

Inclusive Education Practices for Syrian Students from Turkish Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The integration of Syrian children into the Turkish national educational system has been an important issue in the field of Turkish educational policy since 2011 when the Syrian crisis caused millions of people to seek asylum in Turkey. After Temporary Education Centers (TECs) in refugee camps were phased out due to the changing inclusive education policies, Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System project (PIKTES) was introduced by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in 2016 in 26 cities across the country mainly to alleviate the linguistic challenges of Syrian refugees and facilitate their social integration into the society. The present qualitative type of study aims to describe and analyze the inclusive education practices for Syrian students at primary state schools. Data collected from five experienced Turkish teachers of integration classrooms via semi-structured interviews. The reflexive thematic analysis revealed three main themes as systemic shortcomings, Syrian families' indifference, and insufficient professional support for the teachers. The themes present the challenges of inclusive education in Turkey from the initial stages in TECs to the recent practices within the scope of the PIKTES project. Findings shed light on how to redesign inclusive education for refugees in the Turkish context.

Keywords: *Refugee education, Integration, Educational policy, National project*

Introduction

Because of the political repressions, and a decade long civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic, around six million Syrians have been forced to migrate since 2011 and Turkey has received the most Syrian refugees (3.7 million) (World Migration Report, 2022). Around 1.7 million of these refugees are children in the compulsory schooling age (between 5-17). This remarkable high number of children among the refugee population has rendered the issue of education the biggest problem of the refugee crisis. Rather than removing these "children at risk" from the mainstream system, education systems now need to make sure that schools are welcoming and engaging environments for all kids. According to Stubbs (2008), "inclusive education" refers

to a broad range of tactics, initiatives, and procedures intended to realize everyone's right to a high-quality education. It aims to make it possible for communities, systems, and structures across all contexts and cultures to fight discrimination, celebrate diversity, encourage participation, and remove obstacles to learning and engagement for everyone.

When Syrians initially arrived in Turkey, they were considered guests under "temporary protection", and the inclusive education policies started with the establishment of Temporary Education Centers (TECs) in refugee camps. Their goal was to lessen the difficulties Syrian children would experience upon returning home by providing the country's customized national curriculum for all subject areas like Science and Math by Syrian teachers in Arabic. Turkish was just a subject matter among other lessons. The education in TECs was conducted in isolation and teachers had difficulty managing challenging classrooms with severely traumatized students in the absence of adequate administrative support, effective planning of curriculum, and teaching materials (Gümüş et al., 2020). Despite these drawbacks, these facilities served as crucial transitional hubs for Syrian children.

However, with the prolonged nature of the Syrian conflict, TECs were gradually phased out and the Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES) project began in 2016. This harmonization project by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) sponsored by the EU, was put into practice in 26 cities throughout Turkey's public schools. By providing the refugees with free admission to schools, the Turkish government aimed to ensure Syrian children's long-term inclusion in the educational system and help them successfully integrate into the Turkish community and obtain better chances for their future careers. For the project, MoNE has employed Turkish language teachers (N=5.700) and psychological counselors (N=491) to provide language training, psychological counseling and guidance for students, in-service training for teachers and school managers, social integration activities, and Turkish for Syrian parents (PIKTES, 2021). Primary school students began their education at state schools with Turkish peers; as there was increasing second-generation refugees born in Turkey and are of school age, the project's focus was mainly on the primary level (Erdoğan, 2020).

In the first phase of the project Syrian students had Turkish instruction in the first grade in separate integration classes for two to three hours per day while the rest of the day was spent in regular classes with Turkish students. As of 2019, refugee children with "poor" Turkish abilities at the end of the second grade are sent to integration classes for a one-year training in

Turkish and in academic subjects for 30 hours per week (20 hours Turkish, 2 hours math, 2 hours science, 2 hours social sciences, 2 hours PE, 1-hour music and 1-hour arts).

The education of Syrian refugees has been the subject of numerous studies revealing serious challenges for Syrian students, such as language barriers (Erçetin & Kubilay, 2018; Gagné et al., 2018), intercultural gaps, and social discrimination (Özyurt et al., 2020; Sarmini et al., 2020). However, few studies so far have focused on the changing practices over the years and described the implementation of inclusive education practices within the scope of the recent PIKTES project implemented for 6 years (Celik et al., 2021). Thus, the present study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of inclusive education practices from the teachers' perspectives. We believe that their viewpoints are crucial in designing inclusive education for refugees in Turkey. The following research question was addressed: What are teachers' opinions on the education of Syrian refugee students in Turkey?

Method

To be able to answer the broad research question about teachers' views on the inclusive education of Syrian refugees before and during PIKTES, a multiple case study was designed with qualitative data collection and analysis procedures.

Participants

In the study, purposive sampling was used. Five female Turkish teachers of integration classrooms from different primary schools in two cities with the highest number of Syrian refugees participated in the interviews. The participants are a homogeneous group because they all work at public primary schools and have experience teaching Syrian refugees since the establishment of TECs. All participants are currently working for PIKTES. In their integration classrooms, they have around 15 Syrian students. Four teachers are graduates of the Elementary School Teaching department and one graduated from the Turkish Language Teaching department. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality pseudonyms were assigned.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Semi-structured online interviews were used to collect data. In order to learn about the participants' opinions on refugee education and the PIKTES project in a detailed way, questions were posed without an arranged order. Questions were adjusted to bring up fresh ideas in the flow of the communication in Turkish which is the mother tongue of both parties. Each interview took between 45 min and one hour.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was applied on the interview data. The data were coded inductively without trying to fit it into a prior topic, making the thematic analysis data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The recursive and continuing analysis occurred throughout the study. Interview data were first transcribed; then the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading it repeatedly. Based on the iterative patterns in the data, the themes and sub-themes were developed. At the end, the main themes and their sub-themes were presented along with sample quotes taken from the participants' translated responses. The validity of the qualitative analysis was achieved through triangulation of data sources and member checking via emailing the interview transcripts to the participants and asking them to make any necessary additions or edits.

Results

Participants were asked to evaluate and share their insights about the inclusive education process for Syrian students starting with TECs and evolving to the PIKTES project. Analyses reveal the challenges of inclusive education in years. There are three broad themes as systemic shortcomings, families' indifference, and insufficient professional support.

Systemic Shortcomings

Even though the attempts of inclusive education for Syrian refugees started with well-intentions to support them in their integration process and to speed up the process as much as possible, there were a number of challenges stemming from the systemic designs and lack of effective planning that the teachers had to deal with during the evolving practices from TECs to the PIKTES project with two implementational phases at schools.

Temporary Education Centers (TECs)

The experienced teachers revealed that TECs were not serving the purpose of Syrian integration by providing education in separate buildings with classes of 35-40 refugee students from various ages and mixed backgrounds. One of the teachers mentioned her experience about classroom management in TECs.

The classrooms were hard to control because they were really crowded. As Turkish teachers, we were all alone, so we couldn't cope with that most of the time. The students were used to violence at home and schools, but we never resorted to the use of force. That was a great hardship for us at first until they got used to our styles. (Sinem)

First Phase of the Project

At first, PIKTES was implemented as a daily Turkish course at schools with 2 lesson hours a day to learn Turkish. Then, the students used to join their mainstream classrooms for the remaining 4 hours of other subject areas with their Turkish peers. The participant teachers explained that this application created a chaotic environment at schools. The students and their individual progress were not monitored adequately. Due to the irregularity, it was hard to establish rapport with the students and give appropriate feedback on their improvement.

We used to have 4-5 students from each classroom for only 2 hours of Turkish lessons every day. We were usually confused about the curriculum and had difficulty keeping track of their attendance, learning levels, styles, etc. This implementation was so limited and insufficient. (Bircan)

At first, it was like a 2-hour course for the students. They used to change classrooms to attend our Turkish classes while their Turkish peers are in lessons like PE or art. This created a huge disorder for all of us. (Sinem)

Another repeatedly mentioned challenge of the inclusive education project in its first years is the inappropriate teaching materials and books. The participants explained that they had to create their own materials and share the photocopies with their students. No books for the students or guidance for the teachers were provided by the project.

When we first started, there was nothing in the name of the book. We, ourselves, were handing out photocopies, and we still are. Then, some resource books started to be distributed in the following years, but this time the books did not meet the need. So, materials didn't meet expectations. They are above their levels. (Bircan)

Second Phase of the Project / Integration Classrooms

The current integration classrooms system with only 3rd-graders for extensive Turkish is praised to ensure regularity for teachers and students. It is easier to monitor students and build a good relationship with them. Even though the integration classrooms are offered to solve earlier problems observed in the first phase of the project, there are a number of issues that need improvement based on the participant teachers' experiences. The integration classrooms are designed to overcome the refugee students' linguistic difficulties besides to catch up with other subject matter lessons like science, math, social sciences etc. However, the teachers revealed

that they cannot follow the curriculum due to the low proficiency level of the students. Their primary focus is on teaching how to read and write in Turkish and some basic math.

These students cannot read and write in Turkish, that is why our first goal is to teach them how to read and write in Turkish and help them to speak Turkish, express themselves in a way. Namely, it is not sensible to emphasize lessons like science, social sciences for the students who struggle reading and comprehension in Turkish. The actual implementation is different from the project system. We tackle the realities! (Sinem)

The integration classrooms are also criticized by the participant Turkish teachers as being isolated from the Turkish society. They explain that their classrooms turn into an Arabic speaking environment easily, and there is no chance for social interaction and cohesion with their Turkish peers. The integration classes for a full year have deepened social isolation of the Syrian students and “resembled TECs” as Syrian children could not socialize with their Turkish peers.

We basically focus on teaching how to read and write in Turkish for the whole year but students are not so willing. They speak Arabic to each other and the class turns to a monolingual Arabic class. How can I teach math and social sciences? They are still working on letter recognition. I just hope they can at least keep the track when they go back to their regular classrooms. For social integration, we conduct PE classes all together in the garden. I observed that boys tend to play football with friends only from their own classrooms. They don’t talk to other students from different classes. After a while, my students step aside and get bored. They can’t communicate or make friends with students with different languages and cultures. (Zeynep)

One of the teachers echoed the same situation with her classroom and shared her technique to encourage the use of Turkish in lessons.

What is my method? I tell them that I will give presents to those students who speak less Arabic, more Turkish during the week. Every Monday, I choose that student and give a present or put his/her photo on the bulletin board. These types of reinforcement are generally catchy and enthusing for them. It works! (Bircan)

Another Turkish teacher touched upon the social isolation issue, comparing the current application with that of the previous one:

We used to teach Syrian students two-three hours a day in integration classes and they returned to their regular classrooms for the rest of the day. It was better because the

support was ongoing. They felt better; social integration is about wellbeing. Now they feel somehow ‘pushed’ to make friends and communicate in Turkish and children do not like it. I can see their resistance, sometimes even hatred. (Derya)

As for the books, the teachers stated that the project provided a set of Turkish for Foreigners books for the students. However, they are not applicable at that low level. The teachers generally use only the first book and they pick some other activities from the other two books according to the students’ levels and needs.

The books are sent by the main office and I think they are not suitable for our students’ levels who are not even A1 in Turkish. The books are mainly for A1 A2 level learners, so we try to use them by simplifying the activities. I personally create activities for letter recognition, sentence formation, syllabication, vocabulary and functional language in the form of games. (Funda)

Majority of my students have difficulty in reading and writing in Turkish, so I try teaching the basic literacy skills, but I do not have sufficient materials, e.g. realia, digital tools, story books. I feel limited. My colleagues and I mostly use 1st grade books in the 3rd grade with supplementary materials. Since they mainly struggle with reading and writing, we can’t enrich the lesson with interesting activities as well, like doing drama or playing Kahoot. (Zeynep)

Additionally, the participants generally think that implementation of integration classrooms at 3rd grade is late. It should be earlier to increase its effectiveness in terms of learning Turkish.

I personally feel that integration classrooms are being too late in 3rd grade. If we could teach the basic concepts in Turkish and school rules instead of teaching how to read and write at least at 1st grade or preschool years, would it be more effective? I honestly think that it would be more effective for the children. (Funda)

One of the teachers explained that the reasons for choosing 3rd grade only for integration classrooms are to ensure social adaptation of the Syrian children into their mainstream classrooms and homeroom teachers at first and second years.

I believe that first and second grades are actually for getting used to the class environment and their friends. Also, the curriculum of the third grade is like the continuation of the second grade, so the subjects are not very different. Just one step forward. That's why I think it's the third grade. (Sinem)

Moreover, the teachers complained about the lack of standardized selection for the integration classrooms. The project shared assessment criteria in the form of a 50 question-survey to fill out for each refugee student by their teachers. However, the homeroom teachers tend to send all Syrian students in their classes without considering the survey items and give them intentional low scores. Dealing with Syrian students was a kind of additional “workload” for them.

I can see that the (homeroom) teacher in my school doesn't want Syrian students in class. To get rid of them for one year, she gives low scores on purpose. Actually, she knows the aim of the project- a rubric for student evaluation is provided and discussed several times. She attended meetings about the project, but she doesn't want these students. There are many teachers like this. Even though we warn them, we are still struggling with that problem. (Zeynep)

Some homeroom teachers are really biased. They believe that Syrian students can't learn. They ignore them in class and these students face discrimination without sufficient care. Their teachers are willing to send them to integration classes (Derya)

They recommended that the integration classroom teachers should also be part of the placement procedure of Syrian students at the end of the second grade. The homeroom teachers' decisions should be discussed in a commission with other teachers of these students.

First of all, I think we, as Turkish teachers, should take part in the placement of integration classrooms. Because when we leave it to their teachers, frankly, the teachers want to get rid of the students because they are naughty. They don't want to deal with Syrians because they can't communicate with them. Not all are like that, of course. Thus, I think it would be better if the Turkish teachers were active in pre-assessment. (Sinem)

Syrian Families' Attitudes

All participating teachers repeatedly shared that Syrian parents have a considerable influence on the inclusive education process of their children and the effectiveness of the practices. The families do not support their children either in psychological or academic ways. The participants unveiled that some parents experience problems about social integration into the Turkish community even after all these years. Their “indifference” regarding societal norms prevented the effective integration process for the students and due to the linguistic barrier, there is no connection between them and the schools. The teachers try to interact with the

students' elder siblings speaking Turkish better or they need translation assistance to talk to the parents.

Only a few of my students' parents speak Turkish. We usually need a translator to communicate. They are not much involved. Frankly speaking, they are not like Turkish parents. They don't come when we call. So, I can say that caring parents are really rare. (Funda)

However, they reported that it was not only the language barrier but more importantly lack of willingness that made it hard to reach the desired results.

Parents need to put some effort, but they simply don't. They are culturally resistant to learn and speak Turkish. That is incredible! In one of my parents' meetings, I suggested watching some quality Turkish programs on TV all together as a family, but they said that they don't have any Turkish channels at home. As far as I learned, they don't even have Turkish neighbors to make friends with. They live in isolation from society and they are closed to inclusion. This negatively affects my students for sure. (Bircan)

Inadequacy of Professional Support

The participants revealed that in-service teacher development programs throughout the inclusive education processes were not sufficient and regular and there was no follow-up. They had a great difficulty in initial stages about how to approach these students and what to do. A few of the participants expressed that some training sessions were provided on how to teach Turkish and how to approach children experiencing trauma before the start of the PIKTES. The in-service online webinars continue in breaks by focusing mostly on recent topics like children of migration, children of pandemic, communication with students, children's rights, qualified teaching etc. They basically explain the related theories and they are found partially effective by the participants.

I think the seminars are good for consciousness, but they don't help our in-class teaching. They explain the theoretical issues, but we need more hands-on workshops with real practices, case analysis, discussion on authentic examples and collaboration with other colleagues, and in-class implementation ideas, suggestions, etc. (Bircan)

Discussion

The current study was conducted with the intention of hearing from Turkish teachers of integration classrooms. Similar to international attempts and projects on inclusive education for refugee students in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Lebanon in collaboration with UNHCR and national governments, as well as German GIZ and DAFI projects at different grade levels, not TECs but PIKTES project in Turkey appears to achieve its objectives in terms of structural integration with increased enrollment to the public primary schools throughout the project. That means younger refugee students were able to access more education, and a warm and secure learning atmosphere, which corresponds to the inclusive education pivots on the ability to welcome the student who is unfamiliar to the teacher and society. It also had a valuable effect on drawing attention to the vital issues of refugee integration via national educational practices.

However, the results depicting inclusive education programs until now, have mostly focused on the flaws and limitations of the practices as part of national policies and projects. The difficulties mentioned by the teachers are in line with previous research's conclusions (Esen, 2020; Özkan & Cakmak, 2021; Şahin & Şener, 2019; Topaloğlu, 2020), including persistent language barriers (Dryden-Peterson, 2015), academic failure (Aydin & Kaya, 2019), and difficulty adjusting to and participating in the curriculum (Kılıç & Gökçe, 2018). The results also show that integration classes in particular are implemented without adequate planning, lesson designs, necessary teaching materials, and they do not assist social inclusion by educating refugee students separately from their Turkish peers (Gümüş et al., 2020; Taşkın & Erdemli, 2018). Additionally, teacher-induced exclusion in mainstream classes is another issue to be reported. According to Derrida (2010), teachers should make sure their children have the opportunity to express themselves and learn about the cultures they interact with. Due to their linguistic difficulties and low academic performance, these students should be viewed in the context of their prior traumas and stress (Celik et al., 2021). In summary, in line with previous research, the current study shows that the integration of refugees in the national education system is fraught with various difficulties stemming from the aspects like language, acculturation, policy development, teaching practices, and teacher-family attitudes.

Most of the teachers are not specialized in inclusion and multicultural education, so they lack the credentials needed to interact with Syrian students appropriately, prepare appropriate course material, employ teaching strategies effectively, establish positive communication, and ensure family participation. For effective inclusive education, teachers must have additional

pedagogical skills (Keser & Düzkantar, 2019), hence they need to consider a number of interconnected aspects while attempting to manage the diversity in their courses with students from a variety of psycho-social backgrounds, such as individual traits, needs, expectations, and pre-learning experiences (MoNE, 2017). As the study's findings show, the teachers need more support with relevant, locally based in-service teacher education programs to become 'reflective practitioners', and child-centered team workers. Although the MoNE has been organizing in-service teacher training sessions for teachers since the start of the project to guide them on inclusive education, they lack practice based, reflexive and hands-on experiences. The findings are consistent with previous research on the difficulties in integrating refugee students successfully due to Turkey's lack of pre- and in-service education programs (Kazu & Deniz, 2019; Zengin & Akdemir, 2020). Regarding the familial effect on inclusive education, some Syrian families were also the root of barriers because of their lack of empathy and concern, inability to support their children academically, and linguistic difficulties when contacting the school for assistance.

The sharp rise in the number of refugee students and the sudden demand for integration into the national education system were both wholly unanticipated issues on the agenda of the Turkish MoNE. Because of this unpreparedness, it may be assumed that the inclusive education attempts and the PIKTES project have failed to meet the predetermined goals in terms of relational integration to create fully inclusive learning environments to accommodate a range of learning levels, diverse cultural values, ethnic identities, and linguistic backgrounds so that all students can develop fulfilling lives (Education Reform Initiative, 2017). Additionally, the current integration classroom model of PIKTES could be problematic and inadequate because of psycho-social isolation of disadvantaged students, labeling academic failure, ineffective language teaching, and distorting educational outcomes.

Recommendations

The research's findings supporting earlier studies on the integration of refugees have some implications for the field. First of all, it would be best to rebuild integration programs with intensive Turkish language instruction in the first grade or, preferably, at the preschool stage in order to address the language-related hurdles that Syrian students face. The students may also receive additional academic training in later years if they need, when they overcome the language barrier earlier thanks to a well-designed and appropriate curriculum for teaching

Turkish as a second language for young learners. Moreover, in-service education programs with reflection sessions to comprehend and immediately address teachers' problems should be provided for teachers and school employees to gain the professional abilities required to teach these vulnerable children. To help students from both Turkey and Syria, develop their intercultural skills via a multicultural, democratic, and bias-free worldview, teachers must be given pertinent instructional materials. Orientation programs and more coalescence initiatives for Turkish and refugee families should be created to promote effective parent integration and collaboration, allowing both groups to contribute to the upkeep of community-wide peace and learn to coexist in social harmony. Further research is required on inclusive education for refugees in order to get a more complete picture using additional data from stakeholders such as Syrian students from various cities, parents, and policy makers (project managers) besides the teachers.

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