Chapter 7

Syrian Refugee Students' Lived Experiences at Temporary Education Centres in Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey hosts around three million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers, more than any other country in the world. Most of the Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers face poverty-related barriers to education, with parents unable to legally work or meet associated costs, or feeling they have no option but to send their children to work rather than school. According to a UNICEF report (January, 2017), even though there is a 50% increase in school attendance for Syrian refugee children in Turkey since June 2016, more than 40% of them (around 390,000) are still not receiving an education. One of the biggest challenges for the Syrian refugee children who are able to go to school in Turkey is the language barrier. The language of instruction in Turkish public schools is Turkish while majority of the Syrian refugee children grew up learning and speaking Arabic. Furthermore, the refugee children often encounter experiences of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization from the non-refugee peers and teachers who cannot recognize and meet the diverse needs of these children with their lack of teaching experience in the culturally diverse classrooms. This narrative research examines the lived experiences of Syrian refugee children attending a Temporary Education Centre (TEC) in a city located in the north-west of Turkey. Narrative research is a way of inquiring into individual and social dimensions of experience over time through storytelling. It is often employed to illuminate the experiences of marginalized or excluded individuals and communities. Given the influx of refugee children in TECs and schools in Turkey, it is important to provide an in-depth understanding of the refugee children's lived reality in schools and centres particularly, the factors contributing to their academic success, resilience

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and psychological well-being, so that future studies will have a basis for further investigations of newcomers.

Keywords: Syrian refugee children; Temporary Education Centres; education of refugee children; academic success of refugee children; multicultural education; narrative inquiry

Since the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, more than six million Syrians left their homeland to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Turkey, as one of the neighbouring countries of Syria, hosts around three million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2016) identified Turkey as the country hosting the largest number of refugees worldwide. Faced with such high-scale immigration, Turkey has demonstrated that the country do not have the enough resources to help the gradually increasing number of Syrian refugees. Turkey received the majority of its Syrian refugees from the conflict zones near the Syria–Turkey border, including Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, Lattakia, Hasici, Deir ez-Zor, Al Hasakah, Damascus, Homs, Suwayda, Daraa, Quneitra and Tartus (The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD), 2013). Only around 10% of the refugees remain in the refugee camps, while the rest of Syrian refugees live in Turkish cities (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation, 2017).

One of the biggest problems of this refugee crisis in Turkey is the education of non-Turkish-speaking Syrian refugee children (Akkaya, 2013; Arabacı, Başar, Akan, & Göksoy, 2014; Eryaman, 2018a, 2018b; Eryaman & Karakurt, 2015; Sert, 2014). Even though educational programmes are available in the refugee camps for the children, the refugee children living in the cities have limited access to quality education or have trouble studying in public schools because of financial and language barriers or policy restrictions. A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report (January, 2017) demonstrated that around 40% of Syrian refugee children in Turkey are still not receiving an education, despite the fact that there is a 50% increase in school attendance for the Syrian refugee children in Turkey since June 2016. According to the report, a total of 169,121 Syrian children have been taught under the Turkish curriculum at 14,742 public schools, and 291,039 of them have been receiving education based on intensive Turkish teachings in the Temporary Education Centres (TECs) in 20 provinces of Turkey.

Temporary Education Centres (TECs)

TECs are primary and secondary education centres providing educational opportunities for the Syrian refugee children in Turkey. They are generally placed in NGO buildings, office blocks and Turkish public school buildings.

Since the establishment of the TECs to enable Syrian refugee children to continue their education, 291,000 Syrian children have received education in 404 TECs in 20 cities in Turkey (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2016). Currently, around 78% of Syrian refugee students are attending TECs, and 22% of them are getting their education in public schools (Aras & Yasun, 2016). Even though the students attending TECs have an option to transfer to the public schools in proximity of their residence, the percentage of transfer remains significantly low (Human Rights Watch, 2015). In TECs, the students receive 15 hours of Turkish classes in addition to general education in their own language and curriculum so they do not forget their background and heritage. The main language of instruction in TECs is Arabic and they follow a curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Interim Government and modified by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (Aras & Yasun, 2016). It remains unclear whether the public authorities would count any diplomas or certificates issued by the TECs as a legally valid document in the future. However, the Syrian refugee students registered in the Turkish public schools receive their education only in Turkish with their Turkish peers by following the Turkish public school curriculum.

Around 1,000 Turkish and 11,500 volunteer Syrian teachers are currently working in the TECs. A total of 10,000 volunteer Syrian teachers are getting financial assistance from UNICEF. The volunteer Syrian teachers in TECs receive a payment of 600 TL/US$100 per month and 900 TL per month is paid to those working outside camps. The remaining 1,500 volunteer teachers are financially supported by NGOs. (Human Rights Commission of Turkish Grand National Assembly, 2018)

Regardless of their education at TECs or public schools, refugee students currently are allowed to continue their higher education at Turkish universities after successfully completing their accreditation exams upon completing their high school studies. They also need to take an entrance examination intended for international students wishing to study in Turkish universities. The universities have a 10% quota for admitting international students and a large proportion of students admitted to Turkish universities through the international quota are Syrian students.

In April 2017, Turkey has announced a three-year plan to get all Syrian refugee students into the public schools. According to the plan, Kindergarten and primary school education will be compulsory for all refugee children. And the children already registered in public schools will be given intensive Turkish language education to help them move to upper classes. Furthermore, the students currently studying in TECs will be gradually transferred to the public schools. (Turkish Ministry of National Education, 2016a, b).

However, problems associated with educating the Syrian refugee children cannot be merely solved by the state regulations and interventions. Most of the Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers face poverty-related barriers to education, with parents unable to legally work or meet associated costs or feeling they have no option but to send their children to work rather than school. Furthermore, the public perception of the Syrian refugee children as guests in the public

schools problematizes the refugee students' full participation into the school activities. So refugee students experience exclusion from classroom activities and academic participation and teachers do not have the same academic expectations as for the Turkish students (Dallal, 2016; Eryaman, 2018a, 2018b; Isik-Ercan, 2012; Seker & Sirkeci, 2015). In addition, the refugee children often encounter experiences of discrimination and marginalization from the non-refugee peers and teachers who cannot recognize and meet the diverse needs of these children with their lack of teaching experience in the culturally diverse classrooms (Bircan & Sunata, 2015; Doner, Ozkara, & Kahveci, 2013; Sert, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

There are very few research studies in the field of education to address the schooling and language-learning experiences of Syrian refugee students in Turkey, as most of the governmental and non-governmental reports only provide statistical information about the number of school-aged refugee children and how many of them have access to education (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Eryaman, 2018a). In order to contribute to the genuine and holistic understanding of the nature of schooling experiences of refugee students, this narrative study explored the Syrian refugee children's lived experiences and how these experiences help them negotiate their hybrid identities. The term 'Hybrid Identity' in this narrative inquiry refers to newly constructed, mixed or contradictory identities resulting from immigration, war, exile and integration experiences in educational settings (Bhabha, 1994; Brooker, 1999). The process of educating Syrian refugee children in Turkish schools involves cultural identity construction of Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Yazidis, Shia, Sunni, Christian and other minority cultures of Syrian refugee communities. This study examined the lived experiences of Syrian refugee children attending a TEC in a city located in the north-west of Turkey. Given the influx of refugee children in public schools in Turkey, it is important to provide an in-depth understanding of the refugee children's lived reality in schools particularly, the factors contributing to their academic success, resilience and psychological well-being, so that future studies will have a basis for further investigations of newcomers.

Research Methodology

Our decision to explore the schooling and language-learning experiences of Syrian refugee students has directed us towards the qualitative research methodology which, according to Van Manen (1990):

> studies 'persons,' or beings that have 'consciousness' and that 'act purposefully' in and on the world by creating objects of 'meaning' that are 'expressions' of how human beings exist in the world. (p. 4)

Narrative inquiry is employed as a qualitative research method in this study.

Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method

Narrative inquiry focuses on the narration of experiences of research participants and the instantaneous resulting feelings through 'collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) conceptualize narrative inquiry as follows:

> People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

By employing narrative inquiry as research method in this study, we aimed to illuminate the voices and experiences of the Syrian refugee children by providing a contextually embedded complex storytelling that can be subjected to multiple discursive analyses. The multiple discursive analyses provide insight into the development of hybrid cultural identities of Syrian refugee children as a consequence of removing these children from their home culture to a foreign context in which cultural conflicts and assimilation becomes the norm.

Research Setting

This narrative research examined the lived experiences of Syrian refugee children attending a TEC in a city located in the north-west of Turkey. The city hosts more than 500,000 Syrian refugees and the district where the TEC is located hosts one of the biggest Syrian refugee populations in the city.

The TEC where the research data were collected was founded in 2016 within a public elementary school. The TEC classrooms are located in the ground and first floors of the elementary school. Currently, the school has 4,572 Turkish students, and 558 Syrian refugee students are attending the TEC. Based on their birth dates indicated in the temporary ID cards and their Turkish language proficiency, the students were placed in six second-grade, two third-grade and two fourth-grade classrooms. In addition, there is a special education classroom at the TEC. Due to the state regulations, the first-grade Syrian students are registered in the elementary school studying together with the Turkish students. One Turkish director, two Syrian translators, 24 Syrian teachers, 12 Turkish language instructors, two Turkish school counsellors, one Turkish special education

teacher and one Syrian cleaning staff are currently working in the TEC. All Syrian teachers have a university degree, and most of them had a previous work experience as teachers in Syria. Syrian teachers are teaching Arabic language, Mathematics, Science Education, Visual arts education, physical education, religion, music and traffic education courses. The salaries of Syrian teachers are financed by the Yunus Emre Institute, a non-profit governmental agency, and the salaries of Turkish teachers are financed by a European Union project, 'Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into Turkish Education System'.

Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was used in this study. Purposeful sampling is a commonly used strategy in narrative inquiry for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). Thirty-five Syrian refugee students, five teachers and one school counsellor participated in the study. Four students (two male and two female students) and a Turkish and Syrian classroom teacher and a Turkish school counsellor were chosen as key informants and individually interviewed over a period of three months. Refugee students in the TEC mostly have families with a low socio-economic status. A few refugee families have a better financial situation as they have moved in the city before the Syrian conflict started and established small companies. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity of all participants. In order to protect the physical and psychological well-being of all participants, data collection protocols or guidelines were developed at the beginning of the research study to identify and minimize risk, or respond to risk as they arise during the research process. Ethical approval was received from both the University and the relevant agencies to conduct the research study. All participants of the study and the parents of the refugee children signed a consent form.

Data Collection and Analysis

Consistent with narrative inquiry methodology, we collected data from multiple sources including open-ended individual interviews, classroom observations and the school and public policy documents related to the refugee students. Research data were analyzed through the qualitative coding procedure in order to assign related labels to segments of the data sources (Van Manen, 1990). We used an inductive coding strategy as transcripts of the observations and interviews were evaluated and thematized with codes emerged from data. When interviews were completed with each participant, we read his or her data file several times in order to generate the initial codes. We then analysed all the materials, arranging them according to the initial codes that emerged in first stage of the data analysis. Some codes were mutual across the research participants; others were specific to each participant. For each person, 20 to 25 codes were usually sufficient to thematize all the data. Narrative texts from the participant interviews were labelled under each theme. There were two general themes emerged from the

data analysis. These two themes are as follows: (1) family background and parental involvement and (2) understanding teaching as a student-centred and culturally relevant practice.

Findings

Negotiating Multiple Identities and a Sense of Belongingness in a New School Environment

When the Syrian crisis began in 2011, Turkish society welcomed Syrian refugees with open arms and perceived them as guests under the assumption that the war would soon end, and they would return to Syria. However, as the Syrian conflict enters its eighth year, the refugee status now turned into a prolonged state rather than a temporary 'guest' stay. As a result, the gradually increasing number of Syrian refugees affected the social fabric of many cities in Turkey while creating discontent among people living in those cities (AFAD, 2013; Ergin, 2016; Kirisci, 2014).

The public discourse on labelling Syrian refugees as guests had consequences on education of the refugee children. As the school communities recognize refugee students as guests, the refugee students experience exclusion from public education and quality academic participation. Majority of the refugee students participated in the study indicated that they and their parents did not want to leave Turkey even after the Syrian crises is over. Only two of them said that their parents wanted to move to Germany and Sweden to live with their relatives living in those countries. As the Syrian refugee crisis continued to progress, these children and their families no longer see themselves as 'guest'. For instance, when we asked Rojin, an 11-year-old female refugee child, about his and his parents' future plans, she said that:

> My little sister and brother were born in Turkey and my big brother is accepted into a Turkish University to study agricultural engineering. I want to be a teacher in Turkey in the future.

The idea behind the foundation of the TECs is an example of the impact of the 'guest' discourse on education of refugee children. TECs aim to educate the Syrian refugee children with a modified Syrian curriculum and Arabic language as the language of instruction to ensure a smooth transition when they go back to their schools in their home country. However, Fatma, one of the female Turkish Instructors in TEC, was sceptical about the notion of the centre:

> We already know that Syrians will not go back to their country so why are we educating them with a Syrian curriculum here? I think the Ministry (of Education) should soon close these centers and register the (refugee) students to the public schools. We are isolating these children from the Turkish society. I think there

> is a lack of clarity and direction on how to educate the children. I am worried about their future.

However, Ahmed, one of the male Syrian teachers in the TEC, disagrees with Fatma:

> Turkish families mostly do not support the idea of Syrian students studying with their children together in public schools. Especially, Syrian students without adequate language skills complicate the learning process in the classroom for the teachers and other students. I heard complaints from my Turkish colleagues in the public schools that Syrian students with low Turkish language level misbehave in the classroom when they do not understand classroom instructions. These situations create classroom management problems that the Syrian students feel excluded and react aggressively and emotionally. I think the TECs are better suited for the Syrian students with low Turkish language ability.

Hasan, the male Turkish school counsellor in the TEC, indicated that the classroom management problems and resistance to instruction were very common behaviour among refugee students.

> Refugee children have a freedom of leaving the classroom or coming to the school whenever they want. Since these children have experienced war trauma, state regulations do not enforce the regular school discipline rules to these children. These students, therefore, lack classroom discipline and when they are transferred to the public schools to study with the Turkish students, they are having great difficulty to adapt to the new school environment.

Previous studies demonstrate that Syrian refugee students often isolate themselves from the classroom instruction and become introverted since they do not know how to cope with their new Turkish peers, school environment and school bullying. Furthermore, their traumatic experiences undesirably affect their sense of belongingness and identity construction in their new school settings. Particularly those who have experienced war trauma before arriving in Turkey have a hard time to adjust their behaviours in the new classroom settings. (Doner et al., 2013; Emin, 2016). However, our interviews with the refugee children demonstrated that the adaptation of young refugee students with less trauma experience into their school culture is better than the older refugee students' adaptations. Hasan, the Turkish school counsellor in the TEC, mentioned that teachers have fewer problems with the refugee students with no trauma experience.

Our interviews with the teachers revealed that they were often unfamiliar with the trauma that refugee children experienced before coming to Turkey. The cultural differences and educational background of refugee students, therefore,

become a critical aspect of the classroom instruction, as the teachers do not have adequate pedagogical and practical skills to meet the educational needs of the refugee children.

Fatma, the Turkish Instructor, indicated that educating refugee children from a conflict zone was a new concept for her and her colleagues in the TEC since they did not receive any formal training in their teacher education programs regarding the education of refugee children. She mentioned that they (Turkish teachers) received a two-week training in the city of Antalya from the Ministry of Education before they start teaching in the TEC. Fatma further stated that for many Turkish teachers in the TEC, it is their first professional teaching experience and they will quit their job in the TEC as soon as they found a job in a public or private school.

Issues with Family Background and Parental Involvement: Child Labour and Marriage, Domestic Violence and School Absenteeism

The parental involvement is a crucial element in the education of refugee children for their successful integration into their new school environment. Literature demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between parent involvement and academic success and well-being of refugee children. Yet schools often have difficulties in involving parents of refugee children, since there are language, economic and socio-cultural challenges separating the schools from the refugee families. Refugee parents encounter multiple intersecting hardships that may negatively influence their involvement in their children's education. Our interviews with the research participants revealed that many Syrian families had financial problems that put pressure on Syrian refugee children to work and support their families. Almost 30% of Syrian children, particularly boys, in the TEC had high non-attendance issues as they had to work to support their families. Rauf, a 10-year-old male refugee child, told us that his father did not let his big brothers to go to school because of their financial problems:

> I have one little sister and two big brothers. We are living in a small apartment. My mother is working in a textile factory and my father works at a furniture atelier. One of my brothers works with my father and other one works at a barber shop. I also want to work but my mother wants me to go to school to learn Turkish so that I can help them in school to talk to teachers or at hospital to the doctors.

Most of the Syrian refugee children indicated that they did not have any decent work space at home to study after the school. And their parents, who have to deal with economic survival and cultural adaptation with their limited Turkish proficiency, struggle to find the time and energy to get involved with their children's education or participate in parent conferences in the TEC. Hasan, the Turkish school counsellor in the TEC, indicated that there were no legal mechanisms for families who did not send their children to the TEC and without

parental involvement, refugee children would not be able to succeed socially and academically regardless of in-school support.

Our interviews with the Turkish teachers and school counsellor in the TEC revealed that they were having difficult time with the parents of several refugee children with regard to the gender issues and cultural values. These refugee parents did not want their children, especially the girls, to be registered in a mixed gender classroom. Even though the school administration and the teachers did not want to accommodate the parents' demands, they were aware that criticizing the parents' cultural values openly or refusing their demands would prevent the girls from attending the school. Fatma, the Turkish Instructor, stated that the school was a secure shelter for many female refugee children since failing to monitor the students' attendance to school increased the possibility of domestic violence and child marriage. Hasan, the Turkish school counsellor, further mentioned that the refugee students are reluctant to report the instances of domestic violence and child marriage due to shame and fear of humiliation of their families.

The ethnic background of refugee children was another factor affecting the schooling experiences of these children. Our observations and interviews with the students and teachers revealed that Syrian refugee students with Kurdish ethnic origin were more successful with learning Turkish language and integrating into the school culture than the students with Arabic ethnic origin. Since most of the refugee families with Kurdish ethnic background were living in the cities and villages located at the Turkish-Syrian border, they had years of interaction and family ties with the people living at the Turkish side of the border. Therefore, the familiarity of the Kurdish refugee students with Turkish culture was more than the students with Arabic ethnic origin. Zeynep, a 13-year-old female refugee child with Kurdish ethnic background, mentioned that they had regularly visited their relatives living in Turkey even before Syrian crises started. She also stated that they were familiar with Turkish language since they were watching Turkish TV channels when they were living in Syria. Refugee children who had schooling experience in Syria also had extra difficulty in understanding the grammar and literacy rules in Turkish since Arabic is written from right to left, unlike Turkish which is written from left to right. The Refugee students' language problems also affected their academic success in the TEC. Fatma, the Turkish instructor, indicated that the students with low Turkish language skills had short attention span and often changed their assignments, if they realized that there is an easy task that they can complete.

Conclusion

Since the Syrian crisis began in 2011, Turkey received the massive numbers of Syrian refugees. The influx of Syrians posed significant political and financial challenges stemming from complex cultural, ideological and religious differences. Turkey expected neither the size of the refugee population nor the Syrian crisis to continue so long. The uncertainties with regard to the Syrian conflict

delayed long-term planning for the integration policies. Turkish authorities currently working on developing new strategies assume the permanence of the refugees in order to craft an integration strategy to lessen the long-term risk for the national security and stability. However, the integration of Syrian refugees into Turkish society is a very complex process.

Education of the refugee children is one of the most important issues to develop a sustainable integration in this complex process. Even though the temporary 'guest' policies provide refugees with unlimited free health care, access to education by enroling in either in the public school system or the TECs, and work permits, around 390,000 Syrian refugee children are still not receiving any education. Continuation of low participation into the school system would mean a generation of lost children who would face with the social and humanitarian problems including child labour, child marriage, domestic violence and potential for radicalization. Furthermore, recognizing the risk of creating a marginalized community as a consequence of a TEC system based on an Arabic language instruction with an adapted Syrian curriculum, Turkey developed a new policy strategy to register all Syrian refugee children into the public school system by closing out the TECs in the next three years. Yet, ambiguities still continue with regard to how the policy should be implemented.

There are very few research studies in the field of education to address these issues and complexities of Syrian refugee students in Turkey. In order to contribute to the genuine and holistic understanding of the nature of educational experiences of refugee students, this narrative research study examined the lived experiences of Syrian refugee children attending a TEC in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the refugee children's lived reality in schools. We particularly focused on the factors affecting their academic success, resilience and psychological well-being, so that future studies will have a basis for further investigations of newcomers.

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