

## Review Article

# Examining the psychology of Syrian refugee students and the guidance and psychological support given: the case of Turkey

Hayr nnisa Dilek Keklik<sup>1</sup>

Esenler Nene Hatun Primary School, Istanbul, Turkey

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### Abstract

Turkey has covered a great distance in the adaptation of immigrants to the education system, with the phenomenon of immigration that it has met recently. In this study, the psychological support and guidance services received by Syrian refugee students in the Turkish education system were examined in terms of their psychology. In the research, the documents related to the applications and researches in this field were examined. First of all, the psychological problems experienced by refugee children who had to migrate from their countries were discussed. In order for the psychological support given to Syrian refugee students to be effective, the awareness of the stakeholders (school psychological counselors, classroom teachers, school administrators, etc.) who will provide this service should be increased. The practices in national and UNICEF supported projects to increase awareness and awareness of the phenomenon of migration are explained. Research findings on school adjustment of Syrian refugee students and remedial studies are explained. Information is given about the measures taken by school counselors in order to create effective intervention programs and which psychotherapy approaches they apply. The details of the Hope-Based Intervention Program, which is an application based on the theory of hope and adopting the cognitive behavioral approach in Turkey, and which gives positive results, are explained. As a result of the research, it can be suggested that more research and projects be carried out to increase the quality of psychological support for Syrian refugee students in Turkey.

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## Introduction

Turkey is the country in the world where the immigration phenomenon has been experienced most deeply due to the war in its region for the last ten years. In this respect, Turkey is in the process of a very important learning experience and this situation is very difficult. All stakeholders have important responsibilities to facilitate this process (Kağnıcı, 2017). The phenomenon of migration has many dimensions. However, it is the child and student dimension that attracts the world's attention. The reason for this is that it is very important for the future psychological health of these children, who have left their country and are left unprotected in many ways, to be able to grow up in safety. In this research, the psychological state of Syrian refugee students in Turkey will be described based on document analysis. In addition, the psychological support services offered by Turkey for these students will be examined.

### Psychological Problems Experienced by Syrian Refugee Students

Looking at the data on Syrian refugees, the number of refugees who took refuge in Turkey due to war and other reasons is 3,551,078 and 1,182,261 of them are children. 968,000 of the children are of school age (Erdođan, 2017). The problems experienced by Syrian refugee children can be classified directly as the problems they experience and indirectly as the problems experienced by their families. For example, the fact that these children live in or out of the camps and cannot find a home are problems that concern their families but also affect the child. The majority of Syrian families live in rental houses (Akpınar, 2017). Proof of residence is required to enroll in public schools or

<sup>1</sup> School administrator, Esenler Nene Hatun Primary School, Istanbul, Turkiye. E-mail: nisadilekk@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0003-1504-4981

Temporary Education Centers (TECs). In addition, Syrian refugee children may also work as child workers (Çetin, 2016).

The main source of the most important problems faced by Syrian refugee children is the language problem. Because of this problem, it is seen that teachers also have a negative attitude. This situation causes Syrian refugee students to experience psychological problems. As a result of the researches, it is seen that the school administrators also expressed opinions about these students that they disrupt the flow and order in the schools and that they do not want to accept these students in their own schools. Similar negative attitudes are also seen in Turkish families (Emin, 2016; Sakız, 2016). In the studies conducted with Syrian refugee students in pre-school institutions, there is a finding that students who have difficulty in meeting their basic needs are excluded in the classroom environment and their families are also effective in this exclusion (Mercan & Tüm, 2016). In the studies conducted with teacher candidates, it has been observed that Syrian refugees have a negative attitude due to the fact that they have too many children, their tendency to beggars, and the thought that they will burden Turkey's economy (Topkaya & Akdağ, 2016; Kara, Yiğit, & Ağırman, 2016). These studies show that the psychological problems that occur as a result of the great trauma experienced by Syrian refugee students cause more exacerbation. In addition to many psychological problems such as anxiety, stress and depression, situations such as exclusion, prejudiced and negative attitudes that can be experienced in the most suitable environments for their socialization such as school can cause negative effects on their psychological well-being and psychological resilience.

However, schools are the most effective institutions where effective intervention programs are made for refugees and their cultural and social cohesion is ensured (Hodes, 2000). If schools are weak and insufficient to provide the necessary psychological support to refugee students, it is very likely that these students will experience negative psychological conditions such as antisocial behaviors, low school success, low self-regulation, and low self-confidence (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

### **Migration Psychology Awareness Studies**

The phenomenon of migration may be perceived as a normal process by many, but social, institutional and individual awareness of the impact of migration on the immigrant may not always be high. In addition, biased and prejudiced perspectives towards immigrants may also cause deepening of the psychological trauma experienced by immigrants. In the research, it will be examined what kind of awareness-raising measures are taken on the concept of "student" or "child" in the phenomenon of migration.

The General Directorate of Special Education has published the book "Migration Trauma" within the scope of the Psychosocial Support Program. The publication of this book has been considered within the scope of the "Renewal of Psychosocial Support Programs Project" carried out in cooperation with UNICEF in November 2017. Within the scope of this project, legislation workshops, content preparation workshops, pilot studies and evaluations were made. Looking at the chapters of the book written in this context; consists of four parts: migration, migration trauma, prevention and treatment of migration trauma, and conclusion (MEB, 2022). In particular, the part of "the role of guidance teachers in the prevention of migration trauma" constitutes the subject of this research. When the book is examined in detail, it is seen that many activities are prepared in the company of experts in teaching about immigration for teachers and families.

### **School Adaptation of Syrian Refugee Children**

Looking at the concept of refugee students, it can be defined as students who have left their country for various reasons. As an age group, they are students in the 5-18 age group who have the right to formal education (Göksoy, 2020).

Educational problems of Syrian refugee students should be given priority. Because, as stated before, the most important element of social and cultural harmony is school. For this, full records must be obtained by the Immigration Administration. It can also be ensured that Syrian educators, who can play an accelerating role in school adaptation, take a role. In addition, adaptation and awareness trainings can be organized in schools to raise awareness of other students. Such psychological and social supports can prevent problems such as child marriage and begging (Emin, 2016).

Temporary Education Centers have been established to ensure school adjustment of Syrian refugee students. The transition and adaptation process here is very important (Erdoğan, 2015). Refugee students who enroll in the center or enroll directly in school continue to have problems in many issues such as not knowing the language, lack of planning, uncertainty, absenteeism, and family disinterest (Göksoy, 2020). The reflection of all these as learning difficulties in Syrian refugee students, their low performance at school, and other conditions that affect their adaptation to school. These are reflected in many psychological problems and distress in children (Rousseau et al. 1996).

### **Psychological Support Provided by School Psychological Counselors to Syrian Refugee Students**

Schools are the most important centers of psychological support for Syrian refugee students. Schools are the most important environments for children and students experiencing migration, where they relax, socialize and adapt to a new culture and environment. It is a place where they can carry themselves to the future and connect with the society

(Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). Many psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety are seen in refugee children (Fazel & Stein, 2002). The best observation place for all these ailments is schools. The people who undertake this task in the first place are school psychological counselors (Gümüştun, 2017). School counselors implement intervention and prevention programs in schools and support the development of social and adaptation skills (Hodes, 2000; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

In these environments, the most effective person and role in solving the psychological problems of refugee students and providing psychological support are school counselors. Psychological counselors must first be aware of the phenomenon of "migration" and the trauma it creates and preventive therapy techniques. In addition, school counselors should have information about the cultural values and beliefs of Syrian refugee children. This is very important in terms of the quality of the therapeutic relationship they will establish with students. They should be aware of their own values and prejudices, be aware of their stereotypes, have knowledge and respect for the group and culture they work for, know and understand family structures, receive and transmit verbal and non-verbal messages, know and use appropriate intervention methods (MEB, 2022). All this information is presented in the booklet prepared for school psychological counselors. This is important in terms of drawing a roadmap in their approach to these children.

Psychological counselors and Turkish instructors temporarily employed by the PICTES project, namely the Integration and Support of Syrian Refugee Children in the Turkish Education System Project, carried out by the Ministry of National Education, started to serve as of March 2017 (General Directorate of Lifelong Learning, 2017). In this project, it is thought that the quality of the service provided by the trainers who are fluent in the mother tongue of Syrian refugee students can increase.

Intervention and prevention programs for Syrian refugee students in Turkey are carried out with different therapy approaches. These are therapy approaches such as Trauma-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Narrative Exposure Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. Bosqui and Marshoud (2018) state that the following subjects are focused on in the therapies; creating a safe environment and protecting from harm, playing games, developing the capacity of the community, developing the capacity of the family, increasing social support, improving family relations, values, traditions, bonding, developing stress management skills, problem solving skills.

### **Teachers and Turkish Students in the Psychological Support Needs of Syrian Refugee Students**

One of the important sources for the adaptation of Syrian refugee students to school is their teachers. Teachers' approaches for psychological support may cause these students to experience less adjustment and psychological distress. However, studies conducted with teachers show that teachers have negative attitudes towards Syrian refugee students. There are also statements of teachers that they do not want refugees to rent a house from the places where they live (Topkaya & Akdağ, 2016; Kara, Yiğit, & Ađırman, 2016). These findings may further deteriorate the psychology of Syrian refugee students (Mercan & Tım, 2016). Therefore, it can be recommended to give seminars and trainings on multiculturalism and tolerance for teachers (Sakız, 2016; Emin, 2016; Kara, Yiğit, & Ađırman, 2016; Topkaya & Akdağ, 2016)

It is quite wrong to consider the educational support given to Syrian refugee students to address only the cognitive aspect. Educational policies should also have a psychologically supportive aspect to these children. According to the research conducted by Göksoy (2020), although the teachers evaluated the education service provided by the Ministry of National Education for refugees as humane, they found that there were deficiencies in many aspects. First of all, teachers want an education policy to be formed and shaped. In addition, they recommend taking measures to increase the readiness level of students. These may be vocational and language courses.

Classroom teachers are one of the most basic elements of intervention programs for psychological support to be applied to Syrian refugee students. In-service training of classroom teachers should be provided before and after the intervention programs to be implemented. These issues are the development of peer relations of refugee students, adaptation problems and solutions (Gümüştun, 2017). It is very important that researches and interviews about the mental health of refugee students are carried out continuously. Teachers have roles in these observations and interviews (Vatansever & Erden, 2018).

The most basic problem of Syrian refugee students is language problem, and because of this problem, they also have problems in developing relationships with their peers. They may encounter the cynical attitudes of their peers. This may cause their psychological problems to deepen (Sever, 2020). Therefore, it is very important to provide psychological support for the solutions of language problems. Studies show that students who receive Turkish education well are in a better situation than other students in many aspects such as adapting to school and making friends. This situation results in Syrian refugee students establishing positive relationships, friendship and love with their Turkish peers (Akkaya, 2013; Türk, Kaçmaz & Tırnıklı, 2018).

### **Good Practice Examples**

School psychological counselors are constantly working on providing psychological support to Syrian refugee students in Turkey. However, many problems are encountered in the implementation of these intervention programs. Participating families fear negative labeling. They see themselves as victims or guinea pigs. Another problem in interventions is that refugee students are seen as having a group structure with individuals with different characteristics

(Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). But it is true that they can be different. Including the cultural and contextual needs of refugee students in the intervention programs will increase their chances of success (Garrison, Roy, & Azar, 1999).

However, even if intervention programs are prepared for refugee students in Turkey, there may be problems in participating in these programs due to the instability experienced by the students in their environment. In this respect, the implementation of school-based and interdisciplinary prevention programs, in which educators, including mental health workers, will be stakeholders, can be effective. These psychosocial and psychosupport programs will be effective in overcoming the psychological problems of Syrian refugee students (Cengiz, 2017).

These intervention programs are necessary to prevent emotional and behavioral problems that may occur after migration (Peltonen & Punamaki, 2010; Weine, 2011; Fazel & Betancourt, 2018; Miller & Jordans, 2016). In intervention programs, post-traumatic cognitive behavioral therapy approach is generally used and psychological disorders such as stress, anxiety and depression are targeted. These intervention programs focus on trauma relief (Fazel, 2018; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Turrini et al. 2017). Now, an exemplary intervention program with scientific foundations in Turkey will be examined.

### Hope Based Intervention Program

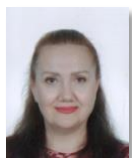
This intervention and prevention program is a treatment protocol developed by Cheavens et al. (2006). Based on Snyder (2002)'s theory of hope, cognitive behavioral therapy is approach and group therapy. Made for people with depression. This model was redesigned and implemented by Ataman (2012) for Syrian refugee students in Turkey and positive results were seen. This program consists of four part sessions and eight sessions. Session one: What is hope for me? Session Two: My success story Session Three: Future me Session Four: My Way Session Five: What does Hope say? Sixth session: A new journey of hope. This research and application is the first to investigate the effect of hope-focused intervention on resilience in Syrian secondary school students. As a result of research and application; It has been determined that the intervention program is quite effective and has an effect on developing psychological resilience in Syrian refugee children. In this respect, the Hope-Based Intervention Program is recommended to practitioners.

### Conclusion

In this study, the psychological support services provided for Syrian refugee students, which are now an important element of education in Turkey, were examined. As a result of the examinations, important projects are carried out thanks to both national and internationally supported funds. It is seen that school psychological services have also been developed in order to ensure the continuity and sustainability of these projects. It is seen that a book has been published to raise awareness and awareness about the phenomenon of migration, which is the first step in providing psychological support, and the psychological problems it creates. It can be said that this book is a guide for teachers. Temporary Education Centers from the integration studies carried out with the projects supported for the adaptation of Syrian refugee students to school; Studies carried out to overcome Turkish problems are effective studies in terms of making school more efficient and effective, which is the most important place for psychological support. School psychological counselors were provided to develop themselves about the values, belief systems and cultures of Syrian refugee students. In this way, the effectiveness of psychological support was also supported. School psychological counselors, by applying many psychological therapy approaches, provide services for the relief of psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression of Syrian refugee students. In addition, classroom teachers were supported with trainings about these students, providing a suitable environment for the classroom and improving their adaptation skills through peer communication. It is seen that good practice models developed for psychological support are also implemented in Turkey. The Hope Based Intervention Program, which is one of them, has been found to be an effective model.

Turkey gains significant experience with Syrian refugee students. Further research can be recommended to increase the quality of psychological support services provided to Syrian refugee students. In addition, it can be recommended to develop and support new and original projects to provide psychological support to these students.

### Biodata of Author



**Hayrūnnisa Dilek KEKLİK**, School Administrator, She graduated from Istanbul University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Journalism in 1999. She completed her master's degree in the field of Educational Administration and Supervision at Hasan Kalyoncu University in 2014. She has received inclusive Education, Special Education, Social, Emotional and Cognitive Development, Critical Thinking Skills trainings. The "Let 's Get to Know and Introduce Our Culture" e-Twinning Project, which she carried out at her school in the 2020-2021 academic year, received the European Quality Label she. Currently, she is involved in the execution of the Healthy Steps Project of the General Directorate of Basic Education. **Affiliation:** Esenler Nene Hatun Primary School, Istanbul, Turkey **E-mail:** nisadilekk@gmail.com **ORCID:** 0000-0003-1504-4981

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