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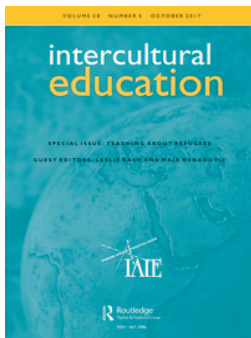
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The educational needs of and barriers faced by Syrian refugee students in Turkey: a qualitative case study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational status of Syrian refugees in Turkish schools, and the perspectives of teachers and school principals regarding the needs of Syrian refugee students in two inner-city elementary schools in Istanbul, Turkey. A qualitative interpretive case study method was employed. Eight participants (seven teachers and one school principal), who had Syrian refugee students in their classes and wider school environment, participated in the study. The findings of the study show that Turkish public schools provide many Syrian children in Istanbul with an access to education, and a welcoming and secure learning environment. However, poor school conditions, linked to the potentially limited capacity of teachers and the shortage of sufficiently trained teachers able to instruct refugees, inadequate resources and inappropriate curriculum planning impede the provision of high-quality education.

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Introduction

There has been an unprecedented increase in the number of Syrian refugee students in the major cities of many countries, in particular in Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Approximately, 10% of Syrian refugee students have embarked on a dangerous journey to Europe. Relocation remains far below par and the Syrian civil war has caused some of the worst human suffering in the first half of the twenty-first century (Nielsen and Grey 2013). By 2016, the number of refugees has reached almost 5 million and 7.6 million people have fled their country. Another 13.5 people are in need of humanitarian aid inside Syria (Ferris and Kirisci 2015). Turkey, which has previously hosted refugees in large numbers, such as those fleeing military conflict and occupation in Iraq, has adopted an unconditional 'open border policy' for those fleeing the civil war in Syria since

April 2011 (Ahmadoun 2014). According to Ferris and Kirisci (2015), Turkey is the largest recipient of refugees in the world. According to the European Commission of Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) (2016), there are more than 3.1 million registered refugees from Syria and Iraq, in addition to other refugee populations, in Turkey. Since October 2011, the number of Syrian refugees has more than tripled and the number of registered refugees has now reached almost 2.8 million (UNHCR 2016). Both the Turkish Government and civil society organisations believe that there are in fact a larger number of refugees present in Turkey than has been acknowledged until now. It is believed that there are one million undocumented refugees in Turkey at present (International Human Rights Clinic Report 2015; Disaster and Emergency Management Authority [AFAD] 2016). The refugee population has become more diverse as a result of the addition of Yezidis, Arabs, Assyrians, Kurds and Syrians. A SWP report, authored by Ahmadoun (2014), highlights that at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Syrian refugees were considered more as guests than as legal refugees. However, starting in October 2011, Turkey has guaranteed that Syrian refugees will not be forcibly sent back and they have been granted 'temporary protection' status, and that no time limits should be imposed on their stay. In April 2014, following the establishment of the General Directorate of Migration Management (GDMM), a new migration law with the title 'conditional refugee status' or 'temporary asylum seeker status' came into force.

Education and integration of Syrian refugees

The Ministry of National Education (MoNE 2013) has implemented an urgently required programme under its supervision to bring under its authority all unofficial Syrian schools operated (mainly) by Syrian NGOs. This will also increase the opportunities for Syrian children to attend Turkish schools, including day schools. Presently, the number of registered students in refugee camps is 66.875 (90.6% coverage). The number of students who attend schools outside these camps is 223.528. Out of 625.000 Syrian refugee children, 290.403 receive education in schools (Emin 2016). According to the ECHO (2016) report, there have been many Syrian children who have not received any form of education and they are at risk of becoming a lost generation. According to the circular of the Ministry (MoNE 2013) that constitutes the official guide for student selection and regulates the placement exam for secondary school students, Syrian refugees can access formal education, which offers a modified version of the Syrian curriculum in Arabic, at camps and via the national school system, as well as through use of the temporary education centres established in urban areas. As one Turkish official put it 'We cannot let a generation to go astray educationally, regardless of the fact of whether they stay in Turkey or return to Syria'. Considering the fact that many Syrian children inside Syria do not presently attend school, the future of Syria might well depend on Syrian children who do receive formal education (Kaya and Aydin 2016). AFAD offers education at 70 schools and MoNE offers education at 75 locations outside

refugee camps. The number of students who do receive an education, out of about half a million children who need education, stands at approximately 75.000 (Kanat and Ustun 2015). It is not easy to place this many children within existing education facilities in the south-east of Turkey. In order to provide these refugee children with an education, international engagement is needed.

Kanat and Ustun (2015)'s report also highlights an important point to which attention should be paid concerning the teaching of Turkish. Many refugees learned Turkish thanks to the language classes they attended inside and outside camps. However, it is observed that this has proven to be a very slow and unsuccessful process, considering that the majority of the refugees have already been resident in Turkey for a number of years. Given the existence of inhabitants who were multilingual in cities and their use of multiple languages, including Kurdish and Arabic, many refugees did not feel the urgency of reaching an adequate level of fluency in Turkish (Aydin and Ozfidan 2014). In addition to this, since it is likely that the conflict will continue for a number of years to come, it should be considered of greater importance for refugees to learn Turkish, so as to allow them to better integrate into Turkish society (Kanat and Ustun 2015); this is because integration only takes place when both cultural maintenance and involvement with the larger society are sought (Berry 1996; Berry et al. 2006). As an extension, help for refugees requires more than merely measures to save their lives. Efforts are needed to integrate them into Turkish society. According to Icduygu (2015), there are steps that Turkey may take to improve its asylum and admission system and to encourage the integration of Syrian refugees into Turkish society. Icduygu argues that the conditions of the EU and the pre-accession conditions help to harmonise local laws with those of the EU. There is a particular need to amend existing rules and regulation to those in the EU and wider international policies. A first amendment is needed to remove the geographical limitations of the 1972 Geneva Convention that limits asylum rights in Europe. A second amendment is needed to revise 'the 2006 Law of Settlement that encourages the migration and settlement of people of Turkish origin and culture.' This is because Turkey is home to Syrians who have left their country due to the ongoing civil war. Turkey carries out a respectable task of hosting Syrian refugees and establishing cities with clinics and schools created especially for them. In addition to this, many Turkish families have provided financial assistance to Syrian families and more importantly, have helped them to integrate into wider Turkish society. However, there remain some main difficulties involved in the planning of a more comfortable life for refugees outside of camps and for their long-term settlement and integration. Therefore, Icduygu (2015) emphasises that Turkey needs to redefine the status of Syrian refugees by considering the possibility of their long-term relocation and to prioritise its policies to match this reality.

In this context, education and access to legal employment are critical issues. One of the difficulties in formulating integration policies (Berry 1994) is the education of Syrian refugee children. The public education system in Turkey is mostly

monolingual in its approach and for instance Syrian children cannot easily adapt to it. At the local level, municipalities help solve this problem to a certain degree through the provision of Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish language courses both for children and adults, as well as via vocational training courses. They help operate and allocate buildings for 'Syrian schools' but it is hard to create resources to cover the wages of the teachers. AFAD camps provide education for children, while UNICEF (2015) and other organisations offer school materials. In general, most school-age children do not actually attend school and despite the efforts of many governments, local and international NGOs, education remains the most serious problem for refugees in Turkey. It is observed that most Syrian refugees in Turkey live outside official refugee camps, and the school-age population outside those camps has a low rate of school attendance (Dorman 2014). Furthermore, refugee children have undergone traumatic experiences that can prevent them from learning. Turkey has no previous experience or programme designed to educate and integrate migrants or refugees. The purpose of this study is to explore the educational status of Syrian refugees in Turkish schools, as well as the perspectives of teachers and school principals regarding the needs of Syrian refugee students. This article also tries to identify the experiences and educational needs of Syrian refugee students; as well as provide recommendations to policy-makers, schools, teachers and other service providers to improve the acculturation, social integration and academic performance of Syrian refugee children. In this vein, this qualitative case study, through multiple methods of data gathering, addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What do Syrian refugee students need to succeed in Turkish schools?
- (2) What are the barriers to their school success?
- (3) What types of intervention are needed to overcome these barriers?
- (4) How are Syrian students' performing/achieving in Turkish public school?

Methodological context

This study employed qualitative methods for data collection and analysis (see Stake 2000; Yin 2011) that emphasises the understanding and interpretation of human perceptions (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) of their actions within a wider system of meanings to which those actions belong. Qualitative research explores lived experiences (Merriam 1998), in an effort to better understand and ascribe meaning to them; this is usually achieved by systematically collecting and analysing narrative materials through methods that ensure the credibility of the data and the findings of the research (Fazily 2012, 68). According to McMillan and Schumacher (1993), qualitative research is defined as, 'primarily an inductive process of organising data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among categories' (479). In addition, qualitative researchers have argued that qualitative research helps individuals to better understand and explain the meanings that participants

attach to the central phenomenon of the research study (Creswell 2009). For this study, qualitative methods provide the most adequate tools to address this need for the understanding of individual perceptions and experiences, in this case by obtaining data through the recording and documentation of the experiences of teachers and school principals working with Syrian refugee children.

The study involved eight participants (one school principal, seven teachers). Their ages ranged from 39 to 47 ($M = 42.5$). All of the participants originated from Turkey and had been working with Syrian refugees in the greater Istanbul metropolitan area during, or immediately after the 2015–2016 spring term. Purposeful sampling was employed to obtain access to information that helped in answering the research questions. In this vein, purposive and convenience sampling were the methods utilised in selecting participants for this study. Purposeful sampling techniques were selected because they allowed the researcher to select participants who had the potential to provide information regarding the research question to be addressed (Born and Preston 2016, 501; Charmaz 2006; Stake 2006).

Each participant was interviewed over the course of a single session lasting between 45 and 60 min. All interviews took place over a number of working days at the schools in question and were recorded using audio devices. Field notes were taken during the classroom observations. Researchers used an embedded, single-case study design (Yin 2009) to answer the research questions for this study. This design was able to incorporate a variety of evidence and data triangulation (Cresswell 2007; Maxwell 2005), including open-ended questions with in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations and documents, to deeply explore the multifaceted social phenomenon faced by participants (Glesne 2010; Yin 2009). The importance of such triangulation has been emphasised by Creswell (2007).

Participants were volunteers recruited for this exploratory study through personal contacts with the teachers and a school principal who had Syrian refugees' students in their classes and schools at two public elementary schools in Istanbul. The researchers met with potential participants and discussed the purpose of this study and its procedures.¹

All interactions were recorded, transcribed and then analysed, using a systematic thematic approach employed by the researchers. Researchers then applied an inductive content analysis approach (Patton 2002) in order to discover overarching themes that emerged from their participants' data, as well as from the observations and documents. This analysis was obtained through adherence to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) three analytical steps, namely: the unitisation of textual data into idea units, the codification of categories and the integration of categories. In addition, using MAXQDA 12 software, the second author created a database for all interviews, observations, field notes and documents before disassembling data by use of open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Yin 2009; as cited in Haines 2015, 27) to create level one codes upon entry into the database. The key parts of data that supported each code in MAXQDA were highlighted to generate a chain

of evidence. After that, the researchers employed a 'peer-review' strategy, during which the four doctoral students and three faculty members independently read and analysed the interview transcripts, checking for evidence of the themes and assertions, and verifying them with the original data. Research reports, compiled using the analysis and interpretations of the data obtained, were prepared and returned to the research participants for 'member checks' to establish credibility, reliability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985; as cited in Kanu 2008), and to assess and strengthen the accuracy of the data (Born and Preston 2016). The three participants who checked the findings provided feedback to researchers. This process resulted in two overarching themes, which include: academic achievement and students' challenges and resilience.

Findings

The analysis of transcripts of interviews with participants demonstrated that participants displayed a positive attitude towards Syrian students and that the main problem of these students was admission to public schools without prior language training. The two main themes that emerged as a result of the analysis are as follows; *Academic achievement* and *Students' challenges and resilience*.

Theme one: academic achievement

Language is the main problem that Syrian students face in public schools in Turkey. Many of these students start school without any Turkish language training and as a result, due to their lack of Turkish proficiency, they are not able to follow classes and their academic performance suffers. A male teacher remarked:

They do not understand much or enough. This affects their class performance. First of all, their language problem should be overcome. Since they have poor Turkish reading, writing and communication skills, this affects their attainment in their courses. (7 March 2016)

By highlighting that Syrian students are eager to learn but their lack of Turkish proficiency is a barrier, a female teacher remarked:

They really want to learn but they cannot do so since they do not speak Turkish. I really believe that my 3–4 Syrian students can integrate better into the classes as they learn Turkish more. (8 March 2016)

A school principal highlighted that those who came to school without speaking any Turkish and who do not receive Turkish courses outside school face a longer acquisition process for Turkish.

Not speaking Turkish is their biggest problem. Some of them do not attend Turkish courses. It takes about 2 years for them to learn Turkish. The biggest problem is that it takes too long for some students to learn Turkish. (25 February 2016)

Participants stated that Syrian students were not successful in their classes because they did not speak Turkish and that if they could overcome the language barrier,

they would be successful. The observations for this study yielded similar results. It was observed that the class performance of students changed depending on their level of Turkish and that those with higher levels of Turkish were more successful, whereas those with lower levels of Turkish were unsuccessful because they did not understand what was being taught.

Even when Syrian students were familiar with a topic, since they read and understand slowly, they lost time and this situation affected them adversely in exams and put them in a disadvantageous position. A teacher summarised the situation as follows:

For example, we give exams. The student takes out his dictionary. He needs to look up the words, understand, and then answer the questions but by the time he does this the time is up. Thus he leaves the dictionary. And answers the questions haphazardly. Then he fails. That means he needs to master Turkish first. (8 March 2016)

The results of observations confirmed the views of participants. It was observed that Syrian students needed more time during exams to read and answer the questions and that they needed more time to complete exam-based tasks.

Another factor affecting Syrian students' academic performance was that of active participation in class. Depending on their level of Turkish, their class participation differed. Those who did not speak any Turkish were not able to participate in class at all. Those who spoke a little bit of Turkish participated in class a little bit and those who speak Turkish to a higher level were able to participate more in classes. A male teacher summarised the situation as follows:

It depends on the student. There are those who are very active but also those who do not participate in class at all. Unfortunately, there are those who do not participate at all. However, when I ask questions to those students, they do not understand me. Those students do not speak any Turkish. To be more precise, they know very little Turkish. (21 March 2016)

The results of the observations confirmed the remarks of teachers regarding the participation of Syrian students in class. It was observed that Syrian students whose levels of Turkish proficiency were higher, participated more frequently in class, whereas those who spoke little Turkish almost never participated.

Teachers also stated that Syrian students understood numerical and universal courses more easily and became more successful, though they had more difficulty in language and culture-based courses. A male teacher commented:

There is such a problem. Syrian students have trouble answering comprehension-based questions in my class. However, there is no one better than them when it comes to grammar questions. This is because grammar is more mathematical in nature. However, they have difficulty in comprehension questions. Therefore, they cannot demonstrate their class performance in exams. (21 March 2016)

A school principal underlined that Syrian students were more successful in numerical courses and stated that:

When they learn Turkish well, they do not have any problems. They do well in math and science. However, they cannot succeed since they do not understand Turkish sufficiently. (25 February 2016)

Although Syrian students exerted more effort in their classes, due to the disadvantages stemming from their different culture and language, they were not able to attain the same level of success as other students. It is understood that the academic performance of Syrian students depended on their level of Turkish. It was observed that Syrian students were more successful in other courses to the extent that they were able to overcome the language barrier.

Theme two: students' challenges and resilience

Participants stated that one of the problems Syrian students faced was the fluctuation of emotions that these pupils experienced due to the effects of war and migration. Most of the students at the school at which the study was conducted migrated with their families before they had faced more serious violence. Therefore, they had not experienced the most severe forms of trauma. Nevertheless, it was observed that they experienced problems associated with leaving a war zone, being away from their country and living in a foreign country. A female teacher stated that a Syrian girl was affected by what she experienced and at first cried all the time, before she stopped coming to school at all.

She had a very difficult time at the beginning of the school year. She cried all the time. She cried all the way to school, in school queues, and ceremonies. She said she missed her country, her relatives, her friends and her life there. She is better now but now she is absent; she does not wish to come to school. (8 March 2016)

Another female student talked about an event that affected her very much in class.

At one time, I shouted at the class and my Syrian student closed her ears and I could see the fear in her eyes. Then I understood the fear that the war had brought to these children. (8 March 2016)

A male teacher reflected on what the Syrian students had gone through.

What students have been through can be seen in their eyes. The problems they experienced with migration, terror and war can be seen in their reactions and behavior. (8 March 2016)

Though the Syrian students featured in this study did not directly experience the most horrific aspects of war, they did experience the problems associated with being witness to a conflict, of having to flee their country to save their lives, and living in a foreign country whose language and culture is unknown to them. The teacher stated that what they had been through left a deep impression on Syrian students and that they displayed behaviour such as constant crying, problems with their friends, not wanting to talk about their experiences or expressing fear and discomfort in a loud voice. A male teacher remarked:

A more traumatic thing is that these children have witnessed war and destruction. Now we ignore these issues. We ignore this part of the children's psyche. There are

some traumas that these experiences bring. Because these children express these traumas through the attitude they manifest in their relations with their classmates. This is because they are victims of war and they live in a foreign country. (21 March 2016)

Another male teacher talked about the reactions of Syrian children:

They are trying to forget the past. They try to do so by not even talking about it. They do not want to talk about the environment they lived in. When we mention something about this event, when we give examples about civilizations, language development, how civilizations affect one another, how one environment affects the other, or when we give examples of war, they turn their eyes away. They feel the need to work on something else. When we talk, when other students talk, they do not talk. They do not give examples; they do not want to participate in a discussion of these issues. (8 March 2016)

Syrian students are affected by living in a foreign country and the psychological processes they have been through and express this in a number of ways. A female teacher stated:

Other than that, psychologically, I observe that students do not have trust. They do not have self-confidence. This perhaps stems from the fact that they left their country. (8 March 2016)

Although there are a few Syrian students who are happy to live in Turkey, it can be seen that most of them miss their country, their previous lives and what they left behind. A male teacher offered these observations:

One of my students wrote an essay in my class. I took a copy of it. He concluded that essay by saying yes, now I am in a different place, I live in a different country. But my heart remains in Syria. (21 March 2016)

The participant, who mentioned that Syrian students had experienced difficult times, stated that Syrian students needed help to deal with these difficulties and that the school did not offer specialist psychological support to Syrian students. In fact, the only help students received was from their family and their teachers, not professional help. A female teacher remarked that:

They all have experienced trauma. They need serious help. There is nothing we can do in that field. I am just a teacher. We of course receive some training on this topic but this is definitely not something we can offer specialist help with. There are children who need help. In particular help is needed for those who are suffering as a result of the effects of the trauma etc. (3 March 2016)

In the current system, after they receive a certificate of equivalence from Directorates of National Education in cities, their level of study is determined and Syrian students are directly admitted to public schools. However, the criteria used in determining their levels, and what grades these children are to be assigned to, are something that teachers object to and do not approve of. Teachers state that they are faced with communication problems with incoming Syrian students due to language barriers and thus, it is not possible to determine their exact levels.

Syrian students experience a lot of problems due to their lack of Turkish proficiency and they become a part of the public education system without having taken any preparatory training that can solve this problem. This situation causes

considerable challenges at school for Syrian students. First of all, students are not able to follow the classes. This widens the gap between them and other students. Determined and ambitious foreign students are able to close the gap in a shorter period of time, whereas others take a much longer time to catch up with their Turkish peers. A female teacher remarked that:

When I came in for the first time and taught the subject, I knew that Syrian students did not understand. Because when they looked at the blackboard with a blank face or when they did not look confident, I could understand. But this situation goes on in such a way during the first year, in the 5th grade. Determined students really begin to shine in the 6th grade. (8 March 2016)

Another female student stated that:

They are either good or bad. There is no 'in-between'. There is a student who is trying. But he does not understand because he does not know most of the Turkish terms. (8 March 2016)

A male teacher stated that since they do not understand what is being said in classes, some Syrian students do not prepare for their classes, have little interest in class and they just spend time in class without doing anything.

They came unprepared since they did not understand. At some point they behaved as if the class had nothing to do with them. That meant they came, sat, and went. But later they tried to participate in class. Their class level was naturally behind that of others. (8 March 2016)

Syrian students were found to understand courses that required operational tasks, such as mathematics, relatively well when taught using clear examples. However, they experienced difficulties when such courses questions were posed in the form of verbal problems. Students failed because they did not understand what was being asked. A female teacher remarked that:

When we deal with problems expressed verbally, they do not understand us. For example, even a very successful Syrian student in math asks what 'score' means when I give an assignment. They do not know the words that Turkish students know. Such things happen. (3 March 2016)

Very few Syrian students who attended public schools tried to do well with external help from outside channels and from their families. The majority of Syrian refugees tried to remain more or less invisible in the system. Teachers stated that Syrian students, who had trouble following classes, needed different and special education. A male teacher remarked that:

No single teacher can set aside time to individually teach these students the rules of Turkish from scratch. They are considered to be 'guest students' in our system. This means all teachers follow the general curriculum. I do not carry out any extra work for them. I only try to help them with the issues they have trouble with. (7 March 2016)

A female teacher said that she was not able to set aside time for Syrian students.

However, with regards to the pace of the education we provide, I am not able to allocate special time for them. (8 March 2016)

Teachers commented that although they wanted to help Syrian students, all they could do was answer the questions of those who asked questions in class, and that they were not able to provide them with any real support. Participants also mentioned the fact that the education systems of both countries differ and this represents a problem for Syrian students. They have difficulty adapting to school due to the specific conditions and requirements of the Turkish education system. A female teacher remarked that:

They have difficulty adapting to school. This is because the education offered there and here are different. The students who were very successful there fail here. This is also related to a lack of language skills, but it is mainly about the incompatibilities between our education systems. (3 March 2016)

In sum, Syrian students do not receive any professional support from schools to help them overcome the problems they experience and their lack of Turkish proficiency becomes an important factor in not being able to overcome the difficulties they encounter.

Discussion

This study focuses on the experiences of Turkish teachers and principals with Syrian refugee students who are attending public schools in Turkey. One of the themes that emerged as a result of the analysis is academic success. It was observed that the academic success of Syrian students was lower compared to that of their peers. Although there are various reasons for this, the main reason, according to the respondents, was that of language. It is already a difficult process to get used to and adapt to a different culture and society. The expectation of having sufficient literary competences in an unknown language affects the success of refugee students. Studies show that gaining verbal fluency takes 3–4 years, while academic fluency might take 4–7 years. For refugee students whose education has been disrupted, it can take up to 10 years to achieve comparable fluency to their peers (Miller 2009).

There is no programme in Turkish public schools to help Syrian students and other refugee students overcome their language barrier. Students who do not speak Turkish apply schools after having received a certificate of equivalence from the Directorate of National Education of the cities in which they reside, and are then directly accepted into regular classrooms. Syrian children in Turkey also do not receive any supplementary language courses before starting their education in the Turkish educational system, which is solely carried out in Turkish. Some countries, initially, offer language classes to refugee and migrant students in order to help and accelerate their language acquisition. The length of attendance of these classes differs, based on the countries and the needs of the students involved. After refugee and migrant students complete such a period of initial language training, they are then integrated into regular classrooms. Despite this, it was observed that refugee and migrant students have trouble understanding what transpires in class

and their language training is generally not sufficient for specific tasks (Ferfolja and Vickers 2010).

While, migrant and refugee students in some countries have difficulty participating in class and catching up with their peers after receiving language training, Syrian students who do not receive any language training before starting regular classes such as math, science and social sciences in a foreign language face profound challenges. Ceyhan and Kocabaş (2011) found that the academic success of migrant students was lower compared to that of other students. The main reasons offered were: migrant students did not understand their classes due to their linguistic deficiencies, some of the things their teachers said did not match experiences in their culture and since they were from a different place and culture, they became more introverted (Ceyhan and Koçbaşı 2011).

Language teaching is a primary concern in the education of migrants and refugees around the globe. Some countries view lack of language as the main barrier preventing integration into their countries' educational systems and societies (Oikonomidou 2010). Migrant and refugee students are integrated into the regular education system, sometimes after a certain amount of language training, and sometimes directly. It is a rather difficult process for students to deal with key subjects. Another difficulty that refugee and migrant students need to overcome is the learning of the complex and special words that for instance the language of science includes (Miller 2009).

The findings of the study show that the success of Syrian students and their levels in the target language show a direct relationship. Those with less-advanced Turkish are less successful in their courses, while those with more advanced Turkish are more successful. It was also observed that class participation was proportional to the level of Turkish of the students concerned. The findings of the study indicate that another factor that affects Syrian students' rates of success is the fact that although they know the topics, they cannot complete their exams on time due to their slow reading and comprehension in Turkish.

The second theme found in our study is the number of difficulties that students encounter. The primary difficulty is that Syrian students who have experienced a very difficult time due to war and migration are not provided with the necessary psychological support. Our findings show that Syrian students are constantly in a state of depression and trauma due to war and migration; they miss their country, they are afraid of loud noises, they avoid talking about the past and lack trust and self-confidence. Bourgonje (2010) has stated that psychological problems, physical pain and illnesses, malnutrition and the economic difficulties that children such as those from Syria experience affect their education negatively. The trauma that migrant children experience interferes with their learning. This causes children not to trust anyone, including their teachers and to frequently become afraid of them (McBrien 2005).

Sometimes the sound of the bell, sometimes that of the fire alarm, the presence of security staff at the school or even the skeleton model they see in science lab

might trigger trauma (Birman, *n.d.*). These students might also experience problems in working in a group. Due to the lack of specialised support programmes, deficiencies in diagnosing the problems of these children and determining their needs, the resistance of families with regard to their children's access to psychological counselling and the language barriers they face, prevent migrant children from accessing the care and attention they need (Bourgonje 2010). In order to help migrant children, and overcome this trauma, it is necessary to know what frightens them so as to offer them the psychological assistance to help eliminate it (Birman, *n.d.*). It takes many years to overcome stress disorders after trauma. The signs of stress disorders can be observed in migrant children even after a period of 10 years has passed (Hos 2012). Children need the support of their teachers and families to overcome these difficulties. In order to determine the emotional and psychological problems children experience, educators and families need to pay attention to the behaviours of children (Ayoub 2014). Teachers are not trained experts when it comes to offering psychological assistance to students and it is important to ensure that children who have experienced trauma receive expert psychological help (Bourgonje 2010).

According to the findings of this study, another difficulty that students face is that students with insufficient language proficiency are placed in classes that are not suitable for them. Since Syrian students do not take extracurricular language courses, they learn Turkish during regular classes, and since they do not have access to the type of teaching needed to learn Turkish, it takes them much longer to learn the language. As a result, they cannot follow or understand their courses and thus, the gap between them and their peers widen. Teachers state that they are insufficiently able to support their students under such circumstances. In Bourgonje's (2010) study, teachers expressed that in classes with foreign students, there often existed large differences in student academic levels; while some foreign students had very little or no previous school education, others had a very strong background. Teachers often experienced difficulties in managing this diversity.

Another difficulty in educating Syrian students is that sufficient time is not allocated to Syrian students who need specialised educational support, in particular, language support. Teachers stated that the curriculum they followed does not include programmes to meet the educational needs of Syrian students. They therefore, had to follow the curriculum, as it stands, and thus, are not able to allocate extra time for Syrian students.

Conclusion and suggestions

The findings of this study demonstrate that Syrian students attend Turkish public schools without receiving any prior Turkish language training. This leads to them taking longer to overcome language barriers and it also widens the gap between them and their peers. In this situation, the education that Syrian students receive in public schools falls short. The common view of all participants is that Syrian

students should be provided with a Turkish-language training programme, even if this was of a short duration, prior to attending public schools. If possible, they should then receive the same curriculum once they have overcome their language problems. Countries such as the U.S.A., the U.K., Spain, Sweden and Australia, which are home to large numbers of immigrants and refugees, administer language-support programmes to migrant students to help them acquire the language of the host country during the first couple of years after they start school. Therefore, as the number of Syrian refugees' increases, it becomes even more important to offer Turkish language training programmes to refugees and migrants to support their language acquisition. This will not only impact the educational lives of these students positively, but it will also facilitate the job of teachers at public schools. Directorates of National Education in cities took a small step in this direction by informing public schools that they could receive help from public education centres to offer Turkish language courses to Syrian refugees. However, due to leaving this decision to the discretion of school administrators, lack of classrooms, the lack of time to offer classes due to double-shift schooling, lack of teachers and the small number of Syrian students at schools, this programme has not made much of a difference. Syrian students tend not to be concentrated in certain public schools but are spread across various schools. This causes public schools to ignore these small numbers of students and not implement programmes to support them. Therefore, some schools can be tasked with the provision of Turkish language courses to Syrian students, as well as with intensive summer language courses. These can be offered alongside complementary academic courses to help Syrian students catch up with their peers. Learning Turkish quickly will help Syrian students close the gap with their peers and increase their academic performance.

Secondly, it was observed that psychological counselling and guidance services at schools did not implement any specialised programmes for Syrian students. Psychological help to Syrian students, who have been deeply affected by what they have been through after the experiences of war and migration, can facilitate their adaptation. In this regard, psychological counselling and guidance at schools should be utilised more effectively to reduce the trauma that children experience. Moreover, children who are found by the psychological counselling and guidance service to have experienced severe trauma should be referred for professional help.

The findings of the study demonstrate that teachers, on the whole, have a largely positive attitude towards Syrian students and sincerely try to help them. Such attitudes will serve to contribute to the academic performance and adaptation of Syrian students. We do not know whether this positive teacher attitude is one that is present in all areas and regions of Turkey. Therefore, whether this phenomenon is exclusive to the city of İstanbul or whether it is also present in other cities and regions needs to be investigated.

Note

1. While obtaining their informed consent they were also instructed that participation was voluntary and that they could refrain from answering any question or leave the interview at any time, without any consequence being incurred. The researchers also emphasized that the principle of confidentiality would be upheld throughout the interview and analysis processes. Prior to beginning this study, and to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the participants, all data gathered from participant resources were collected after having obtained explicit permission from the participants in full compliance with the Institutional Review Board guidelines at Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, and having received full permission from the school district to conduct the research. Both schools and participants names were used as a pseudonym to protect the identities of the school and the participants.

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