert them to private schools. The government proposal caused a major public debate on the positive and negative aspects of private tutoring particularly in terms of its effects on educational outcomes, equality of opportunity in society, and on who benefits from it and how much.

With this note, Education Reform Initiative (ERI) aims to help steer recent debates on the state of private tutoring centers (PTCs) in the right track. A common phenomenon in Turkey regarding changes in education policy is the prevalence of unproductive discussions that are far from the essence of the issue at hand. Furthermore, the fact that such radical and complex changes are brought to the public agenda in a hasty and polemical manner is a problem in itself. Along these lines, debates on PTCs, which directly affect many people, should be steered towards a more constructive platform where the issue can be discussed with an evidence-based and holistic approach.

The recent news in the press and public statements have brought PTCs into the focus of the education policy agenda in Turkey. As the possibility of closing or transforming PTCs into private schools are discussed, different opinions are expressed, regarding whether PTCs are useful in the transition to secondary or tertiary education in terms of equality of opportunity. Yet, the debate has mostly failed to move beyond impressions and personal assessments. However, the existing studies on PTCs in Turkey, albeit limited, may be helpful in guiding the relevant decision-making processes. In an effort to direct the discussion towards comprehensive empirical research, ERI first summarizes findings from relevant academic studies that indicate to what extent PTCs are effective, especially regarding the transition to tertiary education. Afterwards, the note addresses the debates around closing or transforming PTCs into private schools within the context of providing quality education in an equitable manner in Turkey with a critical perspective.

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS REGARDING PRIVATE TUTORING CENTERS

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**The common finding from studies that focus on the impact of PTC attendance on performance in the university entrance examination is that PTC attendance improves performance.**

- Tansel and Bircan's study (2005), which uses 2002 data and controls for numerous socioeconomic variables, shows that PTC attendance increases the likelihood of placement into two or four-year university programs by 9 %; and that receiving private tutoring positively impacts student scores in Math and Science.
- An 2008 study by Gurun and Millimet uses the same data and finds that, in the event that students spend more than \$1,275 (in 2002 prices, equivalent to approximately 3,400 TL in 2013 prices) on PTCs, PTC attendance increases the probability of placement into a two or four-year program by 7 %. However, the authors also state that, when fewer resources are allocated to PTCs, there is no impact of PTC attendance on university placement.
- Lastly, Alkan, Çarkoğlu, Filiztekin, and İnceoğlu's study (2008) reviews 2001, 2002 and 2005 high school and university entrance exams and investigates the effect of PTC attendance on university entrance exam performance. Compared to the above mentioned studies, the estimates in this study take into account the students' former academic accumulation as well. Findings indicate that PTC attendance positively affects university entrance exam performance. However, this effect is not linear, and PTC attendance over 100 hours per year results in very limited value-added in the university entrance exam performance.

The findings of these three studies are in line with the overall impressions prevalent in the debate around PTCs: PTC attendance in Turkey is a significant determinant of success in the university entrance examination.

**While attending PTCs is positively correlated with the socioeconomic status and income level of parents, the correlation between the academic achievement of the student and probability of attending PTCs is stronger.**

- The study conducted by Alkan, Çarkoğlu, Filiztekin and İnceoğlu (2008) demonstrates that income and education levels of parents indirectly affect the university entrance exam score of the student in three ways: Students who have more educated parents and are in relatively higher income households are 1) more likely to accumulate better academic skills throughout their primary and secondary education; 2) more likely to have higher scores at the university entrance exam; and, 3) more likely to attend PTCs.
- Another strong determinant of attending PTCs is motivation. Tansel and Bircan's (2005) research show that while each additional year in mother's education level leads to a 2 % increase in the probability of attending PTCs, graduating with a "merit certificate" means a 26 % increase, and graduating with an "appreciation certificate" means a 17 % increase. A rough calculation around these findings suggests that, *ceteris paribus*, a student who graduates with an "appreciation certificate" and whose mother has a middle school diploma has the same probability of attending a PTC

with a student who has not received an “appreciation certificate” and whose mother has a university diploma.

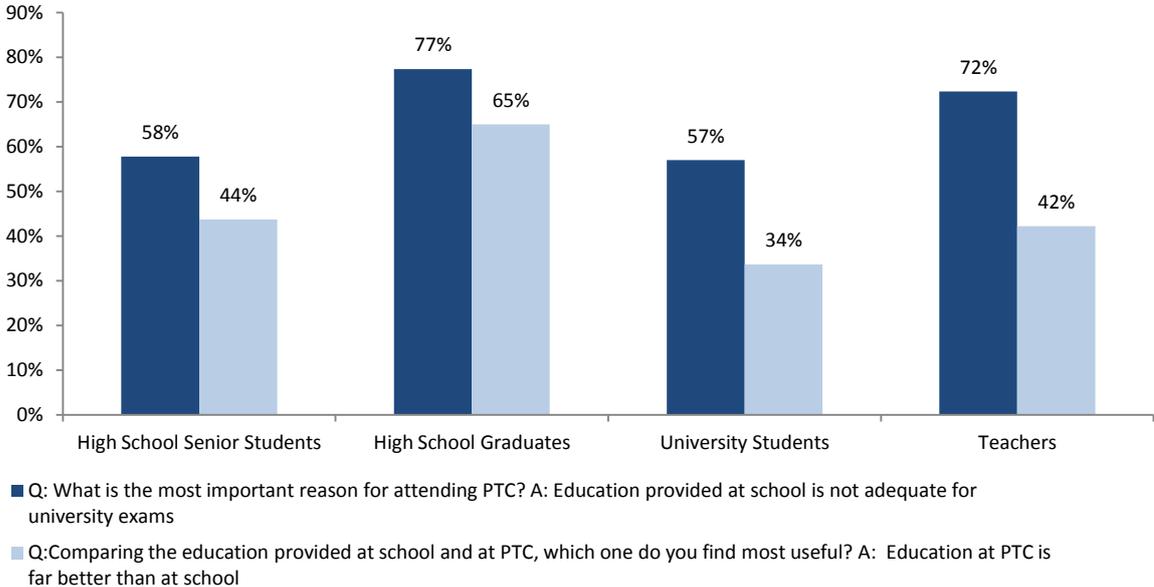
- Tansel (2013) and Gurun and Millimet (2008) underline that uneven distribution of PTCs across Turkey may be causing geographical/spatial inequality. In Hakkari, the ratio of students attending PTCs to all secondary school students is only about 8 %, whereas it is more than 40 % in Mersin and 55 % in Van.

In brief, according to the current research, attending PTCs is positively correlated with the student’s success level at the university entrance exam and yet access to PTCs is contingent upon socioeconomic variables. Furthermore, access to PTCs varies significantly across regions; hence it could be argued that PTCs may be causing inequality in the university entrance exams. On the other hand, especially the findings of Tansel (2005) suggest that **students from low-income families who are highly motivated and successful at school do benefit from attending PTCs. This finding supports the idea that PTCs may be increasing the equality of opportunity for some students.**

**In Turkey a considerable part of household expenditure is spent on PTCs and other private courses. Students and teachers widely think that the fundamental reason for attending PTCs is that the quality of education received at the public school system is inadequate for succeeding at the university entrance exam.**

- In 2005, Turkish Education Association (TEA) conducted a wide-range survey on PTCs. According to the study, in order to prepare each student for the university exam, households spent \$ 5,322 on average in 2005 prices (\$12,000 in 2013 prices).
- The Gurun and Millimet (2008) study finds that up to 15 % of the households expenses are spent on PTCs.
- The underlying motivation for PTC expenses of households is that it is not believed that the education provided in the formal school system is adequately preparing students for university entrance exams (TEA, 2005).
- Furthermore, a significant number of teachers and students infer that beyond the difference PTCs make in preparing students for the university exams, the education provided in PTCs is far better than the one provided at the school (TEA, 2005) (See Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Evaluation from Students and Teachers on Reasons for Attending PTCs and the Quality of Education Provided at School and PTCs**



Source: TEA, 2005.

As a result, empirical research point out three main reasons for attending PTCs: (i) attending PTCs positively affects achievement in the university entrance exam; (ii) PTC expenses constitute a significant part of the household budget; (iii) schools are not believed to be providing quality education neither to prepare for university exams nor for the sake of education. Nevertheless, it is not possible to gauge from the present research any conclusions about how much, towards which direction, and for whom, PTCs have effects on the equality of opportunity in society. There is need for further data and research on the relationship between socioeconomic variables and student achievement in the university entrance exam. Such need is becoming more urgent simply because existing research is about to be outdated and invalid against the rapid changes in the economy and society.

To sum up, choosing to attend a PTC is directly about the demand to receive a good education and to be able to compete in the university entrance exams. Based on present research and findings, it is not possible to clearly foresee whether closing down PTCs (or converting them into private schools) would increase the quality of education and reduce the competition caused by the university entrance exams.

## POLICY PRIORITIES FOR EDUCATION DEBATES

ERI has been highlighting that to focus on the two problematic areas in Turkish education system that need effective solutions is a basic requirement to make sense of the current debate. The first one has to do with providing all individuals with equal access to education regardless of their personal characteristics and status. The second one is the issue of education quality that is measured by what students learn in school, how they learn it and what their educational outcomes are as a result. One of the main goals of education is to ensure that students reach their potential as well as providing all individuals with the same

opportunity for success independent from their personal and socioeconomic characteristics. Numerous academic studies underline that the best education systems are those that make sure all kids have equal access to quality education.

In recent years, net schooling rates in Turkey have been increasing significantly, especially for girls. However, the level of learning and whether or not students can translate what they learn into real life situations will continue to be discussed unless the quality of education in schools increase as well. Educational outcomes are one of the most telling indicators of educational quality. One of the important findings of the 2011 TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study) exam is that almost one quarter of 4th and 8th grade students in Turkey do not possess even basic level proficiency in math and science. This is a sign of lack of quality in the education system. For this reason, previously started projects and programmes aimed at improving educational quality at a regional and national level should be prioritized and completed as a complement to improving access to basic education. One such example is the School Based Professional Development Model (SBPD) project that supports the development of teachers' professional knowledge, skills, values and attitudes inside and outside of the classroom, as well as providing the teacher with the support she needs to develop effective teaching and learning environments. In addition to this study, other projects that can help elevate the quality of education in Turkey include the determination of core teacher competencies; the National Teachers Strategy document designed to present a roadmap on teachers' areas of expertise and work conditions; and steps taken to universalize early childhood education in Turkey.

Inequality, which should not be seen as a separate issue from the quality problems experienced in Turkey, continues to be a major challenge. According to TIMSS results, the proportion of Turkish students who perform at the advanced proficiency level are either at the same or higher than the international average, while the proportion of students who perform at below basic proficiency level are much higher than the international average. In other words, students tend to perform very well or very poorly in Turkey. The fact that the academic proficiency distribution is piled around the two ends of the performance scale highlights inequality as a significant problem in the education system. When young people are unable to realize their academic potential as a result of their socioeconomic background, major problems for the country's current development policy and for the future prospects of its citizens may arise. Students who cannot go to schools that they prefer are further impacted in their future work life causing them to lag behind their peers. This also hampers opportunities for social mobility between generations.

In addition to these two basic problem areas, the pattern of implementing radical and comprehensive changes in a hasty manner without discussing the results of data-based analyses and expert opinions with all relevant stakeholders is, in itself, a problem. It is important to remember that education is a complex system that hosts many components and it requires an integral strategy while designing and putting into effect reforms and policy steps. The system can greatly benefit from analyses of the needs of key stakeholders such as students and teachers and from planning based on the root causes of problems before making significant changes that affect millions of individuals. In a dynamic field like education, the emergence of issues that require solutions is natural; what needs to be taken into account is the extent to which the reforms consider the components underlying the main issues. Processes related to education policy should be operated in a constructive manner

through a comprehensive strategy that is centered on the student and focused on improving quality while eliminating inequalities, rather than resorting to short-term solutions.

An education reform realized through a lifelong learning perspective that starts from early childhood education is one of the most urgent needs in Turkey. This is necessary in order to equip students as active citizens of a democratic society with the principles of equality, pluralism and respect for human rights. ERI insists that Turkey's most important educational goal is to provide boys and girls with equal access to quality education which will, in turn, ensure that Turkey achieves sustainable development and a highly competitive economy.

For these reasons, it is of utmost importance that policy makers explain, in a transparent manner, how closing/transforming PTCs will contribute to an improvement in the overall educational quality as well as how all students can access it with the help of data driven analysis to all stakeholders.

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ERI is one of the few initiatives in Turkey that think and ask questions about education policies, define problem areas and develop alternatives for their solution. ERI has defined its reform priorities and program areas in accordance with its commitment to the ideal of “quality education for all”.

ERI also attempts to serve as an example as to how policy dialogue should be conducted within a contemporary democratic framework by bringing together concerned civil society groups and relevant state agencies to catalyze an innovative collective thought process for education reform policy.

Underlining the importance of setting up participatory, transparent and evidence-based policy formation processes, ERI facilitated the participation of many stakeholders in the education policy processes and mobilized a significant pool of knowledge and experience. Representatives from bureaucracy, private sector, academia, schools and civil society who came together in the activities carried out by ERI, contributed to the emergence of a new political culture.

