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TEACHING SYRIAN STUDENTS IN TURKISH SCHOOLS: EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS

Summary. The Syrian civil war has resulted in approximately three and a half million Syrians relocating in Turkey. In 2016, the Ministry of Education implemented an inclusive approach to schooling of Syrian asylum-seekers' children by educating them in public schools with their Turkish peers. This was intended as a means to address their educational needs, assist them with integration into Turkish culture, and prevent a generation gap. Public schooling, as a basic human right and as a way of integration to Turkish society, is provided for free at all levels of education in Turkey. The inclusion of Syrian students into the Turkish school environment is a new experience for Turkish teachers, and if the inclusion process is not managed properly, the consequences can have negative effects on both students and their teachers. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of teachers teaching Syrian students in the city of Kilis, where the number of asylum-seekers outnumbered its original population and almost one-fifth of the students in public schools are Syrians. The guiding question of this research was "What are the lived experiences of primary and middle school teachers educating Syrian children in inclusive classrooms?" Five teachers from four different primary and middle schools were interviewed. The six open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences. The data were collected during the spring semester of 2017. The interviews were analyzed according to thematic methods. Three themes emerged: Language barriers, lack of family support, and teachers' lack of pedagogical skills for teaching asylum-seeker students.

Keywords: educating refugees; Kilis; middle schools; multiculturalism; Syrians; primary schools.

Introduction

The Syrian conflict began in 2011 and affected Turkey in the sense that approximately three and a half million asylum-seekers now live in various Turkish cities (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2018). According to the AFAD Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (2018), most Syrians in Turkey live outside the established refugee camps. Until the 2016–2017 academic year, Syrian students attended temporary education centers that only accepted Syrian students. These schools were governed by Syrian expatriates under the guidance of the Turkish Ministry of Education. In these

centers, most of the teachers were Syrians, and according to one study, the teachers in these centers lacked sufficient pedagogical skills. Moreover, the conditions of the temporary education centers were not adequate for the education of Syrian students (Amac & Yasar, 2017).

As a basic human right, education is provided to Syrians for free at all levels of education in Turkey. To meet Syrian children's educational needs, assist them in integrating into Turkish culture, and prevent a generation gap in the educational process (UNICEF, 2017), the Turkish Ministry of Education implemented an inclusive approach to the schooling of Syrian asylum-seekers' children by educating them in public schools alongside their Turkish peers. In the beginning, Syrian students were accepted to kindergarten, first, fifth, and ninth grade according to their age.

Dryden-Peterson (2015) identifies three of the most common educational experiences that refugee students face in countries of first asylum: "language barriers, teacher-centered pedagogy, and discrimination in school settings" (p. 1). For instance, Nofal (2017) reports that Syrian students arriving in Canada face problems related to finding necessary information, changing family roles and language-related barriers in schools. Moreover, recent studies on asylum-seekers in Turkey concluded that many Syrian students suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ciğerci & Güngör, 2016), as well as experiencing difficulties with the language barrier (Erdem, 2017).

The profile of Syrian students in Turkish schools includes the following characteristics (adapted from the Refugee Education Partnership Project, 2007):

- Have had minimal schooling in Syria;
- Have low or no skills in Turkish;
- May have experienced some levels of violence before coming to Turkey;
- Have PTSD,
- Have lost at least one family member or friend;
- May have had disrupted schooling.

Research on teachers of Syrian students is limited. Only a handful of studies (eg. Yaylacı, Serpil & Yaylacı, 2017) have focused on teachers of inclusive classrooms. Because educating students from different backgrounds in terms of race, language, and culture is a new issue for teachers, it is necessary to learn more about their experiences in inclusive classrooms. The inclusion of Syrian students in the Turkish school environment is quite a new experience for Turkish teachers, and if the inclusion process is not managed properly, the consequence can have negative effects on both students and their teachers.

The Study

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the lived experiences of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Bhattacharya (2017), phenomenology “accounts for people’s understanding of their lived experience of a phenomenon, focuses on lived experiences of a phenomenon, questions the meaning made of the phenomenon being experienced, and essence of the shared experiences of the phenomenon” (p. 64). The purpose of phenomenological studies is to explore “what a particular experience means for people who have experienced a shared phenomenon so that the structure of the experience can be understood, and the essence of the experience can be abstracted” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27). The purpose of choosing phenomenology as a research design related to our intention to explore how a group of teachers make meaning of a shared phenomenon, “teaching Syrian students in Turkish schools.” The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of teachers who are teaching Syrian students in the city of Kilis, where the number of asylum-seekers outnumbered its original population and where almost one-fifth of the students in public schools are Syrians.

The guiding question of this study was “What are the lived experiences of elementary and middle school teachers educating Syrian children in inclusive classrooms?” We collected the data through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Five teachers from four different primary and middle schools were interviewed. Table 1 shows detailed information on the participants.

The participants were selected through snowball sampling, a type of purposive sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To be a part of the study, the teachers must have had at least five or more Syrian students in their classrooms and have at least three years of teaching experience.

After the study was approved by the university and the Ministry of Education, we started recruiting the participants. To do so, first, we introduced the purpose of the study and then asked for participation. We told them that participation is voluntary. The interviews were carried out in different public schools in Kilis, Turkey. The data were collected at the end of the spring semester of 2017.

We used six open-ended interview questions that allowed the participants to reflect on their inclusive experiences. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were then analyzed according to thematic methods (Bryman, 2012). In the first phase, the researchers read the interviews and then listened to the audio recordings to ensure nothing was missed and to get a sense of the discussion. In the second phase, each researcher independently open-coded the interviews as a means to start from raw data and without a "preestablished testable hypothesis" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). The codes were then checked jointly. At the end of the coding process, the emerging themes were identified. For the purpose of credibility, the final themes were checked by a faculty member who has years of experience in teaching and research and provided feedback about the findings. We also asked participants to reflect on the themes to provide a member check of the researchers' interpretations. To protect the identity of the participants, the teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5.

Table 1.

The participants of the study

Partici- pant Code	Gender	School / Grade	Subject	Years of Teaching Experiences	The Number of Syrian Students in the Class
T1	M	Primary/First	All subjects	5	12

Partici- pant Code	Gender	School / Grade	Subject	Years of Teaching Experiences	The Number of Syrian Students in the Class
T2	F	Primary/First	All subjects	6	10
T3	F	Primary/First	All subjects	4	12
T4	F	Middle/Fifth	Social Studies	5	9
T5	M	Middle/Fifth	Science	4	10

Findings

Through the analysis of the data, three themes emerged: Language barriers, lack of family support for students, and teachers’ lack of pedagogical skills to teach asylum-seeker students. Figure 1 shows a summary of the findings of the study. According to the data, the theme of teachers’ lack of pedagogical skills to teach Syrian students can be linked with the lack of family support, because Syrian families do not know Turkish, which was a result of the language barrier.

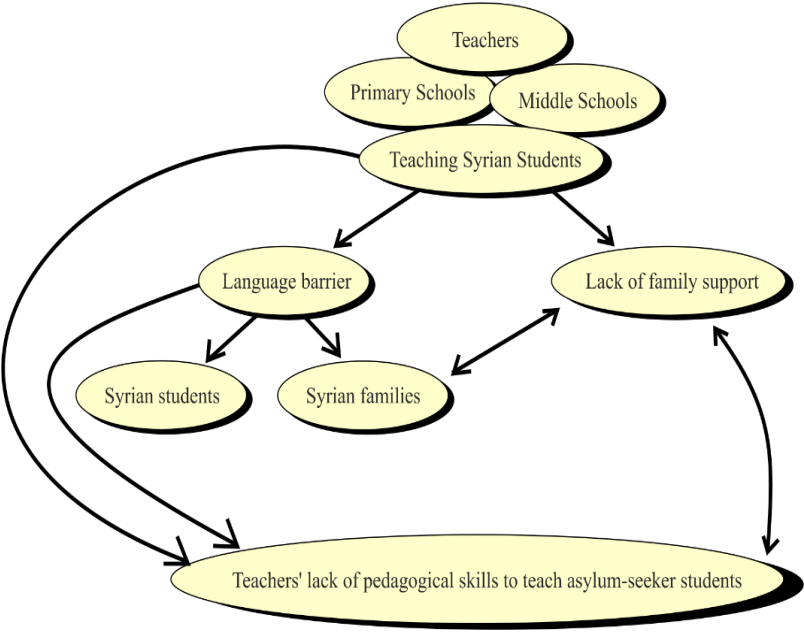


Fig. 1. Summary of the findings

Language Barrier

Language is an important part of communication and is an important basis for education. Because the Syrian students lack adequate Turkish language skills, the teachers experienced challenges during teaching. Here are some vignettes from the interviews:

"Because Syrians do not know Turkish, they don't understand what I say, and this makes me sad." (T1, Male, Primary School Teacher)

"They don't know Turkish. I experience difficulties with language. It is a big barrier." (T2, Female Primary School Teacher)

"Especially in social studies, they just stare at me because they don't understand what I am saying." (T3, Female, Primary School Teacher)

"They can't make themselves understood because of the language barrier." (T, Female, Middle School Teacher)

"They are in trouble because they come without speaking Turkish. They can't even tell us the need for toilets." (T5, Male, Middle School Teacher)

Lack of Family Support

Family support is crucial in children's education. However, in the Syrian case, the teachers complained that the parents of their Syrian students do not support the students. Because of the lack of family support, the education of the students is not at the desired level. The teachers stated their experiences with Syrian families as follows:

"When they first arrived in my class, there were students crying, as they were hungry because they don't have breakfast at home. In the last three hours of the school day, they were sleeping in their seats because they don't get enough sleep. When I tell the parents about this, they say OK, but then everything is the same. Syrian parents don't support us. Most of the parents don't come to teacher-parent meetings. Muhammad's mother never came, for example." (T2, Female, Primary School Teacher)

"At least half of the Turkish parents were interested in their children. I have six Syrian students, but I am not satisfied with any of them. Their parents don't even come to the school to

“speak with me about their children. When I ask why, they just say ‘I have some other chores to do.’ They are not interested in their children’s education. Parents’ support is important in education.” (T3, Female, Primary School Teacher)

“They expect everything from the government. They say that their government [the Syrian regime] used to give them everything. They did not have to spend a dime for the school. They don’t support their kids.” (T4, Female, Middle School Teacher)

“Syrian parents don’t speak Turkish. They rarely come to teacher-parent meetings. I speak with them through a professional interpreter or a Turkmen student who speaks both Turkish and Arabic. Because the parents don’t support their children at home, there is no progress at all.” (T5, Male, Middle School Teacher)

Teachers’ lack of pedagogical skills to teach asylum-seeker students

Teachers are a crucial part of children’s education because they design the teaching and learning environment. While teaching asylum-seeker students, their pedagogical skills are important because asylum-seeker students have unique conditions that must be understood, and their needs must be met. However, the teachers in this study report that they had not taken any courses related to immigrant or asylum-seeker children’s education during their teacher training. Although the Ministry of Education provided in-service training concerning Syrian students, they think that it was not enough to equip them to educate Syrian refugee children. Here are some vignettes from the interviews about this issue:

“No, I don’t do home visits.” (T1, Male, Primary School Teacher)

“It is difficult to design an educational environment that is half Turkish and half Syrian. I’m not prepared for this.” (T2, Female, Primary School Teacher)

“We attended a seminar about Syrian students in December, but it wasn’t enough. We just got some theoretical information. It must be more practical that I can use in the classroom. I feel powerless for teaching these Syrian kids.” (T3, Female, Primary School Teacher).

Conclusions

This study took place in a city in which one-fifth of the students in public schools are from a Syrian background. We interviewed five teachers from primary and middle schools. Our analysis revealed that Turkish teachers who teach Syrian students in inclusive classrooms experienced language problems, lack of support from Syrian families, and lack of enough skills to meet Syrian students' educational needs.

Building a new life in a very different country brings challenges. Among others, this includes the language barrier, culture clash, and financial problems. The Syrian students were registered in Turkish schools without receiving any language-related courses, which means that the students from an Arab background (there are some Turkmen students who can speak Turkish) did not know any Turkish. As such, the teachers naturally faced some students who do not speak their language, making problems inevitable. The most important thing the teachers in this study face while teaching Syrian students is the lack of sufficient Turkish language skills. The teachers expressed that this causes a language barrier that prevents teachers from teaching and students from learning. This finding is consistent with prior studies in the literature, both in Turkey and in other countries, where people seek asylum (Ciğerci & Güngör, 2016; Dooley, 2009; Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Erdem, 2017; Nofal, 2017; Sarıtaş, Şahin, & Çatalbaş, 2016). Because these children will continue their education in inclusive classrooms with their Turkish peers, language support should be provided. This could be arranged as a part of an after-school program. It is also important to note that creating opportunities for peer learning can be a beneficial way to teach the Turkish language.

Family involvement is also an important part of children's education (Ule, Živoder, & du Bois-Reymond, 2015), and cooperation between parents and teachers can increase students' academic, social, and cultural achievement. This is especially important for refugee or asylum-seeker students (Jeynes, 2003). According to a study by Rah, Choi, and Nguyen (2009), there are three important barriers to refugee parent involvement: "Language proficiency, time constraints due to family socioeconomic status and traditional family structures, and deferential attitudes towards school

authority” (p. 352). The teachers in this study reported that the Syrian parents do not support their children in school settings. Because of the lack of family support, the teachers teaching Syrian students face challenges that also prevent Syrian children from benefiting from an education. We believe that the lack of family support theme is linked to the language barrier, which also affects the parents. Because the Syrian parents do not speak fluent Turkish, they may hesitate to contact teachers and school administrators. It is also important to note that the parents cannot help their children academically at home because of the language challenges. The lack of family support theme is similar to the findings of several studies related to Syrian students’ education in Turkey (Sarıtaş, Şahin, & Çatalbaş, 2016; Tamer, 2017). To increase family involvement in Syrian students’ education, the following can be suggested: a) Turkish language programs for families, b) Programs for increasing Syrian parents’ cultural capital, c) Financial support, c) Social cohesion programs to bring Turkish and Syrian families together, d) Programs for informing asylum-seekers’ rights, e) Home visits, and f) Partnerships with local NGOs.

The teachers in this study also noted that they do not have appropriate pedagogical skills for teaching refugee or asylum-seeker students. They admitted that they had difficulties while designing the learning environment and communicating with students and their parents. They also indicated that they had not received any training about teaching Syrian students. Moreover, they reported that their pre-service teacher education programs lacked courses related to students from refugee backgrounds. This theme is consistent with the findings of several studies done in Turkey (Er & Bayındır, 2015; İmamoğlu & Çalışkan, 2017; Taşkaya & Ersoy, 2016; Tösten, Toprak & Kayan, 2017). Teaching students from different backgrounds, specifically refugee or asylum-seeker students, requires a great deal of training and effort. For this reason, the teachers who are teaching Syrian students should be supported. Based on this theme, it can be suggested that the teacher education for primary and middle school teachers in Turkey should be reformed, as Syrian students will be a major part of our schools in the coming decades. Courses related to the conditions of students from refugee backgrounds, addressing their unique educational needs, and designing teaching and learning environments for all learners should be a part of pre-service teacher education.

In addition to this, in-service teachers should be offered programs related to refugee education. It is also important to note that there should be opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, especially from teachers who have experience teaching Syrian students.

It seems that finding a solution to the Syrian conflict is difficult, and because of this, the Syrians are going to be a part of the Turkish community. To educate their children and make the integration process easier, teachers should undertake more substantial roles. We believe that learning more about their inclusive experiences and designing the education of Syrian children on this basis is crucial.

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SIRIJOS VAIKŲ MOKYMAS TURKIJO MOKYKLOSE: MOKYTOJŲ PATIRTYS

Santrauka. Sirijos pilietinis karas taip pat paveikė ir Turkiją, nes maždaug trys su puse milijono sirų dabar gyvena šioje šalyje. Švietimo ministerija vykdo visapusišką Sirijos piliečių, prašančių prieglobsčio, vaikų mokymo programą, kurios pagrindinis tikslas yra vaikų mokymas valstybinėse mokyklose kartu su turkų bendraamžiais. Ši programa pradėta vykdyti nuo 2016 m. Taip siekiama užtikrinti sirų vaikų švietimo poreikių įgyvendinimą, integraciją į turkų kultūrą ir užkirsti kelią kartų atotrūkiui. Švietimas, kaip pagrindinė žmogaus teisė ir būdas integruotis į turkų visuomenę, yra nemokamas visose Turkijos švietimo įstaigose. Sirijos mokinių integracija į turkų mokyklas yra naujas iššūkis mokytojams, ir jei šis procesas nėra tinkamai vykdomas, tai gali turėti neigiamų pasekmių tiek mokiniams, tiek jų mokytojams. Šio fenomenologinio tyrimo tikslas yra analizuoti mokytojų patirtį mokant mokinius iš Sirijos, prisiglaudusius Kilio mieste, kuriame prieglobsčio prašančių piliečių skaičius viršijo vietos gyventojų skaičių, ir beveik penktadalis mokinių valstybinėse mokyklose yra sirai. Pagrindinis tyrimo klausimas – kokios yra asmeninės pradinio ir vidurinio mokyklų mokytojų, kurie moko vaikus iš Sirijos, patirtys. Apklausoje dalyvavo penki mokytojai iš keturių skirtingų pradinio ir vidurinio mokyklų. Šeši atviri interviu klausimai leido dalyviams apmąstyti savo patirtį. Duomenys buvo surinkti 2017 m. pavasario semestro metu. Interviu buvo analizuojami naudojant teminį metodą. Tyrime atskleistos trys pagrindinės problemos: kalbos barjeras, nepakankama šeimos parama ir pedagoginių įgūdžių dirbant su prieglobsčio prašančiais mokiniais trūkumas.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: pabėgėlių ugdymas; Kilis; pradinės mokyklos; vidurinės mokyklos; daugiakultūriškumas; sirai.