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Serra Acar

University of Massachusetts Boston

Ozden Pinar-Irmak

University of Massachusetts Boston

Staci B. Martin

Portland State University, mar24@pdx.edu

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Data Needs for Children with Special Needs in Refugee Populations

 **Serra Acar**, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts Boston, USA
 serra.acar@umb.edu

 **Ozden Pinar-Irmak**, MA, Doctoral Student, University of Massachusetts Boston, USA
 Ozden.PinarIrmak001@umb.edu

 **Staci B. Martin**, EdD., Adjunct Assistant Professor, Portland State University, USA
 mar24@pdx.edu

Summary

This article examines the challenges that affect the identification and assessment of refugee children with special needs in Turkey and provides recommendations related to data collection and assessment of these learners that is broadly relevant in refugee settings.

Keywords

Refugee Children
Learners with Special Needs
Data Collection
Early Intervention
Early Childhood Special Education

Introduction

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), every child has the right to free quality education. In addition, article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires governments to ensure “inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live” (United Nations, 2016). However, refugee children with special needs often remain invisible during emergencies (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2008).

Turkey, which is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is hosting the largest number of refugees in the world, approximately 3.6 million refugees, including over 1.4 million children (UNHCR, 2017). Although the Syrian crisis began in March 2011, detailed data representing the demographics of refugee children with special needs in Turkey are limited (UNHCR, 2016). This article examines the challenges that affect the identification of refugee children with special needs in host countries, particularly Turkey, including lack of trained practitioners, limited assessment tools with good psychometric properties, and language barriers.

What Do We Know about Refugee Children with Special Needs in Turkey?

The methodology employed for this literature review included conducting searches with keywords, such as “refugee children with special needs” and “refugee children with disabilities” in the following websites and databases: Academic Search Premier, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, and the Women’s Refugee Commission. Reports from the Turkish Ministry of Education (MoNE) and the Turkish Statistical Institute, only available in Turkish, were reviewed as well. This was a necessary step to gain a broader sense of the current status of refugee children with special needs in Turkey.

According to the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policies (MoFSP), as a temporary protection for beneficiaries, all refugee children with or without special needs have the right to be registered at public schools in Turkey. There are more than 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees who are school-aged children and youth (5-17 years old) living in Turkey (Carlier, 2018). In the 2017-2018 school year, 7,025 five-year-old refugee children received education in unaccredited and temporary centers which are available in refugee camps (MEB, 2018). For the same school year, 36,601 five-year-old refugee children enrolled in Turkish public schools (MEB, 2018). However, data on the enrollment rate of refugee children (birth to 5 years old) with special needs in these services are not publicly available, which creates a large gap in the early childhood education system.

Since 2016, the MoFSP has established child centers, activity centers, and nursery schools for refugee children with disabilities living outside of refugee camps (ASPB, 2016). Moreover, MoFSP provides psychosocial support, preventive, and protective care services for children with special needs in rehabilitation centers (ASPB, 2016). The MoNE is providing special education classrooms to support children with special needs who live in refugee camps. However, there is a need to monitor and evaluate program quality of these services (Asylum Information Database, 2015).

The literature review showed that detailed individual data that represent chronological age, gender, birth place, birth and medical history, disability category, or time of referral to early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) services are not available for refugee children with special needs in Turkey. In the field of EI/ECSE, calculating the chronological age, which is broken into years, months, and days of a child is the first step of any assessment protocol. Miscalculation of the chronological age will result in faulty interpretations and scores. Therefore, it is critically important to determine a child's chronological age at the time of testing. However, if the children are not accompanied by family members, many of them do not know when they were born or may not provide the correct information.

The findings showed that there is a lack of standard data collection protocols to identify refugee children with special needs (Rohwerder, 2018). Moreover, there is a lack of documentation regarding the services provided to refugee children with special needs (Curtis & Geagan, 2016; UNICEF, 2018). For instance, if children are assessed to identify their educational strengths and needs, it is important to document the date of the assessment, the child's chronological age, the measurement tool(s) that are used, the language of the tool(s), if the assessment is available in Turkish or the child's native language, the staff who administered the tool (e.g. early intervention practitioner/specialist, family members,

interpreters, and/or cultural brokers), and the result of the assessment for each child assessed. If refugee children with special needs receive EI/ECSE services, it is important to document important information on educational services including child-to-adult ratio, number of children with special needs in a classroom, teachers' educational background, language(s) spoken in the program, hours of operation, and daily schedule. This information would help service providers, policy-makers, and researchers to understand the available resources for refugee children with special needs and guide them regarding what else may need to be done in order to meet the needs of these learners.

Implications for the Field

The education of refugee children with special needs is a major challenge in Turkey. There is a need to identify refugee children with special needs (birth to 5 years old) and provide EI/ECSE services to support children to reach their full potential. It is critical to intervene during the early years of child development. EI/ECSE services can impact a child's developmental trajectory and improve the outcomes for children, families, and communities at large. The case in Turkey is complex, yet it provides a critical example to highlight the educational needs of refugee children with special needs.

Recommendations to better meet the needs of refugee children with special needs in Turkey include: a) establish a more rigorous data collection protocol and provide public accessibility; b) develop a universal assessment system for children with special needs; and c) provide ongoing training to educators on the assessment of children with special needs. First, there needs to be an improvement in data collection initiatives. Developing a systematic data collection process across the country for refugee children with special needs can help to organize and coordinate meaningful EI/ECSE services. Furthermore, there is a need to develop a universal assessment system, which is a critical step to understand the strengths and needs of refugee children. For example, Turkey could consider expanding the administration of International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA), which aims to measure child development from 3.5 to 6 years in four areas: motor development, emergent language and literacy, emergent numeracy/problem solving, and social-emotional skills (Pisani, Borisova, & Dowd, 2015). Currently, there are a limited number of assessment tools with good psychometric properties for educators to use with children who have special needs. It is also important to provide systematic in-service training to educators on assessment with a specific focus on collaborating with family members, interpreters, and cultural liaisons/brokers during the assessment process.

Conclusion

Future work focusing on refugee children with disabilities

can make a difference in the lives of all children in education in emergency situations. For example, a child who is hearing impaired may need closed captions or video descriptions, which in turn, could also support children who are learning another language to see the words on the screen while they are listening. There is an urgent need to recognize and respond to the needs of refugee children with special needs, otherwise, they often do not receive the services, funding, and/or support they need. Our findings are limited to the refugee population from Syria residing in Turkey. Despite this limitation, our investigation has suggested that there are no reliable data that indicate that

refugee children with special needs are being identified and/or adequately receiving the services that are within their rights as children (United Nations, 2016). This is not just an issue for Turkey alone, but a global issue that needs attention and could benefit all children with special needs.

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