

Issues in Education for Syrian Elementary Refugee Learners in Turkey: A Systematic Review

Merah Souad^{1*}, Tahraoui Ramdane² and Tahraoui Ghada³

¹*Department of Social Foundation and Educational Leadership, Kulliyah of Education,
International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

²*Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Kulliyah of Education,
International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

³*Blackpool Victoria Hospital, Blackpool, Lancashire, England, United Kingdom*

**Corresponding Author: souad@iium.edu.my*

Abstract

The provision of education for Syrian refugees is a major issue of concern for both the Turkish government and the population due to the immense number of refugees, the availability of resources and the complexity of the former's educational needs. This review aims to synthesize the empirical quantitative and qualitative research, reports and literature related to the appropriateness of current educational practices catering for the educational needs of Syrian refugee children in Turkey, as well as the challenges facing these efforts. Related literature, previous studies and reports were systematically reviewed based on which a reflective analytical account of the actual educational practices and challenges were presented. Pertinent political, social & cultural aspects were further highlighted. By doing so, the researchers aim to determine which of the challenges are hindering the provision of education for refugee children based on the findings of related research. The results of the review indicated that most of the conducted research and reports have concluded that most of the educational practices dedicated to Syrian refugee children were far from being well constructed. The education provided was found to be remedial, spontaneous, reactional and of a tinkering nature. Therefore, a research gap was identified. It consists of the need to investigate other educational remedies to assist in tackling these challenges and to provide a more reliable and comprehensive education for emergencies to aid refugees in fighting back all forms of abuse and exploitation, as well as to facilitate the process of integration in host communities or repatriation to their motherland.

Keywords: *Syrian refugees in Turkey, conflict zones, education in emergencies, integration, repatriation, elementary learners*

INTRODUCTION

The prevailing situation of refugees in Turkey appears to be different in comparison to that existing in other neighbouring host countries. The living conditions of refugees and the laws concerning them seem to be evolving, following the development of the war in Syria on one end and the Turkish internal political agenda on the other. Abiding by the signed Geneva convention 1961 (Foca, 2011) that recommends that Turkey provide equal opportunities for refugees as made available for its citizens (The 1951 Geneva Convention of Refugees, 1951, as cited in UNHCR Malaysia, 2022), the Turkish government has appeared to be exceedingly more welcoming and helpful to Syrian refugees than other neighbouring countries.

The influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey commenced at the start of the Syrian war. The first stage began with the inflow of refugees into Turkey from 2011 up until the summer of 2015, during which the country received an estimated 2.7 million refugees (Bagir, 2018). Turkish authorities followed an “open border/door” policy and began constructing tents in the southern provinces of Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa as shelters for the refugees, and referred to Syrian refugees as “guests”, a name assuming a temporary and short stay that granted them no legal rights (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). The second stage started during the summer of 2015 and was labelled the “refugee crisis” (Memisoglu, & Ilgit, 2016) during which the movement of refugees from Turkey to Europe reached its highest level, receiving large amounts of media coverage. It was a period when thousands of refugees suffered seriously at European borders with some tragically losing their lives at sea (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). This crisis was particularly alarming to European countries who started to feel the pressures of the refugee influx. This issue was further exploited by the Turkish government to encourage EU countries to realise and acknowledge that the refugee crisis was not singularly a Turkish internal problem, but rather, a global issue that required support. The third phase of the refugee situation in Turkey referred to the process in which the implemented policies and practices were moving towards the direction of integration. For instance, in January 2016, the Turkish government began to issue work permits for Syrian refugees who had been in Turkey for more than six months.

In 2014 and with around two and a quarter million Syrian refugees, Turkey became, according to the World Bank, a host to the largest refugee population in the world. The Turkish government accorded Syrian refugees the status of “temporary protection”, which entitled them to public healthcare, education, labour markets, social assistance, and other similar services (Içduygu & Millet, 2016, p. 4). In 2019, the Turkish president, Tayyip Erdoğan, announced that Turkey was hosting more than four million Syrian “brothers”. Turkish opposition criticized these policies and highlighted the burden the refugee influx had created on the economy and local population. Many sectors have been impacted as a result, including healthcare (Doner, Özkara, & Kahveci, 2013), consumer prices, housing and rent, and loss of employment amongst the locals (Tumen, 2016).

As far as education is concerned and according to the Turkish laws, all children on Turkish soil have access to Turkish educational institutions, regardless of race, language, religion, and sexuality (European Commission, 2022). However, on the ground, the situation

of education with regards to refugees seems to be multiplex. Many of the Syrian refugee children in Turkey found it extremely difficult to access Turkish public institutions of learning. According to different studies and reports, the reasons for the difficulty are numerous and related to the following factors: political decisions, internal bureaucratic regulations (Aras & Yasun, 2016), financial aid, equipment, manpower, trauma, language barriers, cultural and religious backgrounds of learners, poverty, social stigma (Ozden, 2013), educational vision and mission, internal operational policies (Baban, Ilcan, & Rygiel, 2017), various assisting agencies with different agendas, uncertainty about long terms plans (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2016) and, most importantly, the overwhelming number of refugees and the absence of accurate documentation of their demographic characteristics, such as the exact number of refugee children, place of living, academic level, etc., particularly for the Syrian refugee diaspora outside of the refugee camps. Consequently, it was estimated that 74% of children outside of the refugee camps in Turkey had no access to schooling (UNICEF, 2014).

As of the 2019-2020 school year, and according to the data published by the Turkish government, it was estimated that from the one million school-aged Syrian refugee children, just slightly more than 640,000 were enrolled in schools (UNICEF, 2019), an indication that a there was a “lost generation” of hundreds of thousands of children who were being left out of other counts.

Aim

The researchers aimed to construct a review by performing a systematic search of the literature and studies investigating the challenges facing the educational provision for Syrian refugee children in Turkey. Furthermore, this review was conducted irrespective of the research methodologies utilized in these studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods). Reports from related agencies were also reviewed because we believe that a comprehensive review should incorporate different types of evidence (Pope, Mays, & Popay, 2007). Drawing on the relevant theories, research and reports, this review provides insights into the effectiveness and appropriateness of current practices catering to the educational needs of Syrian refugee children in Turkey. Relying on the same body of literature, along with our understanding and analysis of the issue, the challenges facing these efforts were categorized and elaborated upon.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review presents an analytical account of actual educational practices and challenges on the issues concerning the provision of education for elementary learners in conflict, which was a systematic review of Syrian refugees in Turkey. First, a reflective review of the literature was utilized. As highlighted by Creswell (2014), a literature review means locating and summarizing the studies about a topic. Often these are research studies, but they may also include conceptual articles or opinion writings that provide a framework for thinking

about topics. In addition, they can also include related official reports depending on the nature of the subject of the study. Second a systematic review of research papers (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) was conducted. The purpose is to systematically share with the reader the findings of other studies (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1993), as well as relate the study in question to the wider ongoing dialogue and rhetoric vis-a-vis the topic (subject of the study). Third, reports from related international and local agencies were utilized to provide data that is difficult to get through other means. Fourth, to fill the gap(s) in the domain of research in question (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), which consists of issues in education for Syrian elementary refugee learners in Turkey, an analysis of the challenges facing these learners in Turkey was presented. In brief, in line with scholars' recommendations for a clear and credible review and synthesis, the process should include an extensive literature search, study identification, study coding, quality appraisal, and finally, a thematic analysis of the research findings (Van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019).

Literature Search

For research articles and books and in line with Creswell's steps to writing a literature review (Peyton, 2017), which consists of identifying key terms or "descriptors", locating literature in primary and secondary sources, critically evaluating and selecting it, organizing it and finally writing the review, it was decided by the three researchers that the selected publications had to meet four (4) criteria. First, the context of the study has to be related to education in emergencies application and challenges. Second, the context of the studies, whether using qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method approaches, has to be related to at least one of the aspects (i.e., application or challenges) targeted by the review. Third, the subject matter must be related to education for Syrian refugees in Turkey. Fourth, the studies must be originally written in English. The researchers had access to hard copies that were available at the International Islamic University Malaysia and the Queen Mary University of London libraries. Databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, Academia and Research Gate were referred to. A minimum period of one year starting from September 2019 to February 2020 was utilized to sort, include and exclude information sources. A particular emphasis was placed on recently published works. To maintain credibility and authenticity, a wide range of 24 published reports from world-renowned related agencies were utilized. The criteria for the selection of the reports were that first, they must be released by agencies working directly with refugees, and second, the latest reports on the refugees must be obtained to get an accurate picture of what was happening on the ground. These reports were utilized especially, to get relevant and up-to-date statistics and correct logistical information which could not be attained from other academic sources. Reports from impactful and concerned agencies—such as UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women, The World Bank Report, ReliefWeb, Human Rights Watch, International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), MEB, BIA News Center Istanbul and Turkish Policy Quarterly—were utilized to obtain the statistics and understand the relevant policies and the efforts of GOs and NGOs in helping Syrian refugees in their educational attainment.

Study Identification

This process first began with identifying publications, where a total of 200 publications (i.e., books, research papers and reports) were found. All three researchers were involved in the process of identifying publications. Discussion sessions were conducted on a weekly basis, especially in the first two months of September-October 2019, to discuss the relevancy and suitability of the collected data. It is worth mentioning that identifying the data process continued into the year 2020. Drawing on the researchers' discussion, 141 publications were selected as potentially relevant resources, then later after further verification, 31 publications were ruled out by a consensus among the three researchers because they were related to challenges facing education for refugees in other conditions different from those in which Syrian refugees are facing in Turkey. Another five (5) publications related to the challenges were also taken out because of the redundancy and the high level of data saturation in this aspect. Full texts were gathered and divided among the three researchers to be reviewed.

Table1

Identification of Data Sources

Phase	Total No of Data Sources	Eliminated Data Sources	Reasons
1. Determining relevant resources	201	NIL	Non-relevance to the topic in its general idea
2. Researcher's discussion of the resources' content	201	60	Content not strongly relevant
3. Resources Identification stage	141	31	Content not strongly relevant
4. Report writing stage	110	5	Data collection saturation
Final Number of Data Sources			105

Study Coding

Full texts were gathered and divided among the three researchers to be reviewed. All the findings of the selected studies were converted into a qualitative form. This process included dividing the texts among the three researchers. Reading and extracting relevant data were conducted, then summary phrases were formulated, and analysis themes were identified based on the discussion among the three researchers after presenting individual findings. To improve the quality of reporting, a checklist of the review criteria was prepared. It consisted of reading, highlighting the main ideas, highlighting the themes, writing a summary for each of them, commenting on the ideas by evaluating, verifying and synthesizing and listing the publications.

Quality Appraisal

Meetings were conducted (i.e., face to face and online via WhatsApp group calls) to discuss the reviewed findings in the three researchers' reports. Reports were given numbers 1, 2 and 3 according to the order of the authors' names. The three preliminary reviews were presented among the three researchers so that the final themes could be identified, as well as to synchronize the content of the three reports, check if there were any discrepancies and eliminate repetitions. The three reports were exchanged among the three researchers who served as interpreters to make sure that the quality of each review was checked. For instance, it was agreed that the theme titled "traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among students" in reports 1 and 2 would be assigned to Researcher 3 to be elaborated further because there was a consensus among the three researchers that the argument was not particularly strong. And more publications were needed to enrich the related data.

Thematic Analysis and Coding

The review's analysis provides a narrative summary, and thematic analysis (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young & Sutton, 2004). For better coverage of the related literature, a meticulous and rigorous process of reading, understanding and analysis was performed by the researchers. Key ideas were highlighted, examined for relevancy, and selected based on descriptors identified in the primary and secondary sources. The ideas were critically evaluated and selected. Subsequently, a review was written, and an argument was established and reinforced by theoretical and statistical evidence. The findings were extracted and finalized, and the proposed framework was designed based on the identified gap in the theory and previous studies.

FINDINGS

The findings of the current review indicate that the challenges facing Syrian refugee children's educational attainment are diverse and complex and vary along political, economic, financial, cultural, religious, and racial themes. These findings are divided into two main categories: pre-enrollment and post-enrollment challenges.

Pre-Enrollment Challenges

Enrollment challenges are related to the obstacles that prevent or hinder Syrian refugee children from enrolling in different educational institutions. They consist of the following:

Financial Support

Typically, “resources are extremely limited in many emergency education spaces leading to barriers in accessing quality education” (Hossain, 2016, p.151). According to UNESCO, the share of total overseas development assistance to education has declined sharply in recent years, with funding being persistently low in conflict-affected states (Menashy & Zakharia, 2017). Therefore, seeking financial support is a top priority in any host country’s action plan. Studies and reports have confirmed that the “scarcity of education program development (is) mainly due to [the] lack of financial matters” (Bircan & Sunata, 2015; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). According to Taskin and Erdemli (2018), teachers reported that they do not receive adequate support in the process of educating Syrian students and added that the students are provided with limited books and additional class support. While there is little doubt that the Turkish government was relatively successful in providing humane living conditions for Syrian refugees in camps “equipped with medical centres, schools, recreational facilities and vocational training programs” (Kirişci, 2014, p. 20), these efforts were not enough due to a complex array of issues ranging from the huge influx of refugees, inconsistencies with the governance system and limited financial support from different donors. The lack of financial assistance (Culberston & Constant, 2015) has led to issues such as difficulties in preparing conducive learning spaces and providing suitable equipment. Studies have also highlighted that in some places, finding buildings and premises suitable for housing schools is a major handicap as well (Kirişci, 2014). In addition to humanitarian aid, agencies’ trend is to prioritize therapeutic intervention programs to help children with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Alpak et al., 2015) as they locate issues at an individual level and overlook broader dimensions of inequality and disadvantage.

Refugee Education’s Mission and Vision

The provision of education for refugees faces another dilemma concerning the vision of the educational process itself—is it for acculturation and integration or repatriation? The related literature debating this dilemma whether concerning old or new refugees in Africa or Asia varies from one case to another depending on the type of conflict, duration, policies of host countries/regions and, most importantly, the availability of the means to help refugees. There is a clear division between those who call for integration and those who emphasize on education being used to prepare refugees for repatriation (Akcapar & Simsek, 2018; Bakewell, 2000; George, Vaillancourt, & Rajan, 2016; Hcioglu, 2018; Icduygu & Millet, 2016; Omata, 2013; Smith, 2013; Yildiz & Uzgoren, 2016). Nevertheless, an all-inclusive education for refugees “that protects the well-being, fosters learning opportunities and nurtures the overall development (social, emotional, cognitive, physical) of children affected by conflicts and disasters” (Sinclair, 2002, p. 23) is urgently needed.

The Vision of Education for Refugees in Turkey

In this regard, the debate is centred around the political, financial and societal readiness to educate and prepare Syrian refugees for repatriation, or to ready them for integration into Turkish society. Many believe that regardless of whether integration is the immediate aim of education for refugees, another alternative where the curriculum would continue to be relevant to the national curriculum of the country of origin should be provided, to facilitate reintegration after repatriation. It is worth mentioning that the immense number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is a serious obstacle to any kind of immediate integration policies (Culberstson & Constant, 2015; Içduygu & Millet, 2016). Therefore, education for repatriation should exist as an alternative, a claim that is firmly backed by the obscurity surrounding refugee parental educational choice, aspirations as well as settlement plans due to the lack of relevant empirical data. In this regard, Syrian schools in Turkey (some of which are run by the refugees themselves) provide a good alternative. These Temporary Education Centers (TEC) are primary and secondary education centres that provide educational opportunities for school-aged Syrian children in Turkey (Aras & Yasun, 2016). “They utilize Arabic as a medium of instruction and follow a modified national (Syrian) type curriculum” (Aras & Yasun, 2016, p. 1). In addition to the strong bond and common understanding fostered between students and teachers, these schools embody a shared intention of repatriation and big expectations on Syria’s reconciliation through education. They also provide (not only) sustainable educational opportunities, but also the particular supplements and motivations which no other supporters are able to do” (Yamamoto, 2016). Regardless of differences in views, many believe that the immediate task of educating refugees should be to save them from becoming a “lost generation” (UNICEF, 2014) and to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills vital in understanding the culture of the host country and enabling their survival whilst being away from their homelands.

The Political Factor’s Effect

In Turkey, events on the ground seem to be affecting the government’s policies, vis-à-vis refugees. The prolonged stay of Syrian refugees in Turkey with a political crisis in Syria showing no sign of resolution, coupled with a clear conflict of interest of international actors which has dragged the country into the centre of an endless and complicated proxy war (Gerges, 2013), is one strong motive for considering integration as a priority. Turkish reception policies at the outset were predicated on the assumption that the conflict would come to a swift conclusion, allowing the displaced Syrians to return home, but as conditions continue to deteriorate ... it has become clear that a shift in policy to encompass longer-term solutions is needed (İçduygu, 2015); yet, whether by default or by design, the government had gradually implemented integration’s policies, suggesting that, regardless of their public declarations, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other key leaders realize that many Syrians are in Turkey to stay (Makovsky, 2019). This view is backed by the notion that refugee conditions on the ground will change and more intricate relations between them and the locals will emerge. For instance, it was reported that by the fourth year of the Syrian conflict, in Southern Turkish cities, Syrian refugees had created a new demographic reality on the ground ‘shifting ethnic and sectarian balances. This is especially true in cities such as Hatay, with up to 8.8% of the

total population being Syrian, Kilis with 59%, Gaziantep with 10.5%, Sanliurfa with 9.5% and Mardin with 6% (Cagaptay & Menekse, 2014). This impact has extended to several other large Turkish cities like Izmir and Istanbul; the latter has witnessed a transformation of the demographic and physical characteristics of (certain) neighbourhood(s). Kılıçaslan (2016) explained that Syrian Kurds constituted a significant cluster in terms of both quantity as well as the cultural and social impact on the city of Istanbul.

Economic Factor's Effect

Syrian refugees in Turkey have also created novel economic trends. Indeed, the impact of refugees on the economy of the host country is of two edges where risk and opportunity are intertwined. In Turkey, the findings of different studies highlight a *mélange* of outcomes. The first and obvious outcome is refugees' impact on the local workforce, especially in the Turkish cities with a significant number of refugees. It is reported that following the predictions of classical models' unskilled intensive migration shock, reduces the wages of unskilled native workers (Bagir, 2018; Icduygu & Diker, 2017). This has affected the likelihood of employment for the locals besides the low payment due to the abundantly available workforce. Other factors include the conventional impact on resources, pressure on the healthcare system, price hikes of goods, housing rent and employment loss among the locals (Doner et al., 2013; Tumen, 2016). On the other end of the spectrum, the movement of Syrian investors, merchants and small businesses and their economic activities from Syria—particularly from Aleppo—to Turkey has created a dynamic commercial movement and contributed to the Turkish economy (UNHCR, 2015). Southern Turkish cities have witnessed significant economic growth; Gaziantep has developed a prosperous agro-commercial base, the city of Hatay has expanded industry, trade and agriculture and Kilis has become a buzzing trading hub of smuggled goods from and to Syria (Cagaptay & Menekse, 2014). Klein (2007) also explained that “disasters have become the preferred moments for advancing a vision of a ruthlessly divided world, one in which the very idea of a public sphere has no place at all” (p. 48). Studies explained that in times of calamities, class-based integration serves the upper classes more than the majority (Simsek, 2018). It is believed that the Turkish government seems to ease the way for integration in favour of those who have money and financial capacity. According to a report on Syrian refugees in Turkey, published by the Turkish Parliament's Refugee Rights Sub-commission, more than 30,000 Syrian nationals had been granted citizenship in Turkey as of 2017 (Akcapar & Simsek, 2018).

Demographic-Related Issues

The birth rate among Syrian refugees in Turkey has consistently been high. It was estimated that by October 2018, there was an average of 350 Syrian births per day in Turkey (Makovsky, 2019). Up to March 2021 and according to UNHCR Turkey, the number of Syrian refugees is estimated to be 3.6 million who are in great need of resettlement opportunities, financial assistance and integration procedures. However, a persisting serious demographic issue according to Turkish authorities is birth registration, where it is reported that the birth registration of Syrian refugees is not accurate (Reynolds & Grisgraber, 2015). This is due to

many newborn babies being registered late or not registered at all, making it exceedingly difficult for Turkish authorities to track refugees and provide suitable assistance such as healthcare and education. The situation has opened the doors for exploitation and discrimination.

Mixed marriages are another emerging demographic issue where marriage has emerged as the most common means for Syrian refugees to pursue Turkish citizenship (Cagaptay & Menekse, 2014). Mixed marriages have introduced a new dimension to the intricate Syrian refugee demographic situation and have resulted in the birth of a new Syrian-Turk generation with unique administrative, social and educational needs, who become automatic citizens with the presence of one Turkish parent (Cagaptay & Menekse, 2014). By 2015, 35,000 Syrians were born in Turkey to mixed marriages (UNHCR, 2015). Turkish authorities must understand that the challenging living conditions and lack of educational opportunities for Syrian refugees are a ticking bomb which might explode and worsen certain social issues in the long term (UNHCR, 2015). Although initially welcomed by the wider public and dealt with through humanitarian discourses, Syrian refugees have recently been framed in security terms. They have increasingly been associated, in the public discourse, with crime, socioeconomic problems, cultural deprivation, and internal security (Simsek, 2015). The conclusion here is that all these factors combined undermine the success of temporary protection and education and should instigate the Turkish government into thinking about long-term planning and integration policies (Icduygu & Millet, 2016). In a recent study about the psychological effects of acculturation of refugees, the findings revealed that psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees is strongly influenced by economic concerns, pre-migration expectations, religion and perceptions of Turkish natives' expectations/ attitudes towards Syrians (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu, Kunuroglu, & Yağmur, 2021).

Accessibility to Education

In Turkey, non-citizen children have the right to enroll in Turkish schools up to the secondary level. Despite this, many refugees are deprived of education by de facto, a fact confirmed by the Turkish Ministry of National Education, which estimates that over 400,000 children are out of school leaving them particularly vulnerable to isolation, discrimination, violence, and abuse (UNICEF, 2019). Enrollment policies for those living in camps, state that “Syrian refugee children and youth ... have access to preschool, elementary and high school education. In these camps, current refugees of the school ages have access to camp schools carrying out Syrian curriculum in Arabic. Meanwhile, refugee students out of camps, and having residence permits can enrol in public schools. Refugee students living in the city without residence permits can also attend the schools as guest status and go without official registration” (Bircan & Sunata, 2015, p. 228). Therefore, Syrian refugee children are provided with three different educational alternatives. First, camp education centres, which are educational facilities provided in camps operated by the Turkish Ministry of Education and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Second Turkish public schools are open to Syrians with residence permits living outside of camps (Bircan & Sunata, 2015). Third, temporary education centres (TECs) consist of educational opportunities initiated by Syrian, Turkish or international charitable

organizations and good samaritans. All are faced with many challenges; for instance, an issue faced by camp schools is the dilemma of accreditation. On one end, the Turkish government does not recognize the Syrian curriculum and certificates, and students understandably are unable to return to Syria to take major governmental examinations for formal certification on the other (Kirişci, 2014). Students enrolled in Turkish public schools face a multifaceted set of challenges including the unclear or ambiguous aims of their educational attainment, future settlement plans, acceptance, integration, language barriers and the lack of good quality education because most provinces where the majority of urban refugees are living are the same provinces where the academic performance of schools is below the national (Turkish) average (Kirişci, 2014). In addition to the constant shortage of national and state policies; funding; school curricula; teacher professional development; targeted expenditure; special provision for disadvantaged groups (Christie & Sidhu, 2002), the state of emergency tainting the lives of refugees, and implementation-related challenges are other major obstacles hindering refugees' educational attainment.

Accessibility to education itself remains a major issue; as more than half a million Syrian refugee students are not enrolled in any school in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (Culbertson & Constant, 2015 as cited in Ayik, 2019). It was also reported that only 60% of Syrian children in Turkey were enrolled in school in 2018—a significant improvement from previous years but still dismal compared to the near-universal schooling rates of this generation in pre-war Syria and the rate among native-born Turkish children (UN Women & SGDD-ASAM, 2018). This may be due to the reservations some skeptical parents have about the efficacy and importance of education to their children in their actual circumstances due to certain economic, cultural and religious convictions. Cultural values related to gender roles are also impacting the educational attainment among refugee children, particularly amongst girls. In displacement, gender roles are often threatened and disturbed, meaning that some girls will experience more restrictions (Paul & Marshall, 2016). For instance, girls are more likely to be kept at home due to social protection, security concerns and household responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings or ailing parents. Girls are also far more likely to be married at an early age (UNICEF, 2012) because they are seen as more vulnerable and susceptible to abuse and exploitation than are boys. Therefore, marriage is perceived to be a means of protection, and in certain cases, a financial return for the family. Reports have found that the number of Syrian refugee girls in Jordan marrying before the age of 18 rose 25 per cent between 2013 and 2014. There is growing evidence that many young girls are being sold into marriage or being sexually exploited. Many families are arranging for their young daughters to be married to ease financial burdens (Charles & Denman, 2013). Subsequently, Syrian refugee girls are not only less likely to complete their education but are also at a significantly higher risk of the mental health problems associated with sexual trauma (Sirin et al., 2018).

Socio-Economic Status (SES), Ethnicity, Religion and Social Stigma

The first determinant of socio-economic status affecting educational attainment among Syrian refugee children is poverty and is a fundamental factor contributing to parents' unwillingness to enroll their children in educational centres (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; DeJong et al., 2017; Seker

& Sirkeci, 2015). Everywhere, students with what are described as disadvantaged home background find that the quality available to them is inferior to that available to the more advantaged (Preston, 1991). It is reported that despite the efforts of governments and the international community, the costs associated with going to school prevent some families from enrolling their children (UNHCR, 2013). Thus, child labour work has become the most common way to combat financial difficulties for refugees and enable families to meet their needs. (Icduygu & Diker, 2017). This may give rise to the risk of child exploitation (Support to Life, 2016). Problems faced by those fortunate enough to have access to education tend to include those related to identity and self-image, such as feelings of being culturally and socially uprooted, social stigma, prejudice, subjugation, marginalization, feelings of alienation, bullying and being subjected to acts of violence in schools (UNHCR, 2013). Reports indicate that with the influx of huge numbers of Syrians into an ethnic and ideology-coloured Turkish society, anti-immigrant and anti-Arab sentiments and discourse have emerged among the Turkish public (Ozden, 2013).

Socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students pose another significant challenge in the enrolment of students in schools. Syrian refugees in Turkey are in fact, from different social backgrounds and classes (Chatty, 2017) and do not form a homogenous social group. There are Arabs, Kurds (Kılıçaslan, 2016), Bedouins (among which tribal sentiments prevail and are strongly influential) and even Nawwar (Gypsies) (Chatty, 2017). Religious sectarianism is another dividing factor, with Sunnis (possessing multiple factions, some of which are taking part in the armed conflict back in Syria), Shias, Yazidis, Christians, and others. This has a profound impact on how children perceive and present themselves in the classroom. “Research has documented well how different racial-ethnic groups can experience difficulties in learning as a result of a poor racial climate... (others) indicate the importance of diverse peers in a learning environment for important outcomes, such as improvements in students’ ability to engage in more complex thinking about problems and to consider multiple perspectives and improvements in intergroup relations and understanding” (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999, p. 7). Even though—when managed properly—diversity among students in education serves to positively impact their performance in the classroom, multiculturalism and religious pluralism in the classroom may hinder learning, particularly in places where racial, religious or sectarian divisions are prevalent. In this regard, Ipgrave (2002) explained that children learners present themselves and their learning in three different ways, each of which corresponds to the dialogue they were put into. They present themselves as “a friend” or a “pal” related to the dialogue of life; as a member of a faith of cultural community and tradition related to the dialogue of experience and as thinker related to the dialogue of action” (Stern, 2018). Young learners share their parents’ cultural and religious beliefs, which in many cases results in them adopting closed intolerant views and convictions preventing successful integration into their learning groups. Because “children do not need their separate world. They act within the same worlds the adults occupy” (Ipgrave, 2002, p. 16). In the case of Syrian refugee children in Turkey, sectarian and racial division is a lived reality in their camp tents, streets, playgrounds, and schools. This division is, in fact, one of the root causes of their initial displacement.

Post Enrollment Challenges

Post-enrollment challenges are related to the issues Syrian refugee children face once they enroll in the different educational institutions in Turkey. They make learning an almost impossible task, take a toll on the academic achievements of students and contribute to an increase in school drop-out rate. They consist of the following:

‘Sink or Swim’ Policy

The first educational hurdle learners face in the “sink or swim” approach is that this process does not provide emphasis on the identification of students’ specific needs, nor does it provide a special preparation program before they plunge headfirst into ordinary classes. Some people believe that this approach accelerates the mastery of the instruction language (in this case the Turkish language) but critics warn that ill-prepared students can become frustrated easily and fall behind, increasing their risk of dropping out (Tischler, 1999). It has been argued that there is a possibility of making this approach effective via the usage of flipped classrooms, instructional technology, interactive and cooperative learning, ICT and the Internet in general, social media, etc. (Fill & Ottewill, 2006; McAdoo, 2009; Sendziuk, 2010; Strawn, Fox, & Duck, 2008). However, the majority of these resources are oftentimes lacking and student frustration culminates due to their finding themselves studying a completely new curriculum filled with alien cultural components, via a foreign language they have not mastered in a novel learning environment. This may lead to poor academic achievements and heighten the level of exasperation and low self-esteem amongst learners, which can lead to the creation of learned helplessness—a mental state in which learners believe that their behaviour does not influence the outcomes.

Language Barrier

Although learning the Turkish language is a prerequisite to any child’s enrollment in Turkish public schools—formal education outside refugee camps (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015)—Syrian students still face language-related issues that often affect their limited access to everyday necessities (Aydin & Kaya, 2017) and hinder their academic progress. Studies have also shown that most Syrian refugee children are unable to communicate or study in Turkish. They also face problems in understanding and communicating content in the classroom (Tösten, Toprak, & Kaya, 2017). In a related study, it was found that the problem of language is significant. The respondents (teachers) in this study shared some of their thoughts vis-a-vis the obstacles they have faced while teaching. One respondent asserted that students “have learned how to read and write but have not been able to learn the language. That’s why they cannot understand what they read,” meaning that they can recognize the words but are unable to comprehend them. Another respondent highlighted that “two or three students (in reference to his classroom) speak Turkish well. We use those speaking Turkish as translators”. A fellow respondent explained that students “mostly communicate through body language”, while another respondent

summarized the issue by dividing the students into three categories: “There are those who do not want to learn Turkish, those who use full efforts to learn Turkish, and also those who are not allowed by their families to learn Turkish (Taskin & Erdemli, 2018). This language barrier poses a serious problem both for learners and their educators. Teachers receive very limited or no training in teaching second language pedagogy, and Syrian students who do attend Turkish public schools receive very little support in acquiring Turkish, catching up on missed material, and coping with the psychosocial challenges associated with conflict, displacement and cultural adjustment (Aydin & Kaya, 2017).

Researchers have differing views on the solutions to the problem of language; some have proposed the provision of Turkish as a second language, which they regard as a fundamental prerequisite, for at least the initial transitory stages after the child is enrolled into public, private and other learning centres, with the condition that the teachers themselves are specifically trained to teach Turkish as a second language (Arslan, 2011; Dilek, Boyaci, & Yasar, 2018). Meanwhile, others have proposed more culturally neutral solutions such as the introduction of English as a foreign language (EFL). This is to foster a sense of fairness and equality amongst learners and because “EFL classrooms are a neutral space for refugees, local students and refugees thus come together and reconstruct/redefine their identities and form life-long friendships” (Gözpinar, 2019). Due to the changing war circumstances back in Syria and the Turkish-related policies, the current dominating trend is that priority should be given to language programs for Syrian children, as a prerequisite for them to be integrated into the Turkish public educational sector (Unlu & Ergul, 2021), especially with Turkey’s latest initiative on the inclusion of almost one million school-aged Syrian children into the public education system (Karsli-Calamak & Kilinc, 2021). This initiative needs immense effort from all stakeholders to get the students ready to embark on this educational journey.

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Refugee Students

When considering the effects of war on PTSD in refugee children, it is important to take account of the presence of other adversities as well as of children's sensitivity” (Karam et al., 2019). Many other studies have suggested that terror and violence cause psychological damage, the extent of which varies from child to child, with potentially serious effects on social and emotional development. The cognitive development of children is also harmed during war, as skills such as literacy, numeracy and critical thinking are delayed (Nicolai & Tripleton, 2003). This argument is predicated on the fact that refugee children/students are under the effect of PTSD (Tösten et al., 2017). It is found that children living in war zones are at high risk of increased PTSD and depressive disorders (Karam et al., 2019; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004; Thabet, Tawahina, El-Sarraj, & Vostanis, 2008; Yayan & Duken, 2019). It was also found that children and adolescents who have experienced traumatic events, especially war atrocities, demonstrate a variety of posttraumatic symptoms, among which recurrent nightmares, as well as adverse reactions in the school setting (Harb & Schultz, 2020). In this regard, many therapeutic studies have been conducted on PTSD among refugees in different parts in the world such as refugees in Western countries, Bosnian refugees, refugees in Uganda, and Sudanese refugees in Darfur. All have shown that various therapies aiming to aid refugees such as

narrative exposure therapy (NET), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) (Acarturk et al., 2016) and art therapy intervention (ATI) (Ugurlu, Akca, & Acarturk, 2016) have generated positive results. Due to its crucial importance, psychological support (Algothani, Algothani, & Atassi, 2012) for refugee learners should be a priority for their readiness for any kind of adjustment, and involvement, regaining the feeling of normalcy and engaging in learning. In a study conducted on 352 participants in a tent city (refugee camp) about post-traumatic stress disorder among Syrian refugees in Turkey, it was found that the probability of having PTSD was up to 71% (Alpac et al., 2015). Contributing and triggering factors include the ongoing stress and insecurity refugees endure daily in addition to displacement from their homes, exposure to traumatic events such as the threat of death, torture, or serious injury, death, the disappearance of family members, rape, lack of food and water and lack of shelter (Mollica et al., 1992). This has also been emphasized by many epidemiological studies that have stressed the possibility of untreated chronic mental health issues among refugees (Acarturk et al., 2016) and the eventuality of low quality of life amongst refugees as a result (Kessler, 2000; Mollica et al., 2001). Besides, mental health is another unspoken crisis (Gormez et al., 2018) that needs intervention. Syrian refugee children will likely need ongoing targeted support to bridge the gaps in their education, attain fluency in the host country language and deal with trauma and other health symptoms (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

The Shortage of Sufficiently Trained Teachers

No doubt that “with comprehensive training and ongoing support, teachers can help (refugee) children navigate unfamiliar settings and new curricula, thereby creating a protective educational environment in which all students can thrive” (Mendenhall, Gomez, Varni, & Guven, 2019, p. 123). However, the absence of this expertise may present a serious challenge that prevents refugee education from attaining its objectives. Research has emphasized the lack of teaching expertise and training for those teaching Syrian refugees in the three types of schooling in Turkey; public schools, camp schools and other temporary educational facilities (Arslan, 2011; Dilek et al., 2018). Not all teachers have been trained to work with refugee children suffering from psychological distress (UNHCR, 2013). Research has highlighted many issues about teachers themselves, such as a lack of understanding of the purposes of refugee education and not being trained in handling refugee students, particularly those enrolled in general public schools (Aydin & Kaya, 2017). Teachers additionally are not usually involved in decision-making related to teaching refugee matters (Tösten et al., 2017). Reports of abuse—particularly in public schools—have been made, where teachers express their frustration and anger at the presence of refugee students in their classes and harbour the belief that having refugees is affecting the academic performance of the local students (UNHCR, 2013). In cases of emergencies, the usage of physical punishment, ridicule and humiliation to control and discipline children appears to be connected to the stresses the teachers themselves experience (Van der Wijk, as cited in Nicolai & Tripleton, 2003). According to some reports, many public school teachers openly express frustration at the challenges of teaching Syrian students. For example, large Facebook groups – designed for sharing pedagogical tools and job vacancies and to foster social interaction – are rife with complaints about refugee students’ abilities and

behaviour. Although many group members do defend Syrian students, there is a concerning lack of understanding among teachers about the challenges faced by the students, indicating insufficient administrative support and knowledge about working with refugee children (UN Women & SGDD-ASAM, 2018). In a study conducted on preschool teachers in a public school located in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Ankara with a dense population of Syrian refugee students, the findings indicate that teachers' practices are accordingly moving on a continuum of inclusivity-oriented to exclusion-oriented actions (Elif & Sultan, 2019).

Multi-Age and Multi-Level Classrooms

Another major problem hindering the education of Syrian refugee children is the multi-age classroom. Since 1949, several research studies have investigated the relationship between multiage grouping and academic achievement. Reviews of research (Pratt, 1986; Veenman, 1995) have revealed inconsistent results. Based primarily on standardized achievement tests, some studies report higher scores for students in multi-age classrooms. Other studies favour academic achievement for students in single-age classrooms (Kinsey, 2001). The biggest challenge to multi-age-learning implementation is the misunderstanding of its application and the academic resources allocated for it, be it the curriculum design, human resources or the school culture in general (Miller, 1994). For instance, not all teachers and administrators have been trained on how to manage and efficiently deliver in a multiage classroom; in the case of teaching refugees in most occurrences, teaching in multiage classrooms is a bitter reality. Many refugee children suffer from *interrupted schooling*, whereby they do not attend school regularly and result in being placed with classmates of different age groups and educational experiences (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Culberston & Constant, 2015; Sirin, Plass, Homer, Vatanartiran, & Tsai, 2018; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015), a situation that hinders their academic achievements and reinforces the feelings of frustration, low self-esteem and learned self-helplessness, particularly amongst low-performing students. Syrian refugee children in Jordan include being unable to begin where they left off their education; when students have missed three years or more of education and/or are three years older than the grade standard, they are no longer eligible for formal education. Currently, 50 to 60% of Syrian refugee children are in school, but many of the remainders have missed so much school that they cannot catch up without specifically designed programs (Paul & Marshall, 2016). The majority of refugee teachers are inexperienced volunteers or social workers who are unable to use efficient teaching and learning strategies in multi-level classes.

CONCLUSION

The challenges facing Syrian refugee children's educational attainment are diverse and complex and vary along political, economic, financial, cultural, religious and racial factors. This finding is in line with theoretical reviews of challenges in education in emergencies in general and, more specifically, education for refugees and victims of armed conflicts (Sinclair, 2001). Indeed, the humanitarian crisis in general and the educational challenges faced by Syrian refugee children in Turkey are multi-faceted due to the complex nature of the region's geopolitics, power struggles, conflicting ideologies, religions and religious sects, cultural and racial disparities and the large scale of the crisis itself, in addition to the proxy war, the warring parties are manning. The persistent ongoing conflict in Syria and the ever-growing number of refugees have created serious internal challenges for the Turkish government. It is also worth noting that most of the educational practices dedicated to Syrian refugee children are far from being well-constructed. According to the reviewed literature, previous studies and reports, the provided educational packages are remedial, therapeutic, spontaneous, reactionary and of a tinkering nature. This is in line with literature about education for refugees (Pigozzi, 1999) which highlights that this is a common trend in education in emergencies.

The current review points to the dominance of remedial education for refugees aiming at keeping children busy without having a clear understanding of its social foundations or a vision of its outcomes in the long term. This is in contrast to education for armed conflict victims, which recommends that education should contribute to eliminating bias and remove 'conflict-inciting materials and ideologically loaded content' (Paulson, 2015) for reconciliation and peacebuilding (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011). Hence, governments and other local and international agencies assisting in the field of education for refugees should plan for a robust, comprehensive and well-tailored education that does not only aim to eradicate illiteracy among refugee children, but also to provide real opportunities for them to learn like other children around the world, paving the way towards a better future, and prepare them to assist in eradicating the conditions that made them refugees in the first place. Concerning the implementation challenges, the review has highlighted various obstacles. Some of which are present before enrollment such as legal registration with authorities, accessibility to education, parental skepticism and mistrust, social class affiliation and poverty, social stigma, alienation, and the dilemma of educational mission and vision. Post-enrollment challenges comprise post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sink or swim policy, gender roles, interrupted schooling, language barriers, social rejection in public schools, multi-level classes, multiage classes, lack of equipment and untrained teachers. Therefore, it is imperative that Turkey develops well-thought-out, structured, comprehensive and effective educational policies and interventional action plans, all of which civil society, municipalities, GOs, NGOs, and refugees' representatives should be involved.

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