Reflections Upon Integration of Refugees into Türkiye’s Social Context

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Abstract
The Syrian Civil War, which broke out in 2011, has had significant consequences on Türkiye, effecting its social, economic, and political landscape. This qualitative study investigates the sociocultural challenges confronted by Syrian refugees in Türkiye and explores the consequences of these challenges on the refugees’ sense of belonging and their social integration into Turkish society. The research involved 14 participants from different work groups, teachers, interpreters, and health workers. Employing structured interviews with the participants, it seeks to gain insights related to the multifaceted experiences of refugees from host country citizens’ perspectives. Adopting Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis system, the study meticulously presents the themes and subthemes through direct quotations. According to the findings, the study reveals the sociocultural problems faced by Syrian refugees revolve around the economic strains, education, social integration, all negatively affecting their sense of belonging. In addition to worsening these challenges, language barriers hinder accessing essential services profoundly. The study also puts forward that the perceptions and responses of the host country citizens evolved from first initial humanitarian response to more judgmental and negative reactions, and the assessments of the effectiveness of existing programs and initiatives, specifically the ones aiming to integrate refugee children into Turkish education system show that they need healing. Building on these findings and accumulated body of research, the study proposes an adult education model addressing multifaceted aspects of adult migrant education.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, social integration, language barrier, refugee programs, adult migrant education

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1. Introduction

With the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, those who wanted to avoid the suffering, started to migrate into Türkiye, turning out to be the first destination for this mass migration. Embracing an open-door policy associated with the initial humanitarian response, Türkiye started to accept a huge flow of refugees crossing the border. Initial estimate of hundred thousand refugees is expected to cross the border but eventually the number added up to millions. Even though it was defined as temporary protection at first, number of the registered refugees living in our country is currently estimated as about 3.6 million by UNHCR, which makes Türkiye as the country that hosts more refugees than any other country in the world within their national borders (Çelik and White, 2021). This open-door policy has been challenging Türkiye’s infrastructure, economic conditions, and social services ever since. With the increasing number of refugees, Türkiye’s policy started to shift from initial humanitarian response to stricter controls and border fencing. The ongoing situation of Syrian refugees in Türkiye stands as a pressing challenge since issues such as limited access to education, employment, and social services, along with cultural and linguistic barriers continue to hinder their comprehensive integration. Furthermore, they stand as long-term obstacles to their well-being and social integration. In some cities of Türkiye, the refugee population surpassed the local residents, which has aroused security concerns, social tensions, and economic strains. Even though Türkiye has had to face these challenges, the country has exerted itself for the integration of refugees into its society. In 2016, the European Council and Türkiye reached an agreement about refugee crisis. According to this agreement, they worked together to end the irregular migration flow from Turkey to the EU, and they offered 3 billion euros as well as visa liberalization (Efe, 2016). As it is a multifaceted issue including different factors such as political stability of Syria, global and local dynamics, international aid and support, the future of the Syrian refugees is still in question. In this
regard, the purpose of this study is to investigate the sociocultural challenges that Syrian refugees have faced in Türkiye. Additionally, the study aims to investigate how Turkish citizens view and react toward Syrian refugees, with a focus on how acceptance or rejection of society affects their integration. Furthermore, through this study, it is aimed to gain insights related to the effectiveness of existing social integration and educational programs and present an educational model related to adult education.

The research questions are as follows:
1. What are the main sociocultural problems faced by Syrian refugees in Türkiye, and how do these challenges affect their sense of belonging and social integration?
2. To what extent do language barriers contribute to the difficulties faced by Syrian refugees in accessing essential services, creating bonds, and improving themselves?
3. How do citizens in Türkiye perceive and respond to the presence of Syrian refugees, and what role does community acceptance or resistance play in the integration process?
4. How effective are existing programs and initiatives aimed at facilitating the integration of Syrian refugee children into the Turkish education system?

In the current research, as the participant number is limited to 14, it should be admitted that the results of the research cannot be generalized to the similar groups in different contexts. It is also evident that there should be further comprehensive studies to be conducted in Turkish milieu where a great number of Syrian migrants have been struggling to survive for a long time.

2. Literature

According to the World Bank Group (2021), Türkiye hosts the world's largest refugee population, with over 3.9 million registered refugees and asylum seekers, mainly Syrians. This sheer scale poses logistical and socioeconomic challenges (World Bank Group, 2021). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also confirms that Türkiye hosts the world's largest refugee population for the ninth consecutive year. Refugees constitute almost 6% of Türkiye's overall population of 85 million (Türkmen, 2023). The report also confirms that the majority of refugees in Türkiye hold "temporary protection" status, limiting their access to certain opportunities and hindering long-term integration.

The integration of refugees into Türkiye's social context is a complex and multifaceted issue. There are challenges like language and culture. In order for refugees to integrate, they need to first overcome these two social constructs. The tapestry of humanity is woven with threads of countless languages and traditions. In our increasingly diverse societies, fostering those differences and promoting to learn from one another is more crucial than ever before. Imagine a world where language isn't a barrier, but a window (Bakhtin, 2010). When we interact with people from different cultures, we come across a multitude of linguistic nuances, which can make communication challenging at times. However, it is essential to remember that language is not just a means of communication but also a reflection of a person’s culture, values, and beliefs (Ruff, 2023). Language is the essential part of every aspect of life such as education, legal processes, and health care. For refugees, language and communication are particularly important because they want to be understood in a culture where they have no information about (Kletečka-Pulker et al., 2018). A study by Saito et al. (2021) found that language is a barrier to many patients from refugee backgrounds accessing and receiving quality primary health care. Being able to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations can help break down barriers, ultimately leading to stronger relationships (Saito et al., 2021). According to a study that explored the psychological and sociocultural adaptation processes of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, the refugees' psychological and sociocultural adaptation is strongly influenced by economic concerns, pre-migration expectations, religion, and perceptions of Turkish natives’ expectations and attitudes towards Syrians (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021). The emotional burden of displacement and the uncertainty of their future weighed heavily on Syrian refugees in Türkiye, which, sometimes, hinders their ability to get fully adapted into their new lives and integrate into Turkish society (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021). These factors reduced their willingness and ability to establish new relationships with the host community and damaged their adaptation. The perception and response of Turkish citizens towards Syrian refugees have changed over time, from initial hostility and pride to increasing resentment and hostility (Künkloğlu, 2020). The role of community acceptance or resistance is also crucial for the integration process of the refugees. Some studies suggest that social acceptance is an integral component of refugee integration, as it facilitates access to other aspects of integration, such as housing, employment, and education (Maclin, 2017).

Social acceptance is often damaged by such issues as stereotypes, misinformation, and discrimination. They can act like poisons, hindering interactions and creating impassable barriers, leaving refugees excluded, while host communities, due to fear and prejudice, lose the opportunity to engage and learn from newcomers. Refugees, fearing discrimination and exclusion, hesitate to step outside their comfort zones, and their hopes for integration fade away...
because of the prejudice. Luckily, they are not impossible obstacles. By actively challenging biases, leaving out misinformation, and embracing diversity, we remove these barriers and pave the way for real interaction. When we choose understanding over assumptions, empathy over fear, and collaboration over exclusion, we open the door to a more inclusive and enriching society, one where refugees and host communities can flourish together (Kimiklioğlu, 2020: Klarenbeek, 2019).

The influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye, primarily due to the ongoing civil war, has posed significant challenges for the education system. Investing in education for refugee children isn’t just about securing their academic success, it’s about empowering them to build a brighter future. Education serves as a powerful lever, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate their new environments and integrate into their host communities (Tösten et al., 2017). Integrating over 880,000 school-aged Syrian children presented logistical and cultural hurdles (Görmez et al., 2017). However, Turkey has implemented various programs and initiatives to facilitate their successful integration into Turkish schools, promoting both academic achievement and social cohesion. Temporary Education Centers (TECs) is one of them. Established in 2014, TECs helped Syrian children with foundational education in Arabic and Turkish, bridging the gap between their interrupted Syrian education and the Turkish curriculum (Tösten et al., 2017). Project on Supporting the Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES), which one of the teacher participants of this study is currently working for, is another project which is also supported and funded by European Union. PIKTES focuses on language acquisition, offering intensive Turkish language courses to both children and adults. For refugee children in Türkiye, PIKTES unlocks the doors to education and opens a path to social belonging. It works alongside the Ministry of National Education to ensure their academic journey and smooth integration into the community. However, a project from Taşay and Erdem (2023) revealed that based on the participants’ statements, the project has failed in terms of language education, integration, and cohesion and in addition to these negativities, they also expressed different problems caused by the project. Adaptation classes within regular Turkish schools offer additional support to Syrian students, helping them adjust to the new curriculum, teaching methods, and classroom environment (Çinkır et al., 2016). There were also intercultural education programs like “Let’s Play Together” and “Welcome Classrooms” promote understanding and acceptance between Syrian and Turkish students through shared activities and workshops, fostering friendships and breaking down cultural barriers (Gonzalez, 2021). There are also programs in action for teacher training and education. Equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the diverse needs of Syrian students is crucial. Training programs focus on intercultural competence, trauma-informed teaching, and different instruction (Karkouti et al., 2021).

Other ways to ease the integration of refugees into Turkish education system are psychological and community support. The traumatic experiences many Syrian children have endured necessitate comprehensive psychosocial support services within schools. These services help them cope with emotional distress (Tuğberk, 2019). By learning to communicate their emotions and build healthy relationships, children develop stronger bonds with their peers and teachers. Building bridges between schools and the Syrian community is essential for successful integration. Parent-teacher associations, cultural events, and community outreach programs create a supportive environment for both students and their families (Rah et al., 2009). The integration of Syrian children into the Turkish education system is an ongoing process, requiring collaboration, innovation, and unwavering commitment. By providing these children with quality education and fostering a welcoming environment, Türkiye can pave the way for a future where they can thrive and contribute meaningfully to their new home (Atalay et al., 2022).

While significant progress has been made, challenges remain. Limited access to qualified teachers, language barriers, and social stigma continue to hamper full integration. Moving forward, a focus on early childhood education, vocational training, and long-term career guidance can further empower Syrian refugee children to reach their full potential within Turkish society.

3. Method

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study has been conducted through structured interviews with health, workers, teachers who educate refugees, and interpreters working at hospitals. The interview questions have been prepared based on the research questions, and interview questions used in similar studies. The relevant and prominent studies that have been useful in the preparation process are Mirici (2020)’s study that is about the needs of adult immigrants in Europe for social inclusion through language education, Soylu, Kaysilt and Sever (2020)’s research investigating refugee children’s adaptation to school from the point of views of the teachers, and Taskin and Erdemli’s study (2018) about the problems faced by teachers in education of Syrian refugees. Hence, the interview questions are as follows:
1) Can you talk about the problems that refugees experience, as far as you observe? (social, cultural and linguistic problems).
2) You provide education to refugee students. What difficulties do you experience? How do you overcome these?
3) What kind of relationship do refugees have with citizens/Turkish students? What are the relationships of Syrian students in the school environment?
4) How are the relationships of refugee students with their parents? Can you evaluate your conversations and communication with their parents?
5) How do refugees make their living?
6) How do you see the future of refugees in our country?

The participants have been selected through criterion sampling method. The total number is 14, 10 of whom are teachers, 3 of whom are interpreters, and one of whom is a health worker, a nurse. The interviews with the participants have been analyzed qualitatively through direct quotations and thematic analysis. The system used for thematic analysis belongs to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis. After data was familiarized, the interviews were transcribed. Secondly, initial codes were formed. Then, the themes were sought and reviewed. After the themes were defined and named, the final report was formed. The data was processed both inductively and deductively.

4. Findings

Table 1. This is the table of themes and subthemes based on the interviews with the participants

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Theme 1: Economic Situation:

Economic situation of the Syrian refugees is one of the main themes. Income resources and child workers are the subthemes. Related interview extracts are as follows:

Specified by teachers:

“If there were no Syrians, employers couldn’t find people who could look after chickens.”

“Many of the parents of refugee students earn their living by working at daily jobs.”

“Refugees can earn financial income by working in daily and temporary jobs that do not require insurance premiums, and by supporting the workforce in the agriculture and livestock sector.”

“In general, they collect paper, work as construction workers, or their neighbors help them.”

“Farmers here continue to take them as workers.”

“Many people coming from Syria are employed without insurance.”

“In other words, in these environments, these people work without insurance because they are miserable.”

Specified by interpreters:
“They are tradesmen and workers in general.”

“Many refugees earn their living from daily jobs or working in factories.”

“In terms of work, some work and some do not.”

Specified by the health worker:

In the city I live in (Gaziantep), refugees can generally find work easily and support their livelihood.”

Based on the interviews, state aid is another issue emphasized by many of the participants. Furthermore, child workers are quite common among Syrian refugees. Here, some related examples can be given:

“The state finances social assistance and supports refugees from the tax revenues it obtains.”

“Most importantly, there are those who receive government aid and do not work at all.”

“In the early periods, they were not allowed to settle and work outside the container city. They received certain financial aid from the state and lived on it.”

“Refugees can receive monthly aid from the state.”

“Having the child work and contribute to the family economy instead of going to school in the countries they immigrate to is seen as one of the ways of earning income preferred by refugee parents.”

“They send those who are healthy enough to work.”

“Even kids are working.”

“Everybody in the family is somehow has to help.”

“Instead of sending their kids to school, it is more helpful for them that their kids are bringing money home.”

“Families put their children to work because bringing money to the family is much more important for them.”

**Theme 2: Education**

Education is the second main theme, which makes an important part of the study. Language proficiency, academic success, adult education, and crime rates emerge as subthemes. Related interview extracts are as follows:

Specified by teachers:

“Teachers who have refugee students in their classes also experience time problems because they have difficulty in getting along with their students. Language is the most fundamental problem that challenges teachers.”

“Education plays a big role in helping refugee students adapt to life in their new country. The first problem in education for refugee students is that they do not know the native language of the country they immigrate to.”

“Those with low education levels had difficulty adapting.”

“Insufficient language proficiency brings low academic success, with the lower the academic success is, the higher the crime rate is. To prevent these, education is not necessary only for children but their parents.”

“They cannot keep up with their classmates as they don’t know the language.”
“It is very difficult for them to adapt to Turkish linguistically. They try to read backwards because of the Arab culture, and they have difficulty learning Turkish at school because they speak languages other than Turkish at home.”

“It is very difficult to teach refugee children because some of them never speak Turkish at home and there are no people who can read and write. Unfortunately, it is not reinforced with what they learn at school.”

“As refugee students begin to learn Turkish, they socialize over time and their participation in classes increases.”

“Since participation in education will be qualified if it is supported by the family, language training should be given to parents, and they should be encouraged to cooperate with the school and be included in the activities to be held at the school.”

“Culturally, there is a group that is very prone to fighting and there is difficulty in adapting. I aim to get over this situation before the lesson, and not to play with Turkish children, to integrate with them, and to teach them to play games with more beautiful objects, not with fights or guns and things that are thought to be hitting and breaking toys, and then teach them to read and write in Turkish. It becomes a little easier because they approach it with more enthusiasm.”

“Families of refugee students are also directed to public education courses in Turkish reading and writing.”

“Even if the language problems with students decrease, there may be difficulties in cooperating with parents. Because not every parent is open to cooperation and willing to learn Turkish.”

“Those who find the opportunity send their children to school and take advantage of job opportunities.”

“It was good for the family that the child grew up early compared to other Syrians, in a good family environment, and that the mother and father, that is, the environment at home, had a good income level. For example, the child had high grades and got into a good high school here. So, we think that if these environments, family environments and basic needs are provided, these children can be educated and get somewhere.”

“For example, if they are involved in something wrong, such as theft, then they try not to be involved in the wrong thing because there is a danger of being exiled from here.”

“Unfortunately, we see that young men are taking too much advantage of this situation and are involved in many criminal elements in our country, disturbing the peace of society, and I think this situation will become even more intense.”

Specified by the interpreters:

“Students who came without knowing the language could not keep up with the progress of the class, no matter how much education they received in the Container City. It was necessary to assign special assignments or to work together.”

“They stay behind their friends because they do not know the language.”

“While young people showed their anger at being a refugee by rejecting culture in the early periods, they created a synthesis in later times.”

“Rates of theft are very high.”

“There are also those who do not work. They steal and commit fraud. They make their little children beg.”

Specified by the health worker:

“As students, they can also study in the same classes as Turkish students.”
**Theme 3: Social Integration**

Social Integration is the third main theme. Cultural conflicts, discrimination, exclusion, and isolations emerge as subthemes. Related interview extracts are as follows:

Specified by teachers:

“Refugee students have difficulty socializing and participating in games.”

“Lack of language skills and incompatibility of social lives are the basis of the problems experienced.”

“..... cultural differences between them and the citizens of the country they immigrate to and negative attitudes and behaviors towards refugees can be considered as problems experienced by asylum seekers.”

“The Syrian refugees where I worked were a much incompatible group and a certain neighborhood was theirs alone. There was no Turkish person there. They did not allow Turkish citizens there. They were very unsuccessful in adapting, on the contrary, there was bad behavior that led to the exclusion of Turks in their own hometown.”

"Refugee students and Turkish students may have disagreements from time to time, or there may be situations where refugee students are sometimes excluded."

“There is a lot of exclusion policy in Türkiye.”

Specified by the interpreters:

“Basically, they experienced social difficulties rather than linguistic difficulties.”

“If I consider older adults first, the educated ones have generally entered into a state of acceptance and are experiencing the pain of leaving behind the identity they have. It was easier to translate for them than others; they mostly spoke English and could communicate on their own. They also accepted cultural differences and tried to adapt to our culture.”

“The situation was different for children. At first, they were not aware or could not understand why they came. However, the exclusion they experienced in society and the perception that you are different led them to become outcasts over time and to behave like others or to break away completely. This was the case while playing both on the street and at school.”

“Because they see refugees as a problem, children are excluded at school, made fun of, and not made friends.”

“Little children are the ones who really suffer from this, and because they are like this, the public reacts against them. Once in a while, the child is oppressed at school, he is oppressed, he is despised, he is not loved, the child feels bad, thinks he is unloved, and is put under psychological pressure.”

“They lived in a certain culture until a certain age and it was difficult for them to change or meet different cultures.”

Specified by the health worker:

“Afterwards, according to my observations, it is quite good. They are very comfortable in their neighborly relations and business relations. In other words, our people also embraced the refugees and the refugees themselves. Our people got used to it. Somehow a way of communication was found.”

Isolation is an important sub-theme.

“They live their own lives in their own region.”

“A certain neighborhood was only theirs, there was no Turkish person there, they did not allow Turkish citizens there, they were very unsuccessful in adapting, on the contrary, there were bad behaviors that led to the exclusion of Turks in their own hometown.”
“They feel that they are a minority in terms of social and cultural aspects, and they only want to make friends with children of their own race and nationality, and they only want to go to their own markets and shopping places, and they think that others are not like them.”

“However, the exclusion they experienced in society and the perception that they are different led them to become outcasts over time and to behave like others or to break away completely. This was the case while playing both on the street and at school.”

Theme 4: Interactions and Relations

“Interactions and relations” is the fourth theme. Parents and children, refugees and citizens, peers emerge as subthemes. Related interview extracts are as follows:

Parents and Children

“Even if the language problems with students decrease, there may be difficulties in cooperating with parents.”

“Unfortunately, they do not have a healthy communication with their parents because most of them have at least 3 or 4 children, they send their children to school so that the state helps them, and they can take care of the other children.”

“Not every parent is open to cooperation.”

“The problem of inequality in education, difficulty in integration, and the inability to establish a common bond with parents are the problems experienced.”

“Refugee students spend more time with their parents because they cannot establish bonds with citizens at school and in social life.”

“Refugees' family relationships and structures are not much different from our culture. Their family structures are similar, except that they grew up in a more fearful culture. Therefore, their relationships with their parents are similar.”

Refugees and Citizens

“Refugees have a distant relationship with citizens due to cultural differences.”

“Refugees seeing themselves as foreigners in the country also causes them to act prejudiced and distant towards the citizens of the country they immigrate to.”

“Since citizens who do not want to see refugees in their country share their negative feelings, a distant attitude develops between the refugees and the citizens.

“They are very comfortable in their neighborly relations and business relations.”

Peers

Specified by the Teachers:

"Refugee students and Turkish students may have disagreements from time to time, or there may be situations where refugee students are sometimes excluded.”

“The failure of parents and teachers to establish a relationship has a negative impact on the communication between students, and groupings as refugees and citizens may occur in the classroom.”
“They feel that they are a minority in terms of social and cultural aspects, and they only want to make friends with children of their own race and nationality, and they only want to go to their own markets and shopping places, and they think that others are not like them.”

“Refugee students spend more time with their parents because they cannot establish bonds with citizens at school and in social life.”

Specified by the Interpreters:

“They faced many problems at school, both in the educational process and in their relationships with their peers.”

“In primary schools, there was a general exclusion between them and their classmates.”

**Theme 5: Future**

Future is the fifth and the final theme. Refugees, culture, and demography are the subthemes. Related interview extracts are as follows:

Specified by the teachers:

“The structure of Turkish society might deteriorate, that even though they are a minority now, the structure of Turkish culture would differentiate due to their increasing numbers over time, and furthermore, I am worried about the possibility of our own culture passing from the dominant culture to a subculture.”

“They can be a threat for our country.”

“Since education is the biggest factor in refugees' adaptation to the country, policies should be created in this direction.”

“...but as their numbers increase day by day, I fear that we will soon become a minority.”

“Unfortunately, we see that young men are taking too much advantage of this situation and are involved in many criminal elements in our country, disturbing the peace of society, and I think this situation will become even more intense.”

“For example, we wanted to help one of the children. So, after a while, the child would no longer go to work and would always wait for that help to arrive.”

Specified by the interpreters:

“I don’t see a future for them in our country.”

“Even though so many years have passed since the refugees came to Türkiye, the vast majority of them have still not adapted, both in terms of language and culture. I do not think that those who cannot adapt due to such problems will have a future in Türkiye.”

“I hope there will be no big problems after this, but I am very sure that there will be.”

Specified by the health worker:

“Now, if you ask my opinion, personally, of course we don't want it because after all, they are different nations and they are increasing rapidly.”
5. Discussion and Conclusion

1. What are the main sociocultural problems faced by Syrian refugees in Türkiye, and how do these challenges affect their sense of belonging and social integration?

There are many different challenges that refugees have had to face and endure since the onset of the Syrian Civil War. Based on the interviews of the participants, who are from different work groups, the problems and challenges that have emerged as subthemes from the study show parallelism with the literature. The accumulated body of research that was conducted in the first years of the mass migration marks the lack of language proficiency, cultural differences, and the traumatic experiences that refugees had as the main problems. From that day onwards, it can hardly be suggested that these problems have changed if not added more. However, there have been changes in the nature and distribution of these challenges. The main sociocultural problems faced by Syrian refugees in Türkiye revolve around the economic problems, education, and social integration, and the obstacles they have come across, which affect their sense of belonging and social integration profoundly.

One of the predominant problems, language barrier, is now mostly limited to adults who got exposed to Turkish as the second language if not third. Over these eleven years since the war broke out, even Syrian children have had problems with Turkish, and still have, yet many are born into the language and raised as mostly bilinguals, which made the things easier, especially for the teachers. However, as the literature and this study have presented, this problem has not been able to be overcome completely, and educators and citizens are still having problems. Only in accessing healthcare services, as revealed by the interpreters and the health worker interviewed, it is easier to get through the language barrier as the interpreters help the things go smoothly. Insufficient language proficiency leads the way for low academic success, class and time management problems, communication barriers and social exclusion and isolation among peers.

In terms of economic situation, most of the refugees have to work in low-profile jobs as manual, agricultural, and construction workers without any insurance, highlighting economic vulnerability. Considered as cheap labor, they are exploited and time to time, they are not paid the money they have earned. Due to these financial pressures, some families tend to send their kids for work instead of school, which has an effect on the child’s development. Specified by the Yalçın (2016), out of every third Syrian household in Istanbul, at least one child is working. Concluding that there is a high level of child labor for refugees in Türkiye, Dayoğlu, Kirdar & Koç (2021), based on their correlations, suggest that Syrian families use child labor as a coping mechanism, which has been confirmed by one of the participant’s utterances working as a teacher: “They try to meet their basic needs first. That's why education is not something they need to pursue too much.”. Even though it has been more than 10 years, refugees are still trying to survive. As mentioned above, language barrier still stands as an important problem as insufficient language proficiency leads to lower academic success, yet education of the youngsters and their parents is very important because it is a vehicle that the crisis can be turned into opportunity. Another participant who is also working as a teacher summarizes it by stating that a qualified education given to refugees returns to the country as more profit than cost and takes its place in the country's economy as a qualified workforce. Therefore, education expenditures on immigrants can be considered an investment for the host country. Whether the refugees reside in our country permanently or temporarily, political steps should be taken to turn this situation in favor of the host country. However, it is obvious that it is easier said than done. The system required to carry out this aim currently falls short. Multicultural and multilingual education setting is an approach that can be adopted in this regard since only adopting host country education can be beneficial immigrants with high education level rather than a more comprehensive target (Kaida, 2013).

Cultural differences between the immigrants and the citizens of the host country have been found as one of the main sources of the social integration problems. Cultural differences create conflicts and prejudgments in negative sense between the citizens and the refugees. As a result, social discrimination and exclusion have emerged. Also, the assimilative approach prevents the social integration. Another important and dangerous outcome of this social discrimination and exclusion have led to isolation. The refugees started to create their own isolated regions, in some of which Turkish citizens are not allowed to enter. Excluded, even in some cases insulted youngsters have stayed away from their peers, and social integration couldn’t take place. It is difficult to expect a complete social integration of the refugees into Türkiye’s social context, a synthesis where two different societies live in harmony can be expected, which is supported by the words of one of the interpreter participants stating that refugees lived in a certain culture until a certain age, and it was difficult for them to change or meet different cultures. While young people showed their anger at being a refugee by rejecting culture in the early periods, they created a synthesis in later times. Especially young people in universities have made faster progress in this regard. The university created many opportunities for them to adapt to society. Basically, it was not a complete adoption of culture, it was a synthesis.
One of the findings of this study is related to the crime rates. Some of the participants defended that with the refugees’ arrival, crime rates started to increase. A teacher who is defending that it is very difficult to teach lessons to refugee children because a certain part of them never speak Turkish at home and there are no people who can read and write, and if it is not only reinforced with what they learn at school, learning cannot take place explains that there is a group that is culturally very prone to fight and there is difficulty in adapting, which is why, she aims to teach them to play and integrate with them, and to play games with more beautiful objects, not with fights, guns, or things that are thought to be destructive toys. According to her, afterwards, teaching them to read and write Turkish becomes a little easier because they approach it with more enthusiasm. Emerging as a subtheme, increase in the crime rates is a controversial issue. Investigating if there is truth in these kinds of statements or they are urban legends, Kayaoğlu (2022) has found out that such perceptions are wrong in their nature and arrival of the refugees do not, actually, result in high crime rates. Kirdar, Cruz and Türküm (2022) also found a similar result by stating that the arrival of the Syrians does not have a causal effect on the increase of the crimes. In this regard the findings of the study do not match with the literature.

All in all, the question needs answering immediately is: How can Türkiye effectively address the various challenges related to the mass immigration of refugees, ensuring their well-being, integration, and sustainable employment while managing the burden on resources and fostering social integration?

2. To what extent do language barriers contribute to the difficulties faced by Syrian refugees in accessing essential services, creating bonds, and improving themselves?

Language acts as a bridge, connecting us to our identities, communities, and the wider world. Yet, for those who do not speak the language of their surroundings, this bridge disappears. Names become unrecognizable, families struggle to communicate, and cultural differences start to become problematic parts. Exclusion and isolation can take root, hindering feelings of belonging within the local life. Based on the findings, the language barrier that refugees have been experiencing significantly contribute to the challenges faced by Syrian refugees in accessing essential services, building bonds, and improving overall situation. These problems do not only affect refugees but also the citizens of the host country. Thus, referring to these barriers is crucial for providing economic stability, improving education, and creating social integration. Filling the linguistic gap can play a central role in unveiling the potential of Syrian refugees since, in this way, they can do more than basically trying to survive. The host country, Türkiye, can use their potential, and they can contribute positively to the society. The Council of Europe frames integration as a shared journey, where both migrants and host nations must contribute actively. Migrants' efforts, like language acquisition, pave the way for successful integration, while host countries have a duty to remove obstacles like labor market restrictions or discrimination, and actively foster an inclusive environment that welcomes newcomers (European Council, n.d.). This two-way approach fosters successful integration and benefits both groups.

As an outcome of this study, absence of language proficiency affects considerably refugee children’s education and social integration. Especially for teachers, in terms of class and time management, it can be very difficult to create a bond and educate them, hindering academic success, which is supported by the studies carried out not only in Türkiye but also in other countries. A study related to the language proficiencies of Syrian refugee children in Canada puts forward with case studies that the inability of communication between parents and the teachers results in not meeting the educational needs of the children, resulting in low academic achievement. Hence, the suggestion of the study by MacLeod and et. al. (2020) shows parallelism with the suggestion of our study which is the necessity of finding a way to fill the gaps with the parents so that education of children can be supported. Another study made by Hammoud et al. (2022) about refugee students’ social integration in Lebanon, Türkiye, and Australia, also mentions that language barriers and legal status are the main factors which affects refugees’ access to essential services like education.

In an applied psycholinguistics study from MacLeod et al. (2020) from Canada, they investigate the language skills of three Syrian refugee boys. Their observations of three refugee boys revealed both delays and weaknesses in boys’ home language development and a protracted struggle to acquire the school language. This language barrier further challenged communication between parents and teachers, hindering their ability to effectively support the children’s educational needs. The researchers also suggested that in order to ease the language barrier and to build resilience in these young refugees, schools must actively bridge this gap by collaborating with parents, fostering language acquisition in both languages, and creating a supportive learning environment.

Accessing to essential services can be challenging for the refugees due to the language barrier they have been experiencing, especially for the grown-ups. In terms of the resource of income, their inability to communicate effectively and working without insurance can leave them in vulnerable positions as they cannot explain themselves, and they may not be able to secure their jobs or money even if they are only daily and temporary jobs. Simply
navigating day-to-day life can be a struggle for refugees facing a language barrier. Accessing essential services like healthcare, education, and legal aid becomes an arduous task. Imagine trying to explain a medical symptom, enroll a child in school, or seek legal assistance without a shared language. Frustration, misunderstanding, and even medical neglect can become all too real (Al Shamsi et al., 2020). For adults, the inability to communicate effectively in the host country's language has severe consequences for their economic well-being. Many are confined to low-skilled, informal jobs often without proper contracts or insurance. Limited language skills make it difficult to explain rights, negotiate fair wages, or complain about poor working conditions. They become vulnerable to exploitation, wage theft, and unsafe working environments. Even securing simple daily or temporary jobs can be a challenge, further hindering their ability to earn a decent living and support their families.

In terms of health services, it seems that refugees, relatively, are more advantageous since the interpreters are there for them to help legal processes and to convey messages related to health issues. In this regard, interpreters hold an important position. Based on a study conducted in the United States, it has been found out that lack of language proficiency can result in poor health outcomes for refugees. However, if professional interpreters are used, better health outcomes can be reached, and there is a close link between the use of professional interpreters and higher patient satisfaction along with better communication opportunities (Fennig & Denov, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) has been providing Syrian refugees in Türkiye essential health services and culturally sensitive health services in their mother tongue. However, Syrian refugees still have to face and endure some problems in terms of accessing the healthcare services. Many refugees are not proficient in Turkish, which makes it very difficult for them to communicate with healthcare givers and understand their health conditions, in this regard, using interpreters is a must. In a study by Al Shamsi et al. (2020) about the implications of language barriers for healthcare they found out that in healthcare, language barriers pose a serious threat to patient safety and the overall quality of care. Miscommunication between medical professionals and patients, due to lack of shared language, can lead to missed diagnoses, incorrect treatment plans, and decreased patient satisfaction. While interpreter services can bridge the language gap, the review found their use does contribute to increased costs and longer treatment visits. This underscores the need for more efficient and accessible language support solutions within healthcare systems.

3. How do citizens in Turkey perceive and respond to the presence of Syrian refugees, and what role does community acceptance or resistance play in the integration process?

The presence of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, over 3.6 million, has naturally generated diverse and complex reactions among Turkish citizens. The views of locals about refugees range from acceptance and solidarity to concerns and even resentment. Many Turkish citizens, especially those with shared cultural or religious ties, have responded with compassion and willingness to help (“Türkiye’s Refugee Dilemma,” 2019). Some express concerns about the economic strain caused by the large refugee population, including competition for jobs and resources. Security concerns related to potential radicalization or cultural differences also play a role. Türkiye has a culture that was enriched by many civilizations, including the Hittites, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, Turkic Tribes, Seljuks and the Ottomans. Each one of these civilizations has left their mark on Turkish culture with their unique traditions and customs. They bring their own set of traditions and customs along with them. This situation creates some concerns from locals of the host country such as what will happen to their values, rituals, customs, traditions and symbols. Since there are different cultures at play here, for sure there will be conflicts.

Cultural conflicts are especially dangerous because they can create enemies fueled by nationalism, islamophobia and misinformation (Riles, 2008). Negative stereotypes and misinformation about refugees can further escalate these anxieties, leading to prejudice and even hostility. Some locals might fear that the influx of refugees could dilute their own cultural practices, traditions, and language. This can stem from a desire to preserve their heritage and maintain a sense of distinct identity. Concerns about economic strain or competition for jobs, housing, and other resources can also fuel anxieties about cultural loss.

There are several positive aspects to this situation such as migration can lead to a vibrant exchange of ideas, traditions, and practices, enriching both the host and refugee communities. Exposure to different perspectives can stimulate creativity and lead to the development of new cultural forms and traditions. Intercultural engagement can break down prejudices and foster greater understanding and appreciation for diversity.

Based on the interviews with the participants, it seems that the responses and perceptions of Turkish citizens related to the issue of arrival and the integration of Syrian refugees are diverse and complex, having both negative and positive attitudes in their nature. That refugees are working at low-profile and daily jobs with low language ability in sectors such as agriculture, livestock, construction without any insurance seems to make participants think that they are somehow contributing to the economy, yet they are not qualified, meaning they are working as manual workers but not contributing scientifically. Almost all participants confirm that refugees are paid state aids. Hence some participants imply that they are burdens on the shoulders of the state in terms of economy and social services.
They also imply that the money that has been spent for them should have been spent on behalf of citizens. Some of the participants recognize the integration of the refugees in some areas but there are mostly negative approaches like the refugees’ isolating themselves in some areas, creating their own community, leaving out the host citizens. Even though there was an open-door policy at the beginning, and participants understand the challenges and problems that refugees have had to face and endure, the common sense is they should not be a part of this country and they do not belong to this culture. By some participants, they are considered as threat culturally, demographically, and economically. Cultural conflicts emerging because of cultural differences affect both sides. Refugees are blamed of committing crime or increasing crime rates. As a result, there has been much emphasis on issue of discrimination and social exclusion, even assimilation.

All in all, the responses and the perceptions of Turkish citizens based on the participants of this study toward Syrian refugees are multifaceted. There are both negative and positive factors that affect the relationship and interaction between the citizens and refugees such as economic considerations, concerns about social and cultural structure, language differences. According to the literature, the citizens, despite worried, were initially more welcoming towards the citizens. However, overtime with the increasing number of refugees, state aids paid to them, and the opinion of arrival of refugees’ causing the increase in crime rates, as well as the fear of the possibility of breakdown of demography of Turkish society have raised concerns toward the presence of refugees.

4. How effective are existing programs and initiatives aimed at facilitating the integration of Syrian refugee children into the Turkish education system?

As stated repeatedly previously, the huge influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye has put the Turkish education system under much pressure. Of the age groups that have been affected by this situation, Syrian children are the most vulnerable ones since they have faced and endured problems in terms of accessing to a standard education let alone high-quality education. When the literature is reviewed for the reasons of this challenge, obstacles such as lack of language proficiency, cultural conflicts, and economic situation have been reached, which is consistent with the findings of this study. To overcome these obstacles, since the arrival of refugees, many programs and initiatives have been started. Called as a humanitarian crisis, these problems have raised concerns among the citizens. Depending on the interviews and emerging themes, to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugee children into Turkish education context, it is obvious that a multicultural and multilingual education setting should be adopted. However, as it possesses a monocultural and monolinguistic approach in the nature of its system, Turkish education system has been struggling in this field. On the other hand, Türkiye, already hosting many different ethnic groups such as Kurds, Arabs, Circassians and etc., becomes more and more diverse due to mass migration and globalization, which brings the necessity to be more inclusive in terms of education.

The curriculum that has a monocultural perspective mostly, should be switched into a one reflecting cultural diversity in Türkiye, and raising intercultural awareness. What is important at this point is to be able to provide the balance between the national identity and other cultures and histories of the groups that Türkiye has been hosting. However, it is a very fragile task, hence, it needs careful planning and implementing. Assuring a culturally sensitive and inclusive educational setting is fundamental in terms of providing positive learning environment and experience for all students from all cultural backgrounds. Standing as a finding of the study, prejudices toward the refugees hinder not only their social integration but also educational integration of the children. Excluded by their peers, refugee children start to feel isolated and become judgmental toward the host citizens and their peers as a result. Thus, educators’ referring to prejudices, biases, and stereotypes along with the educational materials present in the curriculum play a crucial role. In this context, not having the required infrastructure, a multilingual education can come with many challenges. Lack or shortage of necessary materials such as multilingual textbooks, teaching materials, even educators is an obstacle in the way of Türkiye’s embracing a multilingual education setting. Moreover, multilingual education or education in native language has been a political hot topic of debate in Türkiye. Finding a balance between fostering national language and recognizing ethnic languages or refugees’ language is a difficult task for the policymakers. Determining the languages included in the curriculum, the way they are taught, and to what extent they should be integrated are controversial issues in policy making in Turkish setting. Furthermore, the issue of developing a fair assessment system for students is another problematic aspect as it requires careful consideration. Overcoming these difficulties, obviously, requires a collaborative and comprehensive approach including teachers, policymakers, non-governmental organizations along with community leaders, and parents. Once the challenges are managed, this more inclusive and diverse educational setting will be equally beneficial.

As touched upon repeatedly, parents play a pivotal role in shaping children’s attitudes toward language and culture. A healthy communication between the parents and educators and between children and parents enhances the
quality of children’s education. Over years, refugee children born into Turkish community have been raised as bilinguals or multilinguals and even started to help their parents by acting as translators. Even though they are facing different kinds of obstacles and difficulties every day, they are in a more advantageous position in terms of language barrier. Moreover, as the culture is transferred through language, the odds seem to be more in their favor in terms of providing social inclusion, understanding the host culture, or introducing their own culture, which can be beneficial to create a synthesis or balance between the cultures and overcoming the prejudices, compared to their parents or refugees migrating into Türkiye as grown-ups. However, a child that grows up in a family that only tries to survive or overcome their traumas cannot contribute to the society that s/he was born into and raised as a part. In this regard, the education of the adults plays a crucial role in turning the crisis into opportunity. It must be duly noted that the existing programs and initiatives have been quite beneficial, yet they do not address to different aspects of the needs of the adults.

Given this and based on the findings and the analysis of the literature, an educational model for educating adults is presented. Obviously needing improvement, this model can give idea and inspiration for policy makers and educators who are closely related to refugee situation in Türkiye. According to this educational model, the attendants will be financially supported as long as they attend regularly so that while they can be trained, they can financially survive, which will make them psychologically feel better, it can decrease the rate of child labor. It can heal the issue of refugees’ being considered as a cheap labor in Türkiye. Based on the findings, it is obvious that refugees are afraid of assimilation, as a result, this model adopts an acculturation approach rather than assimilation policy. To ensure this, the lessons will be conducted in their mother tongue. During the lessons, Turkish culture and lifestyles will be explained, guidance and counselling will be provided. Furthermore, they will be given them the chance to promote their culture and to express themselves in their own mother tongue, which aims the social integration of the adults through acculturation. A similar approach has been adopted by Sweeden’s Uppsala municipality in the context of civil orientation program, which has been an inspiration for this model (Karataş, 2019). The centers supporting this model should be set. In these centers Erasmus+ projects should be attempted. As the final stage of the training, refugees should be provided with the certificates.

Along with the existing literature, and all interviews, the three specific comments by different participants who are all teachers has had profound effect on shape of this model. One is from a fellow teacher stating the fact that providing refugees insightful education proves to be more of an investment than a burden for the host country. The knowledge and skills acquired by refugees contribute to country’s economy, making them a qualified work power. Therefore, whether they stay in the country temporarily or permanently, strategic political measures should be implemented to make this situation beneficial on behalf of the host country. The other one is about refugees’ exertion to stay meet their daily needs, basically trying to survive, as a result, education is something they are not after. This statement gave the idea of turning an educational setting into a financial resource for adult refugees. The third and the final one addresses the support of the parents for their children’s education. If the necessary language training is offered to the parents, it can empower parents to collaborate with the school and engage in ongoing educational activities. Additionally, the voluntary system of Canada, relying on voluntary recruitments in various sectors such as health care, education, fire and rescue, arts and sports should be carefully analyzed and integrated into Turkish system. Hahmann (2021) presents in her study that as of 2018, over 24 million people took place in the municipality in the context of civil orientation program, which has been an inspiration for this model (Karataş, 2019). The centers supporting this model should be set. In these centers Erasmus+ projects should be attempted. As the final stage of the training, refugees should be provided with the certificates.

References


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