



## The Experiences of Syrian Female Students During the Distance Education and the Insights of Religious Culture and Ethics Teachers into the Process

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### ABSTRACT

Turkey has been hosting a large number of Syrian refugees since 2011 and has allowed Syrians to integrate into the general education system alongside Turkish students since 2016. This situation suggests that Turkey offers a unique experience in the education of Syrian refugees. However, Syrian girls may face disadvantages in their education due to traditional gender roles. Based on this premise, this study aims to examine the educational processes of Syrian girls during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and the students themselves. Therefore, this research seeks to identify the educational experiences of Syrian girls during the pandemic period in Turkey and to evaluate the contribution of religious culture and ethics (RCE) teachers to their ability to receive proper education. The participants of this research, which followed a qualitative design, included 10 students, 5 parents, and 5 RCE teachers selected through snowball sampling. The study's findings reveal that Syrian girls encountered difficulties in accessing and continuing distance education effectively. The data obtained were analyzed by considering the educational challenges experienced by refugee girls during the quarantine period from the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers, and discussed within psychological, social, and cultural contexts. Among these challenges, economic hardships, technical deficiencies, inadequacies in the physical environment, and social adjustment problems emerged as prominent issues. It was found that Syrian refugee girls struggled with limited financial resources, a lack of technological devices such as tablets and computers, inadequate internet access, and a shortage of appropriate learning environments. They also experienced psychological challenges, including isolation and a longing for social interaction, along with shifts in family dynamics. On the other hand, it was observed that Syrian girls and their parents frequently communicated with religious, cultural, and moral education teachers to address these issues. A significant finding that distinguishes this study from similar ones is that Syrian refugee girls, through their participation in both distance and face-to-face education, began to adapt to Turkish culture and lifestyle. According to the perspectives of both students and teachers, Syrian refugee students have become more socially integrated compared to their parents. As a result, it can be concluded that RCE teachers have assumed new, supportive roles in the education of Syrian refugee students.

**Keywords:** Religious Education, Syrian Female Students, Covid-19, Distance Education, Migration, Adaptation.

# Suriyeli Kız Öğrencilerin Uzaktan Eğitim Deneyimleri ve DKAB Öğretmenlerinin Bu Süreçle İlgili Görüşleri

Süreç

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## Öz


Türkiye, 2011'den itibaren geniş çapta Suriyeli mültecilere ev sahipliği yapmakta olup, 2016'dan beri de Suriyelilerin Türk öğrencilerle birlikte genel eğitim sistemine entegre olmalarına olanak sağlamaktadır. Bu durum, Türkiye'nin Suriyeli mültecilerin eğitimi konusunda özgün bir deneyime sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, Suriyeli kız çocukları, geleneksel rolleri nedeniyle eğitim açısından dezavantajlı konumda olabilmektedirler. Buradan yola çıkarak bu çalışma Covid-19 pandemisi döneminde Suriyeli kız çocuklarının eğitim süreçlerinin öğretmenlerin, velilerin ve Suriyeli kız çocuklarının bakış açıları çerçevesinde incelemeyi problem edinmiştir. Dolayısıyla bu araştırma, Türkiye'deki Suriyeli kız çocuklarının pandemi sürecindeki eğitim deneyimlerini ve ailelerinin bu süreçteki etkilerini belirleyerek, din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi öğretmenlerinin onların sağlıklı bir eğitim alabilme sürecine katkısını değerlendirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Nitel bir desenle kurgulanan bu araştırmanın katılımcıları, 10 öğrenci, 5 veli ve 5 din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi öğretmeninden oluşmaktadır ve çalışma grubu kartopu örnekleme yöntemi ile belirlenmiştir. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, Suriyeli kız öğrencilerinin uzaktan eğitime erişimde ve nitelikli bir şekilde devam ettirmede bazı zorluklarla karşılaştıkları belirlenmiştir. Çalışmada elde edilen verilerin analizinde, sığınmacı kız çocuklarının karantina dönemlerindeki uzaktan eğitim süreçlerinde yaşadıkları eğitimsel zorluklar öğrenci, veli ve öğretmen perspektifinden ele alınarak, psikolojik, sosyal ve kültürel bağlamlar çerçevesinde tartışılmıştır. Bu zorluklar arasında düşük ekonomik şartlar, teknik yetersizlikler, fiziksel ortam eksiklikleri ve sosyal adaptasyon sorunları ön plana çıkmaktadır. Suriyeli mülteci kız çocukların söz konusu dönemde eğitim açısından düşük ekonomik şartlar; tablet, bilgisayar vb. teknolojik cihazların bulunmaması, internet erişiminin olmaması gibi teknik yetersizlikler; çevrimiçi eğitimin sağlıklı yürütülmesini engelleyen çalışma veya ders odası olmaması veya ev ortamının eğitime uygun hale getirilememesi gibi fiziksel ortam yetersizlikleri; yalnızlaşma, arkadaşlara özlem ve dışarıda oyun oynayamama gibi psikolojik ve aile içi rollerin değişimi, dış dünyada ile fiziki yönden etkileşimsizlik gibi sosyal sorunlarla karşı karşıya kaldıkları tespit edilmiştir. Diğer taraftan Suriyeli kız öğrenciler ve onların velileri bu tür sorunların çözümünde genellikle din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi dersi öğretmenleriyle iletişime geçtikleri görülmüştür. Çalışmayı benzer çalışmalardan farklılaştıran önemli bir bulgu ise, Suriyeli mülteci kız öğrenciler katıldıkları uzaktan ve yüzyüze eğitim süreçlerinin sonucu olarak Türkiye'deki kültüre ve yaşam biçimine uyum sağlamaya başladıkları hususudur. Öğrenci ve öğretmenlerin görüşlerine göre Suriyeli mülteci kız ve erkek öğrenciler ebevelerinden farklı olarak sosyal yapı ile daha uyumlu yaşayabilir hale gelmişlerdir. Sonuç olarak din eğitimi ve din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi dersi öğretmenin, Suriyeli mülteci kız öğrencilerin eğitimlerini destekleyici yeni roller üstlendiği söylenebilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din Eğitimi, Suriyeli Kız Çocukları, Covid-19, Uzaktan Eğitim, Göç, Uyum.

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## Introduction

Migration of people from one country to another is a common phenomenon in world history. Civil war is one of the main reasons for migration which continues today. One of these civil wars is the one in Syria that has been going on since 2011. Having left their homes due to wars, people surge into other countries as refugees. Many Syrian asylum seekers have come to neighboring Turkey as refugees. As of 22 December 2022, the number of Syrians granted "temporary protection" in Turkey is 3,543,837. Of these, 1,182,016 are between the ages of 5-18 and 567,921 are female.<sup>1</sup> According to January 2022 data, 730,806 out of 1,124,353 Syrian refugees of school age were enrolled in schools. Therefore, the schooling rate of school-age Syrian refugees is 65%. 35% of school-age Syrian refugees are outside the education system.<sup>2</sup>

Syrian refugees were educated in refugee camps and temporary education centers from 2011, until 2016; however, they have been receiving education in Turkish medium in Turkish state schools. The "Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES)" project was launched in 2016. The project aims to ensure Syrian children's adaptation to the Turkish education system and offers Turkish and Arabic language education, counseling, and guidance activities, personnel, and stationery assistance to support schools.<sup>3</sup>

Although it was decided to integrate Syrian refugees into the Turkish education system, this is not an easy task because it is hard to argue that opportunities are equal for refugees and Turkish citizens. However, access to education is offered equally to refugees. First, it is not easy for refugees, who have left their own country and come to a different country, to access education in a new country where there are many differences in language, culture, and education system. There are various studies on this issue. Studies based on teacher views revealed problems of Syrian students such as language and communication, adaptation to school culture, difference of sect and culture, academic failure or low academic achievement.<sup>4</sup> Another study examined the problems related to Syrian students' parents faced by school administrators, reporting that families have problems including having several children, insufficient financial status, experiencing domestic violence, changing their address continuously, and being indifferent to their children.<sup>5</sup> A holistic literature review demonstrates serious handicaps in Syrian students' education.

<sup>1</sup> Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), "Geçici Koruma Kapsamındaki Suriyelilere İlişkin İstatistikler" (16 Haziran 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of National Education, "2021-2022 Eğitim-Öğretim Yılı Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrencilerin Eğitimine İlişkin Veriler", (22 Haziran 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Piktes, "Piktes Projesi" (13 Şubat 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Rıdvan Demir, "İmam Hatip Lisesinde Öğrenim Gören Suriyeli Öğrencilerin Eğitim Sorunları: Kilis Örneği", *Mustafa Kemal Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 16/44 (23 Ekim 2019), 280-306; Cahit Erdem, "Sınıfında Mülteci Öğrenci Bulunan Sınıf Öğretmenlerinin Yaşadıkları Öğretimsel Sorunlar ve Çözüme Dair Önerileri", *Medeniyet Eğitim Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1/1 (30 Haziran 2017), 26-42; Servet Kardeş - Berrin Akman, "Suriyeli Mültecilerin Eğitimine Yönelik Öğretmen Görüşleri", *İlköğretim Online* 17/3 (31 Temmuz 2019), 1225-1237; Aybıçe Tosun vd., "Mülteci Öğrencilerin Eğitim Sorunları, Eğitim ve Din Eğitiminden Beklentileri: Eskişehir Örneği", *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 19/1 (01 Haziran 2018), 107-133; Sümeyye Ertekin Yıldız, "Suriyeli Çocukların Eğitimi Konusunda Nitel Bir Araştırma: Sorunlar Ve Çözüm Önerileri", *Middle East Journal of Refugee Studies* 4/2 (30 Aralık 2019), 5-32.

<sup>5</sup> Ebru Akyavuz Külekçi vd., "Suriyeli Öğrencilerin Eğitiminde Karşılaşılan Sorunlarla İlgili Okul Yöneticilerinin Görüşleri", *Uluslararası Eğitim Araştırmacıları Dergisi* 3/1 (26 Haziran 2020), 1-15.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, an important break has been experienced in the field of education. In this process, schools in Turkey were initially closed from March 16, 2020, to April 30, 2020, and it was decided to continue education through three TV channels and the Education Information Network (EIN) within the scope of open and distance education practices at the primary and secondary education level.<sup>6</sup> Due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic, with a decision taken on April 29, 2020, the vacation period of schools was extended until May 31, 2020, and education continued with distance education.<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of distance education was novel for all students, but for refugees, it meant adding a whole new problem to the existing situation. There are some basic requirements to access online education, including an internet connection, technological devices, and an appropriate environment. It is difficult for refugees, and economically disadvantaged students, to access these opportunities. This has resulted in refugees not being able to afford educational materials, not having access to technological equipment, and having to enter the workforce early, hence significantly affecting their chances of continuing their education. Limited research on this issue revealed that refugee children's education is significantly disrupted due to reasons including financial inadequacy, challenges of online education, economic difficulties, changing roles within the family, and the negative impact of longing for school.<sup>8</sup> Another study reported that Syrian students' participation in online lessons was low due to financial problems in terms of technological devices and internet access, inadequate language, and negative attitudes of parents; home environments and the number of siblings in education created problems in participating in online lessons. Therefore, they experienced equality of opportunity in education problems and emotional and psychological gaps, resulting in level differences among students.<sup>9</sup> Thus, refugee students, experiencing problems such as alienation, loneliness, and adaptation difficulties in social life and education before the pandemic, had to struggle with many additional difficulties in the distance education process.<sup>10</sup>

These new pandemic-specific circumstances are likely to create a different situation for Syrian girls, who are disadvantaged by traditional social and gender roles. Therefore, it is needed to examine the situations that opportunities of access to distance education, which are indeed valid for all students, create for Syrian refugees in particular and Syrian refugee female students more specifically. Considering Syrian girls' traditional gender roles, they are likely to stay at home, doing household chores considered appropriate for their roles, and therefore their attendance to education is likely to be affected. Only a single finding is available in the literature on this. In the study, a participant (a 17-year-old Syrian girl) said: "...Before the pandemic, I was just a student, afterward, I became both a student and housewife (meaning a girl doing chores at home)..."<sup>11</sup> They

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of National Education, "Bakan Selçuk, Koronavirüs'e Karşı Eğitim Alanında Alınan Tedbirleri Açıkladı" (12 Mart 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Anadolu Agency, "Uzaktan eğitim 31 Mayıs'a kadar uzatıldı" (29 Nisan 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Hakan Gülerce vd., "Suriyeli Sığınmacı Çocukların COVID-19 Pandemisi Sürecinde Eğitim Hayatında Yaşadığı Sorunlar", *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi* 10/31 (25 Haziran 2022), 92-108.

<sup>9</sup> Rabia Ünal, "Evaluation of the Distance Education Process with Syrian Students under Temporary Protection during the Covid-19 Pandemic Period", *Journal of Interdisciplinary Education: Theory and Practice* 4/1 (01 Haziran 2022), 34-52.

<sup>10</sup> Berre Sena Arslanoğlu vd., "Pandemi Dönemi Uzaktan Eğitim Süreci Sorunları: Suriyeli Mülteci Öğrenciler Üzerinde Nitel Bir İnceleme", *Ufuk Ötesi Bilim Dergisi* 21/2 (31 Aralık 2021), 290-316.

<sup>11</sup> Gülerce vd., "Suriyeli Sığınmacı Çocukların COVID-19 Pandemisi Sürecinde Eğitim Hayatında Yaşadığı Sorunlar".

addressed this as “changing roles within family” titles including male students’ changing roles.<sup>12</sup> So, the pandemic may have different effects specific to Syrian refugee girls, and families’ living conditions, religious understanding, and worldview may play a determining role in girls' education.

Religious education can undoubtedly make important contributions to overcoming such attitudes towards girls. One of the aims of the religious culture and ethics (RCE) course in schools is to "raise individuals who recognize the role of religion in making sense of life; embrace national, spiritual and moral values; and can live together with differences".<sup>13</sup> This aim enables children to make more rational sense of life and question inappropriate traditional practices. Moreover, through religious education, the child can ground his/her understanding of religion or worldview and develop a more respectful attitude towards "others". In addition, religious education can assume important responsibilities in eliminating social polarization, xenophobia, and hatred of others between native citizens and immigrants, which can arise in society because of migration and are likely to increase with the pandemic.

## 1. Purpose and Problem

The literature suggests that there is no research study on Syrian refugee female students’ educational processes during the pandemic and the contribution of religious education to this. This study aims to contribute to the literature by focusing on Syrian refugee girls. The main purpose of the study is to determine how Syrian girls experienced education during the pandemic what the impact of their families is in this process, and to evaluate what kind of contributions religious education may make to their education. Students and parents who experienced the educational processes were interviewed, as well as RCE teachers as a view from outside the family. The study examines the relationship between RCE teachers and Syrian female students, based on the assumption that cultural and religious commonalities facilitate more genuine communication. This connection can have a positive impact on the student's educational experience. While acknowledging the influence of guidance counselors and other subject teachers, the research focuses specifically on the interaction between RCE teachers and Syrian female students due to its scope. Thus, it is aimed to reach a broad perspective on Syrian girls’ education as a case. The research sought answers to the following questions:

1. Were Syrian female students able to access distance education during the pandemic? What were the supports or barriers in this regard?
2. What were the factors that supported or hindered their education during the pandemic period when they continued their education at home?
3. What solutions have teachers developed to deal with these problems?
4. What kind of contributions may the RCE teachers make to Syrian female students’ education?

<sup>12</sup> Gülerce vd., “Suriyeli Sığınmacı Çocukların COVID-19 Pandemisi Sürecinde Eğitim Hayatında Yaşadığı Sorunlar”.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of National Education, “Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Dersi Öğretim Programı (Ortaöğretim 9, 10, 11 ve 12. Sınıflar)” (2018).

## 2. Method

This is a qualitative study. Since descriptions and comparisons were planned to make for more than one sub-unit that may be within a basic case in this research, it was designed in an embedded single case study design.<sup>14</sup> The case involves Syrian female students' educational processes during the pandemic. To address this case, interviews were held with Syrian refugee female students, their parents, and teachers to evaluate the phenomenon from different perspectives.

### 2.1. Participants

Given the limitations of the pandemic period, the study sample was selected from people living in the cities of Antalya and Eskişehir, where the researchers are located. The participants were 10 Syrian refugee female students aged between 12-17 years, five parents (4 mothers, 1 father) aged between 31-46 years who have at least one daughter attending school, and five RCE teachers aged between 28-45 years (3 women, 2 men). Most of the parent participants were mothers because the fathers of the female students were workers and often at work. Parents, teachers, and students were selected from different schools to reach different experiences. This was also a result of the snowball sampling method. Among the participants contacted through acquaintances, appointments were made with those who met the required criteria, and face-to-face interviews were conducted. The criteria were being a Syrian female student attending various classes in the secondary schools during the pandemic for students, having at least 2 Syrian refugee female students in the classes they teach for teachers, and having at least 1 daughter continuing her education during the pandemic period for parents.

Table 1. Demographics of Parents

Parents No	Role	Age	Number of children	Occupation	Occupation of spouse	Internet connection at home	Child's room
P1	Mother	37	5	Housewife	Automechanic	No	No
P2	Mother	35	7	Housewife	House painter	No	No
P3	Mother	35	2	Garment trade	Garment trade	Yes	Yes
P4	Father	31	7	Teacher	Housewife	No	No
P5	Mother	46	4	Teacher	Deceased	No	No

<sup>14</sup> John Ward Creswell, *Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri Beş Yaklaşımına Göre Nitel Araştırma ve Araştırma Deseni*, çev. Selçuk Beşir Demir - Mesut Bütün (Ankara: Siyasal Kitabevi, 2023); Norman Kent Denzin - Yvonna Sessions Lincoln (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (USA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

Table 2. Demographics of Students

Student No	Age	Grade	Father occupation	Number of siblings	Internet connection at home	Child's room	Smart phone/ Tablet
S1	14	5	Construction worker	7	No	No	No
S2	12	6	Teacher	4	No	No	No
S3	13	5	Driver	5	No	No	No
S4	17	7	Construction worker	8	No	No	No
S5	15	9	Construction worker	6	No	No	No
S6	11	11	Auto mechanic	6	No	No	No
S7	15	6	Cleaner	4	No	No	No
S8	16	9	Dentist	3	Yes	No	Yes
S9	15	5	Teacher	5	Yes	No	No
S10	14	7	House painter	7	No	No	No

Table 3. Demographics of Teachers

Teacher No	Teaching grade	Age	Gender	Seniority
T1	Middle school	36	Female	12
T2	Middle school	45	Male	20
T3	High school	31	Female	8
T4	Middle school	38	Female	15
T5	High school	28	Male	5

## 2.2. Research Process

Permission was obtained from the university ethics committee for the study and the participants were informed. One-to-one interviews were conducted with students and teachers. Students had generally sufficient language skills to communicate successfully. The Syrian refugees were relaxed during the interviews and gave authentic answers. They lived in harmony with society due to the social acceptance and friendly approach of the Turkish people. Their comfortable behavior during the interview also confirmed this observation. However, since the Turkish language proficiency of the parents was not adequate, the interviews were conducted with the

assistance of a researcher who is fluent in Turkish and Arabic. To ensure the integrity of the data during translation to ensure validity and reliability, the Arabic interviews were also translated into Turkish by this researcher. After the initial translation, an independent expert, proficient in the languages and familiar with the subject matter, reviewed the translated transcripts for accuracy and consistency with the original context and meaning. Then, an expert with experience as an English translator, working in the field of education and familiar with qualitative research methodology, also translated the Turkish transcripts into English. Finally, the text was checked for appropriateness in Turkish and English, and the categorization of the data was by an expert in religious education who is fluent in English. This process aimed to minimize any potential meaning change and maintain the reliability of the data.

The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. In total, the study involved 20 interviews conducted by 2 male researchers (by the authors). Although the length of the interviews varied according to the sample group, they lasted on average 25 minutes. The interviews resulted in a total of 469 minutes of audio recordings. The audio recordings were transcribed, and data analysis was carried out on these data.

### **2.3. Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, descriptive analysis was used to explore the case clearly due to the intensity of the participant's views and the language limitations of the participating students and parents. Based on the descriptive analysis, the data were summarised and interpreted from the perspectives of the student (StudentX), parent (ParentX), and teacher (TeacherX) according to pre-defined themes.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, striking quotes from the participants' views were included if deemed relevant when analyzing the data. The data were analyzed within the themes of “technological inadequacies in accessing education, lack of a suitable setting to connect to distance education, problems arising from being at home: housework, psychological barriers, problems arising from nonproficiency in Turkish, traditional judgments about girls' education, opportunities offered by RCE teachers, perceptions about face-to-face education after the pandemic”.

## **3. Findings**

In this section, the findings are presented below following the main categories.

### **3.1. Technological Inadequacies in Accessing Education**

Participant students experienced problems in accessing distance education during the pandemic for various reasons. The main one included their problems in possessing the technological equipment to participate in distance education as well as internet connection. Only two parents (P3, P5) and two students (S8, S9) had an internet connection at home while the other parents and students connected to the internet through mobile phones. None of the students had personal computers or phones. Only S8 stated that her parents bought a tablet after the pandemic

<sup>15</sup> Ali Yıldırım - Hasan Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri*, 8. Baskı (Ankara: Seçkin Yayıncılık, 2011), 224.



started but she used it alternately with her siblings. So, the students had challenges in terms of internet connection and technological equipment to attend lessons, indicating that economic challenges inhibited Syrian female students' access to education during the pandemic. A significant problem with this is related to attending lessons on parents' phones. Connecting to lessons on their fathers' phones, S1 and S10 stated that they could not access lessons when their fathers were not at home and used the phone alternately when their fathers were at home. Another problem of connecting to lessons on phones is the high number of siblings going to school. It prevented following lessons regularly when the siblings had online lessons at the same time (S4).

These challenges were also mentioned by teachers. On the other hand, teachers added that some parents contacted them by telephone to get information about that day's lesson and homework.

Unfortunately, when we started distance education, we lost contact with many of our students. Not only refugees, but we could also not communicate with our students with low economic status, of course, most of them were refugees. Some parents or students would call and ask about the topic and homework we had covered that day, but this was not enough. (T3)

### ***3.2. Lack of a Suitable Setting to Connect to Distance Education***

Another obstacle to attending classes is the lack of a suitable environment. The students stated that they did not have a silent setting at home due to a high number of siblings, living with the elderly at home, and not having a private room (S2). A student said she attended the lesson on the balcony, which was the only place in the house where she could be alone (S10). T5 supported this idea with the following statements.

Almost every household has a young baby or child. The mother has too many responsibilities and cannot keep up with them all. In live classes, we see siblings on the screen of students who turn on the camera and sound. This reduces the child's attention and motivation. (T5)

### ***3.3. Problems Arising from Being at Home: Housework***

In addition to the unique functioning of distance education, being at home is also novel for students. Students stated that when they were at home due to the pandemic, they were more involved in household chores compared to normal times. Participants stated that help with household chores was sometimes at the request of the parent (P1, P5) and sometimes students volunteered (S1, S4, S7). Besides, some students did the chores due to their mother's illness (S5) or respect for their mothers (S6).

Lack of opportunities to connect to distance education also caused students to turn to housework since they stay at home idle. The parents stated they did not impose extra work in this regard. Teachers, on the other hand, reported that being at home made students feel that they had to do housework and therefore could not connect to the lessons (T3).

Similarly, T5 stated that the students' siblings constantly distracted them from lessons as they saw the siblings on students' screens, which shows that students inevitably had to deal with their siblings. These responsibilities that Syrian girls must bear at home are closely related to their socialization processes, worldviews, and traditional lifestyles. The pandemic process has further reinforced these traditional gender roles in some families.

### **3.4. Psychological Barriers**

One of the negative consequences of the pandemic is psychological effects. We observed that Syrian female students experienced these psychological effects in two dimensions: coping with the reality of death and staying away from social life. About the first dimension, S7's statements, who lost her beloved aunt during the pandemic, are noteworthy as one of the important psychological damages caused by the pandemic:

On the day of our live class, I was connected to my mother's phone. During the class, my uncle called. I didn't want to answer the phone at first. When he called for the second time, I gave the phone to my mother. After talking for a while, my mother started to scream and cry. I realized that my aunt, who was sick, had lost her life. (S7).

Due to the unhygienic, crowded, and unhealthy physical environment in their living spaces, most of the Syrian female students stated that the constant announcements of the number of deaths on the evening news and the frequent news that their relatives were sick scared them a lot. T3 stated that students asked a lot of questions about pandemic deaths, especially high school students, and she told them that religion advised people to be patient and learn lessons in these situations.

Regarding the second dimension, students who stayed away from school and could not socialize adequately were affected negatively. P5 pointed out that children aged 9-11-17 did not want to participate in online lessons although they had the opportunity, and they expected to make it up when the schools opened. Some parents added that before the pandemic, the students came home tired and rested at home, therefore they did not have any tensions with their siblings; however, they were always at home during the pandemic and they became aggressive (P1, P3, P4), and missed the school (P2).

S3 expressed that being away from school was bad and made her feel incompetent, and S1 added that she felt bored at home. S5 said that her friends communicated through social media and mobile phones during the pandemic, and she kept away from the agenda and new friendships and then became lonely when she returned to school after the pandemic.

The large number of deaths during the pandemic and the inability to go out due to the quarantine practice caused psychological problems in children and made them afraid, and isolated, and indirectly disrupted their education during this period. In conclusion, these data indicate that Syrian female students experienced a decrease in motivation to attend classes during the pandemic.

### **3.5. Problems Arising from Nonproficiency in Turkish**

Despite the technological possibilities, distance education is a more limited way of communication than face-to-face education. This limitation may cause problems, especially for refugee students due to their nonproficiency in Turkish. While Syrian refugee students have mostly made significant progress in Turkish, recent immigrants do not yet have sufficient Turkish language skills. P3 stated that although they had internet and computers at home, they had difficulties due to their children's insufficient Turkish language skills. Similarly, T1 said that due to the limited communication in distance education, they had difficulties in explaining even a concept students knew and that they could explain in 20 minutes what they could explain in 5 minutes. S6 stated that in online education, they did not have the opportunity to reach their teachers and friends outside the class, so they could not ask their friends or teachers what they did not understand in the lesson.

### ***3.6. Traditional Judgments/Barriers to Girls' Education***

An important impact of the pandemic on girls' education is that it poses a risk to the continuation of their education due to their absence from school because of the pandemic. Although parents stated that their children should complete their education and that female students aimed to continue their education and have a profession, T1 stated that a parent was against girls' education. T3, who stated that the biggest obstacles to Syrian girls' education were financial inadequacy and lack of support from their families, shared the following anecdote about a family with the mindset that "girls shouldn't go to school".

..... a student's name came to the class where I was a guidance counselor, and there was no number to contact. I went to the address we had, they moved to another neighborhood. I went to that address, the family spoke Arabic, we talked to the mother, then she gave me the father's phone number and I called him. He said that the child did not want to go to school, they forced her, but she wouldn't go, and now she went to her uncle's house for a trip. I researched and found out that this girl was not sent to school. However, she was very successful and loved to read.

Teachers thought that factors such as socioeconomic conditions, gender perceptions, and future expectations of Syrian refugee families affect their approaches to education and cause disruption of students' education. T5's observations on the behavior of female students in educational environments are noteworthy.

Syrian female students undergo a change in the process from primary school to high school. While they are normally compatible with more interactive learning and learning environments with other male students in the class in primary school, as they get older, they become more hesitant compared to Turkish students and prefer to learn in groups of girls or to learn individually. For example, when a girl was going to do a circle activity with a boy, our teacher noticed that some girls did not want to sit next to a boy and tried to overcome the problem by finding quick solutions such as having a girl next to a girl and a boy next to a boy. Of course, during this process, the school guidance service actively supported the children with the help and guidance of the religion teacher, and we saw the benefits of this in the children's acceptance of the environment. (T5)

The parents and students we interviewed about obstacles to girls' education did not mention any problems. All the findings on this issue come from teachers. Therefore, we can deduce that a small number of Syrian parents have negative attitudes towards girls' education due to traditional judgments.

### ***3.7. Opportunities Offered by RCE Teachers During the Pandemic***

During the pandemic, people's fears about health and life made them face the reality of death. This naturally led people to turn to religion and engage in worship during their stay at home. In this regard, we found that participating students and teachers shared similar experiences. For example, students stated that they were more motivated to attend RCE lessons because the pandemic coincided with Ramadan, an important time for Muslims, and COVID-19 disease made them think about life after death (S3, S6). S7 said that the RCE teacher advised them to pray to Allah more when the disease spread. S3 explained the contribution of the RCE teacher's attitude as follows.

During the quarantine period, my grandmother passed away. I couldn't even attend her funeral because I was young, and I was a girl. I was very sad, I cried for days, and I didn't attend lessons for a few weeks. Afterward, my RCE teacher found out about it, and she phoned me and gave me her condolences. The only thing that made me happy at that time was that my teacher called me. Then I resumed my classes thanks to her. (S3)

S3's communication with her RCE teacher helped her normalize her experiences and continue with real life. We can deduce that the teacher's indoctrination on the point of belief and her ability to empathize with the student had an important effect here. Similarly, T5 said:

Especially in high school, students ask a lot of questions about pandemic deaths, and I explain in class that religion advises patience and learning lessons in these situations". Regarding the opportunities of RCE lessons, the same teacher said: "We can evaluate this not only as a course but also as a teacher. Because students and parents towards us "RCE teachers are more compassionate, and they can help us a little more". Being a RCE teacher here has the following benefit: 60-70% of the students' families are more religious. As such, children inevitably feel closer to us. (T5)

T4 reported the parents' demands: "Teacher, you are an RCE teacher, you can help her (our child) a little more in this regard (T4)", and another teacher added:

Children have much healthier relationships with RCE teachers than with other teachers, mainly due to language and cultural predisposition. In other words, RCE teachers know the lives of Syrian children better. They can understand them more easily, perhaps through empathy. Of course, the children realize this, they don't tell their class teacher about their problems, but they go and open to the RCE teacher even though she is a branch teacher. Immediately after we realized this, we told our RCE teachers that they were a bridge for these children and that they were at a key point between the class teachers, other branch teachers, and the guidance service, and they were already aware of this. Even parents, for example, have a problem with a math lesson, but the parent calls the RCE teacher. Because to some extent, they can communicate with them more easily... So it is possible to say that RCE teachers have a different mission. (T2)

Similarly, T1 stated as follows:

We use Turkish when we explain something in class the child knows what I am explaining, but since he does not know its equivalent in Turkish, I explain it for a very long time by associating it with religious concepts and events that he can relate to, I explain it by giving different examples from Siyar and especially from Arab culture. When he understands an example, he says: "I know that, but this is how we say it. This is a bit of a waste of time for me, I mean what I would normally explain in 2 minutes I can sometimes explain in 10-15 minutes because we are not using a language that the child can understand (T1).

Finally, the following statements from T5 are noteworthy concerning the contribution of RCE teachers to the adaptation of Syrian refugee girls to the educational environment:

Our Syrian female students are going through a change in the process of moving from primary school to secondary school. While they are normally compatible with more interactive learning in primary school and learning environments with other male students in the class, as they get older they are more hesitant compared to their childhood and prefer learning in groups of girls or individual learning. For example, when a girl wanted to do a circle activity with another boy, our

teacher saw that some girls did not want to sit next to a boy when they met a boy and tried to overcome the problem by finding quick solutions by putting a girl next to a girl and a boy next to a boy. Of course, the school counseling service actively supported the child in this process, with the help and guidance of the RCE teacher, and we have seen the benefits of this in the children's acceptance of the environment. (T5)

Based on teachers' statements, we understand that parents and students feel close to the RCE teachers in various aspects, especially in terms of worldview. In addition, RCE teachers are graduates of theology faculties, receive intensive Arabic education, and are more familiar with Arabic compared to other teachers. This eases communication and makes them the first teachers whom parents wish to communicate. RCE teachers' approach to the education of Syrian refugee girls during the pandemic period has had an important impact on children and parents. Therefore, RCE teachers can support the education of girls through their communication with parents.

### **3.8. Perceptions about Face-to-Face Education after the Pandemic**

Students' and teachers' responses to the questions we asked to learn about Syrian refugee girls' perceptions of post-pandemic face-to-face education emphasized different dimensions. Regarding the advantages of face-to-face education, students mentioned that being in school and meeting teachers made them happy, and face-to-face education and being with friends was better (S8). Face-to-face education was more successful for student-teacher interaction although distance education was costless and hassle-free (S5). Internet connection or microphone-related problems were experienced in distance education but face-to-face education did not involve such technical problems (S6). On the other hand, S7 argued that when switched to face-to-face education, the teachers did not teach the subjects taught during the pandemic although they could not learn it then, and hence they had problems with those subjects.

Regarding post-pandemic education, Syrian refugee female students' answers about the physical and behavioral changes they observed in their friends are also noteworthy. S9 said: "*When I first came back to school, I realized that everyone had grown up*"; S7 complained about the exclusion/isolation problem in face-to-face education with these remarks: "*After the pandemic, my friends had changed, some of my friends had contacted each other through social media during the pandemic but I didn't know it. When I returned to school, they were more intimate.*"

Regarding the differentiation between Syrian and Turkish children, T2 reported that after the pandemic, Turkish girls were more extroverted, while Syrian girls had a more introverted mood. This may be associated with the facts that the fact that Syrian girls had a more limited circle of relatives and interacted with fewer people, thus spending time in a smaller social environment during the pandemic, and then suddenly joining the crowd when they came to school.

The emphasis on students' adaptation to school rules and social life is noteworthy in the answers given by some teachers in this category. For example, T1 responded to this question by stating that Turkish and Syrian girls in the 10-12 age group were behaviorally the same, liked the same things, knew the same jokes, or had the same problems related to growing up, but they differed in terms of their families' financial status and personal care. T4 pointed out that Syrian girls had more discipline-related problems at the beginning, and said: "...due to their access to technological tools

and the time they could allocate for social media use, the impact of social media tools in the education process was less than Turkish students. However, in general, all students were more maladaptive in their in-school and classroom behaviors when they started face-to-face education.” In line with this finding, T2 said:

Since the home environment was more comfortable, the distance education process was not like education at school. As a result, school rules and social rules took a back seat. However, about a month after the face-to-face education started, the children were able to adapt to school again. (T2)

T5, unlike the others, stated that there was no problem in the process of children's school attendance after the pandemic, the children who came to school before were already voluntarily and willingly involved in face-to-face education, they started to act like their peers face-to-face education, and students entered an adaptation process in terms of participating in the cultural structure and social life and forming ideas for the future, especially depending on the financial situation of the family.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study researched Syrian refugee female students' access to distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic, the people and factors that supported or hindered their education, and the contributions offered by RCE lessons and RCE teachers during the pandemic, and eventually reveals that the pandemic has significantly altered Syrian refugee female students' education, responsibilities, lifestyles, and understanding of life.

The findings in the study regarding Syrian female students' technical inadequacies in accessing online education during the quarantine period, their parents' indifference, inaccessibility to education due to language nonproficiency and motivation problems, and not having a suitable physical setting for online education are supported by research in the literature.<sup>16</sup> Teachers and students generally tend to be dissatisfied with the online education implemented during the pandemic period.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the inability of Syrian refugee female students to participate in distance education due to the aforementioned impossibilities has made the situation worse for them, as emphasized in other studies,<sup>18</sup> by leading them to housework and keeping them away from education. Indeed, it is inevitable for almost all children to have learning loss due to not being able to attend education adequately. However, it can be predicted that this situation faced by Syrian girls may cause them to disconnect from education in the future, or at best,

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<sup>16</sup> Gülerce vd., “Suriyeli Sığınmacı Çocukların COVID-19 Pandemisi Sürecinde Eğitim Hayatında Yaşadığı Sorunlar”; Ünal, “Evaluation of the Distance Education Process with Syrian Students under Temporary Protection during the Covid-19 Pandemic Period”; Muhammed Esat Altıntaş, “DKAB Öğretmenlerine Göre Suriyeli Çocukların Devlet Okullarında Karşılaştıkları Sorunlar (Nitel Bir Araştırma)”, Marife, 2018, 495; Baltacı vd. “İmam Hatip Liselerindeki Suriyeli Öğrencilerin Din Eğitimi Sorunları: Çözümü Yönelik Nitel Bir Analiz”. *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 60/2 (Kasım 2019): 333.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmet Çakmak - Yakup Uzunpolat, “Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi Öğretmenlerine Göre Salgın Döneminde Uzaktan Eğitim”, *Tasavvur / Tekirdağ İlahiyat Dergisi* 7/1 (30 Haziran 2021), 855-892; Mualla Selçuk vd., “The Online Learning Experience of Theology Students in Turkey during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A New Disposition for RE?”, *Religious Education* 116/1 (31 Ocak 2021), 74-90.

<sup>18</sup> Gülerce vd., “Suriyeli Sığınmacı Çocukların COVID-19 Pandemisi Sürecinde Eğitim Hayatında Yaşadığı Sorunlar”.

to continue their education with difficulty. Undoubtedly, this situation is related to the traditional way of life in the family, religious perceptions, and partly to the lack of importance attached to the education of girls. Furthermore, the situation of Syrian girls should be seen as an issue that needs to be addressed in terms of social cohesion and cultural conflict. As suggested by studies, it is important to implement value-centered projects and activities that would prevent both refugee students and locals from marginalizing each other, to provide governmental and non-governmental support for some projects and activities, to start free language courses to solve communication problems, to establish socio-cultural networks among the students, and to discuss the effectiveness of the intervention with multidisciplinary teamwork.<sup>19</sup>

Another noteworthy finding of the study pointed out that RCE teachers' attitudes affected Syrian refugee female students and their parents significantly during the pandemic. This finding may be due to the development of sympathy and closeness between RCE teachers and families due to religious ties, and thus, solutions to the problems experienced are developed more easily. Therefore, thanks to RCE lessons and RCE teachers in schools, it was possible for Syrian refugee girls not only to acquire the adaptation competencies required by inclusive education but also to cope with the abstentionist attitudes they have developed due to their traditional understanding of religion. This function of RCE lessons and teachers was also mentioned in studies conducted before the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> The RCE teachers' communication with the students when they lost their relatives was one of the difficulties of the pandemic and their recommendations during this communication process can be shown as an example of how religious education helps students develop resilience to problems related to making sense of life.<sup>21</sup> In parallel to this contribution of RCE lessons and teachers, there is also a study showing the existence of a significant relationship between the cultural adaptation of refugee students and their orientation to positive religious coping activities.<sup>22</sup>

Religious education tries to fulfill many different purposes and functions at the same time,<sup>23</sup> as well as helping students in the process of answering the big questions in their lives.<sup>24</sup> RCE lessons have similar purposes and functions in Turkey. In addition to these, this study demonstrates that RCE teachers, with their Arabic language skills and religious/cultural affinity, play an important role in refugee children's adaptation to school and society. Furthermore, with the use of religious commands in the textbooks that girls have the right and duty to study and acquire knowledge at least as much as boys, RCE lessons have the potential to guide families who are hesitant in this regard. For example, these statements in the "Knowledge and Belief" unit in the 9th grade are important:

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<sup>19</sup> Zeynep Özcan. "Mülteci Öğrencilerin Kültürel Uyumları ile Dinî Başa Çıkmaları Arasındaki İlişki Üzerine Bir Araştırma". *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi* 23/1 (Haziran 2019): 144; Betül Kübra Doğan - Ayşenur Pekasıl. "Covid-19 Pandemisi Bağlamında Evsizler, Mevsimlik Tarım İşçileri, Mülteci, Şartlı Mülteci ve Geçici Koruma Kapsamında Bulunan Suriyelilerin Sorunları Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme". *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet*, 32/1 (Ocak 2021), 288.

<sup>20</sup> Tosun vd., "Mülteci Öğrencilerin Eğitim Sorunları, Eğitim ve Din Eğitiminden Beklentileri".

<sup>21</sup> Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, "Religious Education in (Post-)Pandemic Times; Becoming a Resilient Professional in a Teacher Academy", *Religions* 11/11 (Kasım 2020), 610.

<sup>22</sup> Zeynep Özcan. "Mülteci Öğrencilerin Kültürel Uyumları ile Dinî Başa Çıkmaları Arasındaki İlişki Üzerine Bir Araştırma". *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi* 23/1 (Haziran 2019): 144;

<sup>23</sup> John Conroy vd., *Does Religious Education Work? A Multi-Dimensional Investigation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Wintersgill (ed.), *Big Ideas for Religious Education* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2017).

With the hadith, "It is obligatory for every Muslim, male or female, to acquire knowledge", the Prophet required Muslims to learn the necessary knowledge... What is learned during school, vocational knowledge, language, and general cultural knowledge are considered in this context. Almighty Allah's command to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), "Pray, 'My Lord! Increase me in knowledge'" states that a person should continue to learn throughout his or her life.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the post-pandemic face-to-face education, Syrian refugee female students emphasized the physical and behavioral changes they observed in their friends, while teachers emphasized students' adaptation to school rules and social life. Accordingly, Syrian refugee girls experienced a more disconnected school life from their peers after the pandemic, but they were able to adapt to society and culture in a short time. Syrian female students preferred face-to-face education due to the loneliness, adaptation difficulties, and difficulties in distance education they experienced during the pandemic. Besides, the participants had high expectations from education in terms of their desire to acquire a profession and their hopes for the future, which is supported in the literature.<sup>26</sup>

A peculiar finding is that Syrian refugee female students started to adapt to the culture and lifestyle in Turkey as a result of their participation in distance and face-to-face education environments. Students and teachers think that Syrian refugee children have become more able to live in harmony with the social structure, unlike their parents, which is a result of their socialization and acculturation thanks to the education they receive. The RCE course contributes to the integration of Syrian students with its content emphasizing belief systems and worship as well as cultural awareness, sharing, tolerance, and religious literacy.<sup>27</sup> A similar study also found that religious education has a significant impact on the adaptation of Syrian migrants, with the positive influence of some educators acting as a turning point, while uninformed and biased approaches have complicated social cohesion and increased tendencies towards mutual rejection.<sup>28</sup>

Based on the findings, this study offers several recommendations for Syrian female students' education. Pieces of training can be organized for refugee children and their families with school guidance services and classroom teachers to make them aware of the importance and contributions of education. RCE teachers, with whom parents primarily wish to communicate, can take a leading role in these trainings. Since refugee children have been in social isolation during the pandemic and spent more time at home, religious education can be used to help families and their children overcome their psychological problems. For example, families can read religious stories with their children or celebrate religious days and nights with them. In the process of implementing these activities, children's ages, interests, and learning styles should be considered. In conclusion, whether Syrian refugee female students will continue their education is closely related to their families' religious, cultural, and educational understandings as well as their socioeconomic status. If parents and students can develop the right understanding and approaches to these issues, Syrian refugee girls will be able to live a healthier and more fulfilling life.

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah Bektaş vd., *Ortaöğretim Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi 9. Sınıf Ders Kitabı* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Arslanoğlu vd., "Pandemi Dönemi Uzaktan Eğitim Süreci Sorunları: Suriyeli Mülteci Öğrenciler Özelinde Nitel Bir İnceleme"; Emin Tamer Yenen - Perihan Ulucan, "Uzman Görüşleri Doğrultusunda Türkiyede Yaşayan Mülteci Çocukların Sorunlarına Yönelik Çözüm Önerileri", *Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi SBE Dergisi* 10/1 (22 Haziran 2020), 292-305.

<sup>27</sup> Yıldız Kızılabdullah - Tuğrul Yürük, "The Contribution of the Religious Culture and Ethics Course on the Integration of Children of Syrians in Adana, Turkey", *Religious Education* 113/3 (2018), 289-301.

<sup>28</sup> Öznur Kalkan Açıköz - Ahmet Yemenici. "Türkiye'de Bulunan Geçici Koruma Statüsündeki Suriyelilerin Türkiye'deki Din Eğitimi Deneyimlerinin Değerlendirilmesi" . *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi* , 11/4 (2022), 2261.



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