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B. Dilara Şeker,
Celal Bayar University,
Manisa, Turkey,
E-mail: dilaraseker@hotmail.com

İbrahim Sirkeci,
Regent's Centre for Transnational
Studies,
Regent's University London,
London, United Kingdom,
E-mail: sirkeci@regents.ac.uk

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CHALLENGES FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN AT SCHOOL IN EASTERN TURKEY

ABSTRACT. In this study, we focus on the challenges faced by refugee children at schools in Van, an eastern province at the Iranian border. Focusing on the teachers' assessment of problems encountered by refugee children at school, this paper is based on qualitative interviews conducted at three schools in the city centre of Van province. The qualitative interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview schedule. As teachers reported, main problem areas are lack of Turkish language ability among refugee children, absence of education tailored for refugee children, and problems with relations with other pupils. Among recurrent themes, limited language skills that refugee children have mostly suffered from and problems with making friends among peers were prominent. The teachers interviewed were willing to address these issues encountered by refugee children and they seemingly considered these issues as part of a wider set of complex issues with multifaceted details.

JEL Classification: I14, I31, J13

Keywords: Refugee children, education, integration, problems at school.

Introduction

The increasing traffic of international population flows to Turkey and through Turkey warrants more research as well as policies in regards to various migrant groups in the country. It is possible to claim that Turkey has become a destination country over the last decade or so (Sirkeci *et al.*, 2015a; Sirkeci *et al.*, 2012). Despite the fact that recent arrival of Syrian refugees in large numbers, Turkey have seen significant number of refugee arrivals in the past (Yazgan *et al.*, 2015). Among the mover¹ groups in Turkey, refugee children are a priority vulnerable group as in other parts of the world (Matthews, 2008; Russell, 1999; Sourander, 1998). The share of children among refugees have increased significantly in recent years and it was reported that 51% of refugees were younger than 18 in 2014 (Battle, 2014; UNHCR, 2015). Turkey's geographical proximity to both Europe and conflict zones in the neighbourhood makes it an attractive transit country as well as a destination due to its relatively stable economy and politics.

¹ "Movers" refer to the conceptual proposal by Cohen and Sirkeci (2011) who argue that we need to shift the terminology to acknowledge the link between movers and non-movers, internal and international movers while also avoiding the pejorative meanings attributed to migration and migrants in wider public discourses.

In this paper, we hope to shed light on the problems encountered by refugee children who are more vulnerable than their parents. Teachers' perspectives are important as they are able to observe a large number of refugee children and their parents particularly in locations where refugee population are concentrated.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 19.5 million refugees worldwide by the end of 2014 while the total number of internally and internationally displaced (total population of concern) stood at 59.5 million (UNHCR, 2015). About 51% of the total refugee population in the world are children (younger than 18) (UNHCR, 2015). The total number of asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey, excluding registered Syrians (2.1 million), who are not considered officially as refugees, was 218,652 by the end of September 2015 (UNHCR Turkey, 2015a and 2015b). Other main refugee groups in Turkey are Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians. While a gender balanced population is evident, about one third of non-Syrian refugees and nearly half of Syrian refugees are aged under 18 and three thirds of these are at school ages (UNHCR Turkey, 2015b; AFAD, 2013). These numbers show that the number of children among refugees in Turkey has risen from 6,027 in 2009 to 8,743 in 2012 and to over 1.1 million in 2015 among whom only 20,619 are officially recognized refugees. These statistics show the importance of understanding this vulnerable group's needs and wants.

Van is geographically and socio-economically an interesting province influenced by internal and international migration flows and since it borders with Iran, there is a concentration of refugee traffic of mainly Iranians and Afghans. Like in many other countries, these groups stay in Van until their legal statuses are determined, which sometimes is very lengthy and warrants significant level of settlement and engagement with local communities. Differences and similarities become central in this peculiar process of acculturation as defined by Berry (2002). Acculturation stress is known to have adverse effects on children's mental and emotional health (Fine and Sirin, 2007). Educational needs are essential for those refugees under 18 and their access to education paves the way for more optimistic outlook in life (Fazel *et al.*, 2012). Education gives an opportunity to refugee children to engage with the local community while also enabling native populations to know refugees. This process is sometimes marked by difficulties and tensions. These difficulties are explored in this study from the perspective of teachers involved in education of refugee children in Van province.

1. Education for Refugee children

Problems faced at early stages of education are known to have risks of causing life time concerns in individuals' lives. Despite national and international obligations for the state to offer education to children, refugee children largely face difficulties in accessing basic education (İHAD, 2011). It has been clear that many refugee children in Turkey cannot attend schools (UNHCR, 2008), but there were efforts to improve in recent years (see İHAD, 2011).

Children and adolescents are often exposed to physical violence, chaos and war in their countries of origin. These children also face trauma and conflicts in transit countries and destinations as they often have to live apart from their families along with racism and discrimination (Pynoos *et al.*, 2001; Roxas, 2010). Lack of clarity and temporary settlement for refugee families make access to education more difficult for refugee children (Vedder and Horezcyk, 2006). Relocations such as refugee dispersal movements within countries or transfers to another country impose forced breaks in children education as well as many other integration problems faced by these children (Ehnholt and Yule; 2006; Sutner, 2002; Rah *et al.*, 2009).

Nevertheless school plays an important role in the integration of refugee children. Integration means decreasing the level of disagreement and disharmony between individual

and the environment s/he is part of while also individuals develop new attitudes as a result of acculturation process, which is a two way process changing the newcomers as well as the members of the host society (Alba and Foner, 2015; Seker *et al.*, 2015; Ward and Kennedy, 2001). Socio-cultural integration often refers to learning of culture, behavioural adequacy and exchanges, psychological integration refers to coping with the new environment, social support, solidarity and overall all psychologic well-being (Berry and Ataca, 2000; Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Yu, 2010). Socio-cultural integration is measured by examining the level of understanding and speaking the local language as this will help with communication, making friends and engaging in social activities, and sorting out issues regarding jobs and schools. Psychological integration overall focuses on belonging, life satisfaction, and social support (Berry, 2005).

Psychological integration of refugee children improves their level of belonging, socio-cultural integration, and academic success, while it declines with depression, anxiety, social exclusion and alienation (Oikonomidou, 2010). It is observed that integration is better among students studying in multicultural classrooms (Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Vedder and Horenzcyk, 2006). It is also known that school for refugee children is a place where they get the chance to integrate with the host society while also being a place where they get stigmatised as foreigners, face discrimination and harassment due to their different heritage, culture and language (Yamamoto, 2014, p. 63).

Some studies focus on social origin, geographic location, class, gender, race and ethnic identity affecting the social integration of refugee children (Castles, 2003; Oikonomidou, 2010). Another group of studies focuses on acquiring languages without considering cultural and ethnic backgrounds of refugee children (Faltis and Coulter, 2008; Valdes, 1998). A third view exclusively looks into academic success at school (Gay, 2000). At the same time, there are other research drawing upon traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and emotional and mental health (Dalhouse and Dalhouse, 2009; Hart, 2009; Kirk and Cassity, 2007; Roxas, 2011). These studies and others show that there are lack of knowledge and resources at schools (Hamilton, 2004; Szente *et al.*, 2006), while refugee children's school experiences determine their integration and academic success directly (Noguera, 2004).

2. Data and Methods

This study is based on qualitative interviews with phenomenological design, which is adopted for analysing a phenomenon yet not fully understood despite an existing degree of awareness of it. It is useful "to fully describe a person's lived experience of an event or experience. It stresses that only those that have experienced phenomena can communicate them to the outside world" (Mapp, 2008, p. 308). Such methods "adopt an understanding (verstehen) approach to social phenomena" (Iosifides and Sporton, 2009, p. 101) and therefore deemed suitable for this study which aims to understand the problems encountered by refugee children from their guardian teachers who are the first hand witnesses of the lived experience.

2.1. Participants

We have opted to interview teachers experienced with teaching and guiding refugee children in Van province in Eastern Turkey, where historically large number of refugees has been accommodated. Teachers are able to reflect on the wider context and on a large number of refugee children as well as their parents. On a rather practical level, teachers are easier to access and interview compared to refugee children. The teachers participated in the study were selected from primary schools in the city centre of Van province by using a purposive

sampling. Selected schools have large numbers of refugee children enrolled in classes. We have selected three teachers from each school. Teachers were aged between 27 and 43 and composed of 5 women and 4 men who volunteered to participate in the study. These teachers were delivering classes on English, Turkish, Sciences, Mathematics and generalist subjects at early years. 8 of the respondents were university graduates and one had a postgraduate degree. They were either on permanent or fixed term contracts.

2.2. Interview schedule

The instrument used in the field was an interview schedule which was semi-structured with key thematic areas to be covered with each respondent. Semi structured interviews are known for practicality and to keep the conversation focused during the interviews (Bertozzi, 2010; Xenitidou, 2011). In developing the schedule, two experts in the field were consulted, then the scope and validity of topics and questions were reviewed before the final revised version of the interview schedule was complete.

In this study, we sought answers to the following questions: What are the academic problems refugee children commonly face at schools? What kind of problems and challenges refugee children are exposed in their relations with other pupils at schools? What are the perceived problems faced by refugee children in terms of their relations with parents? What solutions teachers have to address the issues faced by refugee children at school?

2.3. Field research

The data was collected in the 2010-2011 academic year through face-to-face qualitative interviews. The study's scope and focus, ethical aspects, confidentiality of responses, respondents and results as well as informed consent were explained to the participants on the outset of each interview. For those participants who gave permission, interviews were tape recorded. An average interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

2.4. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analysed by using axial coding to identify recurrent themes and some excerpts from these interviews are presented in this paper. The recurrent themes are formulated with the help of the literature and four main themes have emerged. According to the recorded material, categories focusing on refugee children's problems with teachers, parents and peer pupils as well as proposed solutions to these issues are presented. The real names and places are altered to ensure confidentiality. Quotes from respondents are numbered and these are indicated in each direct quote such as T1 refers to "teacher interview number 1".

3. Findings

In the interviews four key themes appeared and this section is organised around these thematic categories with subheadings as summarised in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Recurrent themes and categories identified in the study

Themes	Sub-categories
Education	-Language issues (learning language, communication) -Academic weakness
Peers	-Social and cultural integration -Peer communication
Families	-Parents' attitude towards education -Parents' integration problems
Recommendations	-Recommendations

3.1. Language question

Problems in education was formulated as language-related issues and academic weaknesses. Participants highlighted the issues of academic performance, success, communication and integration overall and linked these to refugee children's lack of language skills as they cannot understand and express themselves properly, which hinders the integration process. All teachers ranked language as the key issue. T5 said *"in the past we had an Afghan student who did not know a word of Turkish and he had problems in his family. He was a different kid. He learned Turkish quickly and he was taking every opportunity to learn Turkish. Then he became more integrated with his peers and also succeeded in his classes. He was a very intelligent kid. However, I had big problems with some other [refugee children]. Students without support from their parents at home take so long to learn reading. Even if they learn, they still face problems because their vocabulary is poor"*.

T1 points out poverty and overcrowding issues in refugee families: *"Most of the children in class are from large families on low income. Then we have refugee children with language problems. I am a subject teacher with limited number of hours and the student's language level is poor. We are facing difficulty with their language levels. It is hard for me. These students don't know the meaning of many words, and only some asks. Those asking are more outspoken and sociable. Shy students never ask anything, they are very passive in classroom. However, if they are here to stay, they must learn the language and be able to read"*. Some difficulties in learning the language were raised by other teachers too. For example, T7 said *"some refugee children learn speaking Turkish at school. It goes slowly. They sometimes mix Turkish with their own language. We are trying to teach Turkish to these students who are not familiar with the Turkish sound structure, patterns. When asked, these students can't make the sounds which are not in their own [mother] language. Therefore, they start reading very late, later than others. The fact that their families don't speak Turkish either makes it even more difficult [for these children]"*.

3.2. Academic weakness

Teachers we have interviewed observed that there was a common problem with poor academic preparation among refugee children and this affects their success at school. They also pointed out that bureaucratic obstacles in issuing diploma and certificates to foreigners in Turkey prevents refugee children continuing further in education (T6, T7, and T9). T4 expressed her frustration that they cannot assess the level of preparation, what these children know or don't know because they cannot present diplomas, certificates showing their level of education. She also said that *"sometimes the education indicated in certificates do not match what we have in our system. Therefore some children has to start from scratch here. It is particularly difficult for those children who are relatively older"*.

Another reason for lack of academic preparedness among refugee children was that many of these children did not have a chance to start or regularly attend school at their countries of origin due to conflicts and related threats. T3 says *“it is important to know the level of education they have completed prior to starting here. If they start at a later age or they started somewhere and transferred here, then it is a serious problem. Even if they start here, they face difficulties and problems but we don’t do much to change information or correct what is needed”*. T9 also expresses some frustration, causes of which lie in the system and structural problems: *“Even if these children have a right to study, they are prevented to go to school for many reasons such as structural problems, having an interrupted or no education in their countries of origin, language barriers, mismatch of the content of education here and what they had before, financial difficulties preventing families to send their children to school and these children’s particular psychological states. Even if they come to school, they fail because of all these adverse conditions”*. T5 underlines the same difference at the level of education completed previously and suggests that *“there can be extra programmes to close the gap at schools. Some students are pretty keen and makes effort to close this gap. When the opportunity and support given, it will be seen that these students will close the gap speedily. However, this is not our job to do anything at that level as teachers”*.

3.3. Socio-cultural differences among peer pupils

Respondents raised that the biggest social problem is the cultural clash these refugee children face in their new place of residence. Refugee children feel alienated in this new environment where family and lifestyles are different and limited language skills prevent them from making friends in new peer groups. T8 similar to other respondents said that *“Refugee children face many conflicts such as adapting to the school, adapting to a different social environment, cultural difference between the culture of their own and that of here. At the beginning students encounter some problems with their classmates and they don’t want to accept these new students. It is our job to mingle them and integrate them in the classroom”*. T9 reiterates that *“even their eating habits at school are different. Students do not come from similar cultural environments. They have different heritage, language, history, places of origin and some of them come from very poor circumstances. They face additional difficulties here and they have to work harder; some are relatively better but they all experience many difficulties”*. Teachers also said that these refugee children are neither a homogeneous group nor are they at equal levels in many regards to the local children at school.

The main cause of problems with peers is the refugee children’s limited language ability. T4 stated that *“these students either began school in another language or never been to school. The conflicts they have experienced adversely affect their commitment to school and self-esteem. It also causes lack of self-esteem within their peer groups at school”*. Because of the language barrier, refugee children are not accepted in peer groups at school as teachers observed. Similarly, it was noted that social exclusion from peer groups, bullying and being mocked at school due to biases alienate these children and may cause them dropping from education.

3.4. Communication among peer groups

It has been observed that refugee children have low self-esteem and this was mainly due to their different cultural backgrounds according to the teachers interviewed in Van. This imposes difficulty in making friends and communicating with teachers at school. This further pushes refugee children towards isolation. T2 says *“these children come with bad*

experiences. They often cannot understand why they are here with these new kids. They don't fully develop the sense of continuity, ways to cope with difficulties, expressing themselves. They prefer to be shy and refrained in classroom. When they are accepted by their pupils, then they start expressing themselves. Other children are harsh and call them names. In fact, adults views at home are transferred to children. They think refugees can be criminals. If you [the teacher] don't intervene, this will be common view in the classroom and students will gang up against each other".

3.5. Families' attitudes towards education

Respondents observed that families are not well informed of education. T3 said *"refugee families do not expect anything from education because they are in limbo"*. Another problem raised is the disinterest of families in children's education: *"Children's psychologies are bad; families are not good either. Thus neither at school nor in the family children are taken care of well... These children have special needs; both children and their families need medical attention"* (T3). Families' inability to help their own children are due to their own very limited language skills as well as low level of education among parents. Interviewed teachers testify that social events and meetings organised at schools help the relations between children and school but more support from parents are needed (T1, T2, T6, T7, T9).

3.6. Families' integration problems

Families suffer from similar problems such as lack of language skills but they struggle more with economic difficulties while there is also a trust issue. They feel insecure and expect to be transferred to somewhere else which prevents them from settling here. Apparently settled families who lived in Van over a lengthy period are adapting more easily. T6 says they try to help refugee children economically to alleviate economic pressure but there is a limit in what they can do as teachers.

3.7. Teachers' recommendations

The final theme emerged in the interviews was recommendations by teachers to address the difficulties and challenges faced by refugee children. These recommendations were based on respondents' own experiences and knowledge of refugee children and their problems. T2 insists that refugee children must have the same access to education like other children but he thinks *"authorities and officers must be educated about the legal frameworks in this regard"*. T8 suggested that refugee children and their families must be informed of educational opportunities, vocational training opportunities and guide through upon their arrival in the country. Families should have a right to work and schools should be provided with funding to cover the expenses of refugee children and bursaries can be given. T7 recommended that there can be family visits to understand families' problems and encourage them to participate in social activities at schools. There can be top-up courses and places for social activities to encourage and foster refugees' learning of Turkish language and social integration. Volunteer activities supporting children at schools, and offering tutorial classes would enhance refugee children's integration and development at schools.

4. Discussion

Refugees are a vulnerable group in need of additional support in their integration in host countries as they involuntarily join in the acculturation process (Berry, 2011). This is

more so for refugee children whose psychological well-being is very important in the integration process. Schools and education in early ages play a crucial role in improving the wellbeing of refugee children, helping them to rebuild their self-esteem, supporting them in making friendships and foster their learning process. In this process, teachers at school play a cultural mediator role helping refugee children learn different cultural codes, gain skills in reading and writing and fluency in language (Exposito & Favela, 2003).

Although schools offer a stable environment for refugee children, their past experiences, heritage differences and inability to speak the language of the host society may cause integration difficulties at school (Hart, 2009). It was interesting to see that respondents pointed out that refugee children were not able to adequately exploit their right to education. Refugee children face difficulties in adapting the school and the wider environment, not easily accepted by their peers and suffer from culture clashes. These all lead to isolation and decline in school success. As indicated very often in the literature, language barrier emerged as the key problem refugee children and families face (see Hart, 2009; Patiadino, 2008). Teachers' support is also crucial in preparing students for the "normal life" knowing their rather difficult past experiences and in helping these children overcoming difficulties faced at school.

It was clear to the participants that refugee children encounter conflicts with other children at school mainly due to language barriers and cultural differences. However, teachers have shown that their interventions in classroom can overcome such clashes and prevent biases and racism in school. When it comes to intergroup relations, individuals may fear of rejection and be anxious as they may face explicit or overt discrimination, which is not uncommon in many parts of the world (see Stephan and Stephan, 2000; Taylor and Sidhu, 2012; Lewis, 2013; Walton *et al.*, 2014). It is also known that equal treatment of different group members, equal legal and social statuses along with satisfaction levels and cooperative attitudes reduce bias among groups (Pettigrew and Trop, 2006; Stephan and Stephan, 2000). Some teachers apparently do their bit to prevent such racism through classroom activities mingling all students.

Refugee children and their families often join the ranks of the relatively deprived, while their uncertain status leads to low paid jobs which is also linked to language barriers in Turkey and elsewhere (Roxas, 2011; Rah *et al.*, 2009; Anyon, 2005; Gitlin *et al.*, 2003; Kirova, 2001; Horenczyk and Ben-Shalom, 2001). Thus economic welfare is a crucial element in improving refugee children's wellbeing and success at schools.

Teachers play an important role in refugee children's acculturation (Trueba *et al.*, 1990) and adaptation at school and academic success while healthy cross-cultural relations are essential in integration (Horenczyk and Ben-Shalom, 2001). Success in refugee children's integration comes with a collaborative effort of teachers and families (Birman *et al.*, 2007; Hamilton, 2004). Teachers' proactive attitude in contacting families and understanding their backgrounds and experiences can facilitate a non-discriminatory and healthy classroom experience (Theilheimer, 2001; McBrien, 2005; Hek, 2005). Nevertheless, this is neither cheap nor an easy challenge to overcome.

Conclusions

Refugee children's experiences at school are marked by several disadvantages and challenges. One of these are the language barrier. Lack of Turkish language skills make life very difficult for these children at school and adversely affect their academic success. These children learn reading in Turkish later than their peers. They cannot improve their language at home with their parents. There is clear need for alternatives in this regard and teaching in mother languages can be part of the solution, while separate support classes can be considered as and when resources are available.

Discrimination and biases spread by adults may find reflection among school children and this may further distress refugee children. Teachers can obviously play a role here to reverse such tendencies in the classroom. Nevertheless, a wider consensus against racism and discrimination along with sanctions are needed to prevent such unnecessary distress at schools.

A more holistic approach is needed in the education system and particularly at schools where significant number of refugee children enrolled. Awareness of these children's presence and their needs may reduce bullying, biases and discrimination against them by local students and others. This in return may prevent high drop-outs among refugee children who are frustrated at schools.

Further studies focusing on these language needs and wants at schools where refugee children enrol are needed to formulate appropriate policies. Similarly, more collaborative efforts from schools, teachers and families are needed for overcoming the challenges faced by refugee children. Local and central governments' support is crucial in achieving this.

Good practices around the world suggest that awareness of refugee children presence at schools is vital. Schools and local authorities must make an effort to enable refugee children's access to education. This means offering information in all relevant languages to reach groups and children in need of support and education. It is known in European experiences that a whole school approach aiming to support refugee children is needed and this should be supported by a clear commitment to inclusion and race equality at school level. At the end of the day refugee children's well-being is believed to depend on their school experiences. Neither these children nor their families are familiar with the education system and the new environment. Besides, often they don't speak Turkish, the local language. These combined may leave refugee children alone to deal with difficulties. Education policies, school management and teachers are crucial in helping refugee children to feel safe and normal again and to begin to learn (Richman, 2000).

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