

## **Evaluation of Street Children in Turkey in Terms of their Ties with the Education System**

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### ***Introduction***

The causes of being street-working children as urban poverty, neglect and abuse within the family, urbanization, and migration (Aptekar, 1994). Nevertheless, literature (Standing and Tokman, 1991; Atauz, 1997; Işık ve Pınarcıoğlu, 2001) discuss that causes of the phenomenon may vary according to different cultural, socio-economical and political structures. This study discusses the phenomenon of street-working children from the angles of culture, economy and migration. In general a distinction is made between (Atauz and Arts, 2004): *Street working children* - children who work [both in wage labour and marginal activities] on the street, who for the majority of the time sleep in a home environment, and who maintain strong contact with their family. *Street living children* - those who for the majority of the time sleep on the street and retain limited or no contact with their family of origin. Children who live on the streets, without any parental support, are a fraction of the total population of working children. These are in their majority, 'abandoning' rather than 'abandoned' children, who are generally on the street as a result of family breakdown and violence almost invariably linked to the stresses of extreme poverty and war. *Children at risk* - for example, those in penitentiaries, institutions, and the younger siblings of working children and children who are part of families of seasonal labourers.

In most countries of Africa, Latin-America, South-East Asia, the former Soviet Union, a lot of programmes are implemented by governments and NGO's dealing with shelter, education, prostitution, crime, drug abuse, nutrition and health. The overall success of these interventions is difficult to measure but individual success stories are reported and maybe the measurement of inputs is more important than those of outputs. In most countries in the world street children are a part of the social and economic conditions which is the result of the struggle of families against poverty (Atauz and Arts, 2004). Street children problem in Turkey is mainly due to structural problems in the country, which can be listed as rural-urban migration, rapid urbanization, uncontrolled population increase and unequal distribution of income. The existence of street children under different names and attempts to address their situation laid back to 1920's in Turkey. Orphans in the streets of Istanbul in the post World War era attracted the attention of the officials and immediate intervention had been provided. Although groups of homeless children appeared in 1950's once again, with heavy rural-urban migration, it is not until 1990's that the problem became visible and widespread, hence drew the attention of the public and the media (Atauz and Arts, 2004).

The phenomenon of the street children is always perceived or discussed in relation with the lack of education as one of the primary causes. Lack of education either causes or accompanies being on the street. Some argue (Güneş and Bay, 2007) that great majority of the street-living and street-working children are illiterate; however, things may appear out vice versa keeping their strong ties or affiliations with the school while at the same time being on the street. It is even the case in Turkey despite the fact that there are currently 10 million illiterate people out of the population of 72 million proving the strong ties with the educational system. This study reveals that lack of education may not be a primary cause of being a street child in various cases. Our research conducted in Malatya, Adiyaman, Van, and Diyarbakır puts forth that street children in these cities not only keep their strong ties with their families, but also with the education system. It is apparent that in these cities the biggest motivation for working or being on the street is economic problems. It is even evident that education may sometimes be the motivating factor for migration of these families. The responsibility for the care of street children in Turkey is with the General Directorate of Social Services and Child Protection Institution. The institution is responsible for the Children and Youth Centers.

At the present moment different approaches have been developed by different departments within the General Directorate for primary Education, which focus on increasing access to the regular primary schools, through training of guidance teachers. In recent years an outreach programme for families has been developed in cooperation with UNICEF (Atauz and Arts, 2004). This study aims at exploring the ties of the street children in Malatya, Adıyaman, Van, and Diyarbakır with the education system and proposing some social work solutions relating to the educational needs of the children. It is seen that children and youth centers in these cities offer some educational activities though limited, and the children's interest in these activities is surprisingly high. Therefore, any intervention strategy targeting these children must first be focusing on their primary educational needs.

### **Method**

This research is a descriptive one that tries to explore the ties of the street children in Malatya, Adıyaman, Van, and Diyarbakır with the education system and proposing some social work solutions relating to the educational needs of the children. In doing so, the research was conducted as an exhaustive one between 2006 and December 2009 on 465 street-working children in Malatya (28.4%), Adıyaman (12.90%), Van (21.5%) and Diyarbakır (37.2%) in Turkey. These children receive social services from the Children and Youth Centers (ÇOGEM) in these cities under the General Directorate for Social Services and Child Protection Institution. ÇOGEMs are not like the children and youth centers in the West, but specifically target street-living and street-working children. These four cities were chosen due to the fact that they have been the cities of origin for both immigration and forced migration in Turkey for since the 1950s and the 1980s respectively.

Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted by the authors in Malatya on 20 street-working children to enable an appreciation of some of the issues involved. The authors employed two main methods in this study. First they prepared a questionnaire comprised of 55 questions focusing on socio-demographic characteristics, their ties with education system and their educational needs. Data were collected by four social workers who work in these ÇOGEMs with these children who attended the centers between 2006 and 2009 under the researchers' supervision. The social workers applied the questionnaires with the children face to face, and each took approximately one hour. Secondly, the authors made use of their own and social workers' observations at the research sites. At the end the questionnaires were collected in preparation for data processing. The questionnaires were edited to check for those that were not properly filled and those that were full of unanswered questions. At the end of this exercise, 465 questionnaires passed the editing stage. Data were analyzed via the SPSS (Statistics Package for Social Sciences 15.00) software program.

### **Results**

#### **Demographic characteristics**

91,9% of the children in this study is comprised of male as Bose (1992) found out before this as mainly because of the socio-cultural factors limiting young girls' mobility. 93,8% of the children in this study is between 7-16 years of age. This finding is in parallel with previous research (Altıntaş, 2003; Institute of Social Research and Development, 1990; UNICEF, 1998; Philips, 1994; Atauz, 1997; İlik ve Türkmen, 1994).

63,2% of the families immigrated to the metropolitan cities mostly from the South-eastern Turkey between 1990-2000 (72,6%). Approximate total income of the family including the money the child brings on average is concentrated between 150 TL (70 Euro) and 550 TL (250 Euro) per month. As to the social security of the families, 73,1% of the families hold green card which is given to the poor people by the government and covers only part of their health expenditures.

Besides their right to the green card, these families receive no social assistance. Distribution of the fathers' jobs shows that 42,4% of all are workers working for the minimum wage. A significant number of all (24,8%) are unemployed. Great majority of the mothers (87,1%) are housewives. The children in this study mostly started working on the street when they were between 6-12 years of age (89%). And as to how long they have been working on the street, it appears that 74,2% of them have been on the street for 2-8 years. The children primarily work in the squares of the city (67,1%) in order to earn more because these are the most crowded places of the city (81,5%). The results on the cause of their working on the street indicate that almost all (91,9%) work in order to contribute to their family income.

#### **Education**

Almost half of the fathers (47%) were graduated from the primary school. 17,2% of the fathers are illiterate, and 21,2% of them are literate, but never attended school. 60,9% of the mothers are illiterate. Only 17,8% of them were graduated from the primary school. Educational status of the parents was found very low in general. These findings are in line with Altıntaş's (2003) and Aderinto's (2000) researches. Great majority of the children (73%) are students in the primary school. School attendance differs from country to country (Philips, 1994).

20,4% state that they have at least a brother or sister who could not attend school due to financial difficulties. 76,2% of the children state that their education need was fulfilled in the city they immigrated. 73,7% of the children in this study have never failed any class before. And 75,8% of the ones who failed did so at the first of year of study. As to the school success of the children, it is surprising that only 6% of all state that they are unsuccessful. 29,6% of all play hooky from time to time, and only 29,2% go working on the street. 69,2% prefer leisure activities (internet, home, friends, computer games, etc.) 55% of all start working on the street immediately after school every day. Among the ones who attend the activities of the Youth and Children Centers 45,2% prefer educational activities. 86,8% of the ones who attend these centers are happy with the services delivered there. And 47% of the participants of these centers are most happy with the educational activities. Besides their satisfaction with the educational activities, 54,5% state that they would demand financial support as a possible service of the centers. As to what they want to be in the future, among all other professions teacher comes the first with the ratio of 23,9%, and surprisingly police comes the fourth after doctor and soccer player by 11,7%.

### **Discussion**

Results of this study revealed a very interesting panorama of the street children in Turkey in relation to their ties with the education system. This unexpected and surprising result differs from many other researches in the world. For example Bose (1992) found out that most street children have never attended school and Aderinto (2000) argued that these children have very low level of education. These children are apparently capable of separating their street practice and school. According to Tzannatos (2003) there is a strong inter-generational transfer of human capital from parents to children in the sense that households with more educated parents are more likely to keep their children in school and less likely to have child workers. This finding of Tzannatos is in accordance with our study, but despite the fact that parents of these children failed in the educational system – which is usually assumed as a triggering factor for being a street child – it seems that they strongly urge their children to continue school. This may be interpreted as the seeds of their unfulfilled desires in life.

It is even the case that education is in most cases the very reason of migration of the family. Furthermore, as an unintended consequence of migration these children could have the opportunity for education having much more comfortable access to school. The only barrier against school attendance is lack of financial resources which make the children have at least one brother or sister out of educational system. Therefore, it is an obvious reality that the children in our study attend or are willing to continue school. Having such a motivation these children are successful at school. And great majority of them regularly attend school. It is so surprising as a result of the study that only a small percent of the children cut classes, but do not have this time on the street and make use of this as a spare time for the things they cannot realize otherwise. They normally go to work on the streets immediately after the school finishes; so they do not have any leisure time for activities such as meeting with friends, playing computer games, and resting at home, etc. Therefore theirs corresponds neither to streets as a life style nor a spoiled breaking of the rules. What they seek for is only the childhood they lost long for.

This study revealed another very important result which has fruitful implications for social work practice. Our results show that great majority of these children participate in the activities of the Youth and Children Centers of the General Directorate of Social Services and Child Protection Institution. What makes this much more interesting is the fact that they attend these centers mostly for its educational activities. Response of the children to the question of what they want to be in the future indicates two important things. First, it seems that teacher as a role model constitutes an important place in their life. In spite of their huge burden of having to work on the street they are insistent on holding on to life. Second, a considerable amount of them state that they want to be policeman in the future. Although theirs is life on the verge of crimes, they again try to keep away. Instead of developing a class-based anger against the others – of course, if not now – they keep their hope and energy for being an ordinary citizen.

Shorter and Onyancha (1999) argue that the main purpose of street children education ought no to be limited to imparting information relevant with examinations but to seek for education relevant to the children's impoverished conditions and to the need they have to earn a living; however, results of our study teach us that these children are happy with formal education and do not need any special program prepared for their needs. The only thing they suffer from is poverty even which does not result in their school dropping. In Turkish case forcing these children to some special education programs would add all other dimensions of social exclusion to their economic exclusion. The only support that they need would be some youth and children centers that cover both educational and social activities both contributing to their improvement and keeping them away involving in the dangers of the street. The eagerness of the children in this study for participating mostly in educational activities implies their willingness and desire for being accepted as an ordinary citizen.

All want to choose professions in the future such as teacher, doctor, and policeman, etc. Their social inclusion would mean acceptance of them as they are and deliver the services they “demand for”. Therefore, results of this study show that these children have not only strengths for surviving on the street, but also strengths for self-development. They need not strict special education policies and practices, but to be a part of the ordinary one, participate in it without any stigmatizing definitions or pressure imposed upon by various parties such as the mass media, the authorities, and neighborhood, etc. Their strengths will not only be the very factor which will enable them be freed from working or living on the street, but also make them contribute to the others.

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