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An Analysis of Interaction of Syrian Students Who Study in Turkey with Their Teachers and Friends

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Abstract: Of all the Syrian refugees who had to immigrate to Turkey due to the war in their country, it has been children who have suffered most. Child refugees were confronted with serious education problems, in particular through the early years of the immigration. In the following years, when it was realized that these children would stay for a long time in the country, an educational policy paving the way for these children to have an education in their own language and in state schools was developed. Following this, the Syrian children who started to have education in state schools had serious problems stemming from the differences in the system of education and culture. According to the body of literature, the problems determined were teacher attitudes, approaches of school administrations and communication problems with peers, and these problems caused a delay in the integration of these children into education.

Adaptation of refugee groups to the society they live in is vital, in particular, to the country hosting them. Many studies have shown that education is a major factor for someone to improve their skills and knowledge as well as learn about the cultural values of the society they live in. Interactions of the Syrian child refugees residing in Turkey with their teachers and peers in the context of education was examined from the Syrian Children's points of view in determining the problems they are confronted with.

The study is an applied field study and a qualitative one conducted at Başakşehir, Şahintepe and Güvercintepe Refugee Houses (Sites), in April and May 2019. Members of the sampling frame were 79 people from 25 families and snowball sampling method was employed. In determining the levels of Syrian child refugees' interactions with their teachers and peers in the context of education, only the data collected from the members of the sampling frame attending state schools were used. The findings from the study reveal, regarding the current state of the Syrian children attending state schools, that in terms of their interactions with teachers and peers, there are sometimes problems but in general terms they are in good state.

Keywords: Immigrant children, education, teacher

1. Introduction

Today, many concepts are utilized to comprehend international migration. The origins of these concepts date back to the 19th century, when the disciplines of social sciences emerged. The concepts of international migration show traces of the thought and socioeconomic regulations of the industrial revolution. Yet, many concepts emerged as a result of interpreting and defining the migration process from Europe to America. However, international migration is a dynamic, complex, multidimensional and ongoing phenomenon. It can take different forms and develop distinctly in different contexts. Migration can have many causes and these can also determine its form and type. These migration classifications are internal–external migration, individual–mass migration, permanent–temporary migration, forced and voluntary migration. (Öner & Öner, 2015) The scope of this study consists of the phenomenon of forced migration.

Regardless of the cause of migration, as long as people live in the country of migration, they have to adapt and integrate with the society of the country in which they live. This population movement has a profound impact on both migrants and the locals of the place migrated. When we examine this population movement in the context of the place of migration, it is seen that it affects many areas of the destination country, such as economy, social life, health and security. And the globalization has brought with it a great increase in international migration movement. Children and youth constitute an important part of these migration movements. Immigrant children and youth face problems such as lack of access to basic services such as housing, education and health due to economic difficulties and they are ostracized from society. Among these problems, education, which is always an important concept for everyone, its role becomes even more important when it comes to immigrant children. Indeed, according to many social scientists, education plays an important role in immigrant children's adaptation of to social life. This is because school is a new environment for the child to socialize. This new environment is very important for immigrant children in making friends, and learning the language and culture of the country (Öztürk, 2017). The adaptation of the immigrant children from different cultures and different education system to the education system of the country they are now in varies in proportion to their acceptance by their class teachers and peers. Therefore, positive attitudes and behaviors of teachers towards immigrant children are important since they contribute to the personal and social development of immigrant children.)

2. Teachers' Contribution to Students' Personal and Social Development

One of the most important tasks of teachers is to educate their students as healthy individuals and to integrate them into society. Teachers are not only representatives of cultural norms, but also teachers thereof. Teachers' ideas, beliefs and decisions greatly affect the dynamics of the teaching process. In addition, it is stated that teachers' emotions, too, affect their interactions with students. Teachers' understanding of students' problems and their awareness of how their emotional relationship with their students affect them can improve the quality of teacher–student relationship. This emotional bond also plays an important role in identifying students' problems. Moreover, it is stated that students who show emotional and behavioural disorders challenge teachers' authority and this, in turn, causes teachers to feel inadequate and helpless. And it is underlined that, when in such a situation, teachers' motivation to help students should be high (Aysan, 2002).

When we examine the literature on the attitudes and behaviours of classroom teachers towards Syrian refugee students; in his study, Öznur (2014) investigated what is perceived as cultural differences by classroom teachers and their intercultural sensitivity levels in relation to their students. According to this study, teachers may have difficulty in communicating with and deciding how to treat students from different cultural characteristics. In the study conducted by Sakız (2016), it was stated that the school administrators, for various reasons, did not take kindly to the immigrant children studying in their schools, and made statements that argued that the existing homogeneous student structure in schools must be maintained. It was also stated by another school administrator that the number of teachers was insufficient and also that the teachers' professional level was not adequate to teach immigrant children. In the study conducted by Demircioğlu (2016), it was stated that teachers had positive thoughts about multiculturalism, but felt insufficient in classroom practices. The reason for this was indicated to be the curriculum and the insufficient knowledge of teachers. In a study which confers on the opinions of teachers regarding the school cohesion of Syrian children studying in Turkey, it was stated that teachers are prepared to have Syrian students in their classroom, but have concerns. According to the same study, some of the teachers had positive thoughts towards Syrians while others had negative thoughts about them. While the positive thoughts of the teachers led them to be tolerant and understanding towards them, and to wish to understand the problems they experience, the negative thoughts of other teachers led them to behave in the opposite way towards them. (Kiremit, Akpınar, & Tüfekçi Akcan, 2018). There are many other similar studies such as those of Uzun and

Bütün (2016), and of Sağlam and Kanbur (Topsakal, Merey, & Keçe, 2013). Although there are some differences, the studies conducted in this context have generally reached similar results.

In our study, the attitudes and behaviours of the teachers towards the Syrian students were dependent on many factors. Teachers, who barely managed the existing number of students in their classrooms, started to experience a number of problems with the addition of Syrian students who have language and communication problems. This situation led to poor performance of teachers. With the Government taking notice of these problems, this problem was eliminated by increasing the number of teachers and opening additional classrooms for Syrian children to learn Turkish. With this practice in the last two years, the problem of communication and cohesion between teachers and Syrian children has been eliminated.

Research Methodology

46% of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey consists of children and youth in the 0–18 age range. Therefore, it is a must that this refugee population living in Turkey be correctly guided and evaluated in terms of social, cultural, political and economic context. Otherwise, this potential will become a major risk factor in a few years and may cause conflicts in the society, as well as have negative impacts on social productivity in the economic, social and cultural context. Since the school, after family, is a very important factor in the socialization process, it is of great importance for maintaining social peace that the relationship between Syrian children and their teacher and peers is examined through the eyes of Syrian children living in the research area and studying in public schools, in their educational process. It is also an important research topic in terms of individual and social development.

The main subject of this research is the Syrian immigrant population who lives in Turkey, including the Syrian children living in Güvercintepe, Göçmen Konutları and Şahintepe neighbourhoods of Başakşehir district of Istanbul. The biggest factor in my preference of these regions was that I personally observed their situation in 2013–2015 due to the fact that I had the opportunity to meet many Syrians at different times for different reasons. In this context, the aim is to understand the status of the research group's communication with teachers and peers as of April–May 2019, to examine through appropriate techniques the direction in which the positive and negative factors are progressing, and to create the necessary data for their development.

The study was limited to a total of twenty-five families, fifteen low and ten high-income, who reside in the region covered. The main subject population living in these regions is not known exactly. For this reason, it is considered appropriate to use snowball method in sample selection. The first interview was made through reference and at least three family suggestions were received during the interview. Among the suggestions, a number of children between the ages of 8 and 19 was optimized to reflect the general, and seventy-nine samples were selected. Interviewed parents, youth and children are expressed as research group and youth and children are expressed as sample. The samples were coded as Ö1, Ö2 up to Ö79. The research group parents were coded as sample Family ÖA1, ÖA2 up to ÖA25.

Qualitative research method was used in this study since attitudes, behaviours and experiences will constitute the main data due to the subject and aim of the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the samples identified in the research area. In order to achieve reliability in terms of the consistency of the data to be obtained, rapport was established by chatting casually in the first half hour. In addition, a Syrian interpreter provided support in all interviews and contributed to conducting the interview in a safe environment. Once the appropriate environment was created, with open-ended questions, the participants were encouraged to speak as much as possible about the topics to be explored, and an interactive rest was taken. In this sense, audio recordings were made to ensure that no detail was missed, and effective communication and adequate eye contact were established, and after the interview, the data was compared with the forms to verify the accuracy and to complete the missing parts. All interviews were conducted by me in April and May 2019 and an average of three hours was spent with the participants.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was created and administered in order to provide a flexible chat environment and not offend the interviewees because of their social status. The data obtained for identifying the interaction of the Syrian children in the study group with their teachers and peers were analyzed and evaluated in the light of the problems identified in the literature and the information I obtained through the opportunity I had to meet with a large number of Syrians at different times between 2013–2016 for different reasons.

Findings

I gathered the data about the current status of the relationship of Syrian immigrant children with their teachers and peers in the education process and the analysis of the relevant situation under two headings. These headings are the general characteristics

of the focus group, and the level of relationship of the samples with their teachers and peers.

General Characteristics of the Focus Group

The personal characteristics of the samples in the research group are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of demographic characteristics of the research group

N=	79		
Variable	Group	f	%
Gender	Female	31	39%
	Male	48	61%
Age	8 – 11	23	29%
	12 – 15	33	42%
	16 – 19	23	29%
Ethnicity	Arab	56	71%
	Kurdish	9	11%
	Turkmen	14	18%
Educational status	Student	44	56%
	Drop-out	32	42%
	Never been to school	2	3%
Education level	Primary School	21	27%
	Secondary School	39	49%
	High School	13	16%
	Bachelor's	3	4%
Work	Employed	30	38%
	Unemployed	49	62%
Turkish	Can speak	75	95%
	Can't speak	4	5%
Health	Ill	3	4%
	Not ill	76	96%
Number of siblings	None	1	1%
	1 – 3	36	46%
	4 –7	29	37%
	7 and more	13	16%

In Table 1, the personal characteristics of the sample group of 79 people also reflect the characteristics of the students attending public schools. In our sample group, there are students aged 8–11, 12–15 and 16–19, attending primary, secondary and high school public schools. Table 1 shows that 71% of our samples is of Arab origin and 75% can speak Turkish. However, in our sample group, only the students who attend public schools can speak Turkish. And as for our samples who attend Arab schools, it

was understood that their comprehension skills were developed rather than speaking skills.

The Relationship Level of the Samples with Teachers and Peers

The researches and interviews conducted showed that the relations of our samples with school officials, teachers and peers varied depending on their ethnic backgrounds. While our samples from the Turkmen ethnic origin have faced no problems from the moment they start receiving education in public schools in Turkey, our samples from Arab and Kurdish ethnic origin have gone through very difficult days in the first year. Therefore, the evaluation of the interaction of our samples with their teachers and peers, and their current status was made according to their ethnicity.

As a result of the interviews we have conducted with our samples in this context, it has been understood that attitudes and behaviours are effective in their relationship with school authorities and teachers, depending on the language first and then the personalities of the children and teachers. Some answers related to this issue are given below.

Turkmen Samples

Our Turkmen samples have stated that they had no difficulty in their relations with their teachers or their peers, from the moment they started receiving education in state schools in Turkey. The reason for this is the fact that, due to being Turkmen, they are able to understand and speak Turkish very well, except for reading and writing.

Ö1: School officials said, "If we make you start from primary school grade 2, you will have to study with younger children, which will make it difficult for you to adapt to school." They made me start from fifth grade with students of my age. I understand Turkish. For this reason, I understand the lessons my teacher teaches at school. My teacher taught me to read and write during breaks. And my friends help me with the exams. This is how it is for now.

ÖA7: One of my sons was 2 years old and the other was 4 years old when we came to Turkey. When my sons were old enough to go to school, we enrolled them in the school their older sister is studying, without any difficulty. One of them, Muhammad, is in 4th grade now and the other is in 2nd grade. At first they were a bit reserved, but as time passed, they opened up. Their relationship with their schoolmates and teachers is very good now. Like my daughters, my sons got used to their schools, friends and

teachers, too. Thankfully, they don't have any trouble. My eldest son meets and spends time with his schoolmates outside the school, too.

Ö13: I am currently in grade 7. I didn't have problem with my teachers and friends at school because I speak Turkish. But still it took a bit of time for us to adjust. It is the same with my sister.

Arab Ethnic Origin Samples

Ö73: I am 11 years old. I studied 1st and 2nd in Arab school and 3rd ,4th and 5th grades in Turkish school. When I was in 3rd grade, my Turkish was very bad. I didn't get along very well with my teachers and friends. I neither could understand nor do the lessons my teacher taught. My teachers were mad at me. My friendships were also very bad. My first year was very bad. But as my Turkish got better in the 4th and 5th grade, we got better with my teachers and friends.

ÖA17 (Mother): My son had an angry teacher. In fact, my son is a well-behaved child. However, something happened at school, my son laughed, the teacher got angry and slapped my son, my son did not want to go to school after that. So I went to school and told the principal. The principal was helpful. He spoke with the teacher and made him/her apologize to my son. "If he takes the same approach with your son again, I will file a complaint about him/her", the principal said. Currently my children are studying in Başakşehir Aziz Sancar Secondary School. Thankfully, both the principal and the teachers are very good.

Ö65: When I first came, I couldn't get along with my teachers and friends. When my teacher gave me homework, we would do the same page for five hours. I didn't have friends at first. They didn't want to play with me. They did not play with me, saying you do not speak Turkish, you do not understand what we say. My first year was awful. But after my Turkish became good, we got along with my teachers and friends.

Ö68: I came to Turkey at 8 years old. I'm 14 now. I studied in in Syria until the 2nd grade, and the 3rd grade in Arab school in Fatih. In the fourth grade, I transferred to Turkish school. I learned Turkish from my Turkish friends whom I played with in the parks. I learned Turkish completely in the 5th grade. My schoolmates lived close to my home. We met with them both at school and out of school. We would buy junk food and eat together. We would play football. I had five Syrian friends at my school. But my style didn't fit with theirs much. They liked to spend time at home more. But I like to play outside. My 4th grade Turkish teacher didn't treat me very well. I would raise

finger to speak, but he wouldn't pick me. I would ask questions, but he never answered me. This made me very sad. I saw him in all the classes because it was primary school. Therefore, 4th grade was very difficult for me. I didn't talk to my Turkish friends much during the first year. I didn't have any problems after 4th grade.

As it can be understood from the feedback of some sample families and samples, the student's knowledge of Turkish language is a very important factor in having a good relationship with their teachers and school authorities. It has been found that while some teachers do not want to deal with students who do not speak Turkish, some teachers are more patient with this situation and they do their best to help Syrian students succeed in school.

The main duty of teachers is to facilitate their students' learning by observing, researching and trying to get to know them. However, it is understood from the feedback of the sample families and samples that some of the teachers show negative attitudes and behaviours towards Syrian students, forgetting their main duties. We had the opportunity to interview a teacher who did not have good feelings towards Syrians, forgetting that his/her duty was to teach only, regardless of the students' race or religion. When we tried to talk about Syrian students, s/he said something along the lines of "Come off it; they have frustrated us, they are wasting our time. They should get the hell out of here." Although we reminded her/him that they are only children, s/he continued with her/his rageful statements.

In 2015, I witnessed a situation with Syrian children, when some disputes occurred between Syrian children and local children due to various reasons. One day, my son was also involved in one of the disputes. My son's teacher called me to school and gave a warning; "Your son is arguing with the Syrian children all the time, I'm afraid they will have a fight after school." Upon this, I had a talk with my son about this issue: "Son, why are you so angry with each other?" I said. My son replied: "Mom, they are cursing at us, we don't like them, we can't get along." I saw that the attitudes and behaviours of the students from the other class towards the Syrian children were same as those of my son, as well; their feelings towards them were not so nice. They would hold them accountable for whatever bad happens at a school and have antipathetic feelings about them.

Although we were able to solve this situation, as it is expressed by our samples, a lot of similar incidents involving Syrian children happened that year. And I witnessed many of them myself. In order to prevent more refugee children from being mistreated by their teachers, it is necessary to provide teachers with training to remind them that

their main duty is to improve students' abilities by preparing them for next grades and to make them contributing members of the society, and to increase in-school supervision. In particular, the ability of the staff to supervise properly can be a deterrent factor in prevention of students from both local and other nationalities being mistreated; because local students, too, face this kind of ill-treatment.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

According to the evaluation results after the implementation; following the Government paving the way for Syrian children to attend public schools, some of our samples decided to go to public schools, while some of them decided to continue with or enrol in Arab schools. Among the samples that decided to go to public schools, there are samples that started school for the first time as well as the ones who decided to go to public schools after studying in the Arab schools until the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade. In addition to these, there are also samples who studied in Syria until 1st, 2nd, 3. or up to 4th and 5th grade.

The adaptation of the samples starting the primary education from the first grade was easier compared to that of the samples starting from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades. The most important reason for this is that reading and writing are taught in the first grade. Our samples in this group did not have communication problems with their friends and teachers after they started to learn Turkish in the second year. From the moment they started the 3rd and 4th grade, they were observed to be well-adapted to and embrace their schools.

Children who started education from the 2nd, 3rd or 4th grades had more difficulty in their first years. The most important reason for this was that the teachers could not communicate with the Syrian students who do not speak the language. When faced with such situation, some teachers were patience while others displayed aggressive behavior. Because of the lack of additional Turkish language classes for Syrian children in schools at that time, the education process for our samples and teachers in this group was a troublesome. However, as of today, it is understood that the samples in this group no longer have any problems with their teachers and schoolmates. In addition, it was seen that the children were very familiar with their current situation, adapting to their school, their teachers and friends, and that the samples who started from the secondary school had the same experiences as the group starting from the middle of primary school.

In short; it was found that the problems they experienced in their first in year in Turkey, such as not understanding the homework given or having to work on the same homework for hours due to not being able to speak Turkish, and the mother's inability to help them as she can't speak Turkish, are no longer present today. As a result, it was understood that their poor relations with both teachers and schoolmates and school authorities have improved. It is a well-known fact that language is very important in communication and it is an important fact that enables different communities to integrate with each other. This reality has manifested itself one more time in the lives of our samples who had to migrate to Turkey due to the outbreak of civil war in their country in 2011.

According to the results of the research, the Government of Turkey issued many regulations concerning Syrian children and youth's access to education. In addition to these, the Ministry of National Education and EU and NGOs such as PICTES have undertaken a lot of projects in order to ensure the integration of Syrian children into the Turkish education system and their access to education. Within the context of this project, the Ministry of National Education announced the recruitment of Turkish-language teaching personnel and that Syrian children aged 4-5 years should attend preschool education in order to learn the language and to ensure their integration into society. In this context, we had the opportunity to meet with a total of three teachers in Başakşehir Ahmet Kabaklı Primary School, Akşemsettin Secondary School and Yahya Kemal Primary School, which is out of the area of our study. According to these interviews, Turkish courses have been organized for the last two years, especially in primary education, and Syrian students with poor Turkish language skills have been referred to these courses. Primary school teachers state that these courses accelerate the adaptation of children to school and that everything is now well-organized in terms of Turkish language education in primary schools.

In the following periods, additional Turkish language courses will be opened in primary schools and according to our samples and the statements of Recep Batun, Istanbul Provincial Director of Migration Management, Arab schools will be closed as of next year. Accordingly, it is foreseen that Syrian children who are now growing up or just got to the school age will be able spend a more comfortable education period. However, with the closure of Arab schools, the fact that Syrian children in secondary schools and high schools do not have a full command of Turkish will lead them to have difficulties in new education periods. Therefore, Turkish languages courses to be organized in primary schools need also to be organized in secondary and high schools.

Otherwise, it will cause the children who do not have the financial resources to take additional courses to drop out of school.

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