


## Access to Education of Syrians under Temporary Protection in the Changing and Developing Turkish Education System: Barriers and Suggestions

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### Makale Bilgileri/Article Information

Tür-Type: Araştırma makalesi-Research article

Geliş tarihi-Date of submission: 10. 07. 2024

Kabul tarihi-Date of acceptance: 28. 10. 2024

Yayın tarihi-Date of publication: 31. 10. 2024

### Hakemlik-Review

Hakem sayısı-Reviewers: İki Dış Hakem-Two External

Değerlendirme-Rewiev: Çift Taraflı Kör

Hakemlik-Double-blind

### Etik/Ethics

Etik beyan- Ethical statement: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde etik ilkelere uyulmuştur.

Benzerlik taraması- Plagiarism checks

Yapıldı-İntihal.net-Yes-İntihal.net

Etik bildirim- Complaints

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### Çıkar çatışması-Conflict of interest

Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest

### Finansman-Grant Support

Herhangi bir fon, hibe veya başka bir destek alınmamıştır.

No funds, grants, or other support was received.

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### Abstract

The Turkish education system adopts an inclusive approach for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds; however, Syrian children face various barriers such as language, economic challenges, social cohesion, and cultural differences. Language barriers, particularly for Arabic-speaking children, complicate their adaptation to the Turkish educational environment, while economic challenges restrict their attendance, and issues of social cohesion and cultural awareness hinder their acceptance in schools. This article addresses the educational access challenges faced by Syrian children under temporary protection in Türkiye and examines the overall development of the Turkish education system, outlining the difficulties these children encounter in their educational journey. Suggested solutions include strengthening language education programs, improving legal frameworks, reducing educational costs, and promoting social cohesion and cultural sensitivity. In this context, the necessity for comprehensive and sustainable policies to support Syrian children's integration into the Turkish education system is emphasized. The proposed Learning and Adaptation Together Program (LEAP) is expected to accelerate educational access for Syrians under temporary protection and contribute to social cohesion. This program aims to facilitate the participation of Syrian children in Turkey's educational system and enhance social cohesion, thus fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

**Keywords:** Turkish education system, temporary protection, Syrian migration, migrant children, migration

## Değişen ve Gelişen Türk Eğitim Sisteminde Geçici Korunan Suriyelilerin Eğitime Erişimi: Engeller ve Öneriler

### Öz

Türk eğitim sistemi, farklı kültürel geçmişlere sahip bireylere kapsayıcı bir yaklaşım benimsemesine rağmen, Suriyeli çocuklar dil, ekonomik zorluklar, sosyal uyum ve kültürel farklılıklar gibi çeşitli engellerle karşılaşmaktadır. Özellikle Arapça konuşan çocuklar için dil engeli, Türk eğitim sistemine uyumu zorlaştırırken, ekonomik sıkıntılar çocukların okula devamını kısıtlamakta ve sosyal uyum ile kültürel farkındalık eksiklikleri çocukların okullarda kabulünü zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu makale, Türkiye'de geçici koruma altındaki Suriyeli çocukların eğitime erişim sorunlarını ele almakta; Türk eğitim sisteminin genel gelişimi ve Suriyeli çocukların eğitim sürecinde karşılaştıkları zorlukları kapsamlı bir şekilde incelemektedir. Suriyeli öğrencilerin uyum sorunlarının giderilmesine yönelik olarak dil eğitimi programlarının güçlendirilmesi, yasal düzenlemelerin iyileştirilmesi, eğitim maliyetlerinin azaltılması ve sosyal uyum ile kültürel duyarlılığın artırılması önerilmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, Suriyeli çocukların Türk eğitim sistemine entegrasyonunu desteklemek amacıyla kapsamlı ve sürdürülebilir politikalara ihtiyaç duyulduğu vurgulanmaktadır. Önerilen Birlikte Öğrenme ve Uyum Programı'nın (LEAP), geçici koruma altındaki Suriyelilerin eğitime erişimini hızlandıracağı ve toplumsal uyuma katkı sağlayacağı öngörülmektedir. Bu programın, Suriyeli çocukların Türkiye'de eğitim hayatına katılımını teşvik ederek sosyal uyumu güçlendirmesi hedeflenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk eğitim sistemi, geçici koruma, Suriyeli göçü, göçmen çocuklar, göç.

### Atıf- Citation (APA)

Güçlüten, Ç. (2024). Access to Education of Syrians under Temporary Protection in the Changing and Developing Turkish Education System: Barriers and Suggestions, *İctimaiyat*, Cilt 8, Türk Eğitim Sisteminde Değişimler ve Yeni Eğilimler Özel Sayısı, ss. 77-93.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33709/ictimaiyat.1513907>.

## **1. Introduction**

While the shifting, emerging, and transforming paradigm of today's world affects all working disciplines, the field of education is also at the center of these changes. From the specific to the general, the education process, which manifests itself within the family, has then transcended the boundaries of the family and turned into an information-sharing mechanism that is transferred from generation to generation. Furthermore, the phenomenon of education, which initially evolved and developed through natural methods, has become systematized over time and has continued to exist with the determination of education policies by states. Historical references on the place of education in society have a guiding role in defining education. In this context, according to Plato, education is a phenomenon that turns the human being in another direction, directs the human soul, and enables the discovery of the world of ideas (Plato, 2006: p. 485). From this point of view, education can be considered a guide that encourages the individual to understand and practice correct behaviors. According to another philosopher, Aristotle, the education of children should be provided by the state rather than being left directly to the family institution, and it is through education that individuals can become virtuous citizens (Aristotle, 1993: p. 233). In fact, Aristotle argues that it is only possible for individuals to be good and virtuous through education under the control of public regulations. Peters, on the other hand, interpreted education, which is formed by the combination of different processes, as the formation of desired qualities in the individual with the most general definition and suggested that these desired qualities are shaped according to the value judgments of individuals and societies (Peters, 2010: p. 2–13). In this regard, Peters characterized education as an institution that is instrumental in equipping an individual with the desired characteristics and stated that this shaping changes and develops depending on the value judgments of society. However, the philosophical perspectives of Plato, Aristotle, and Peters also raise critical questions when applied to contemporary challenges such as the education of Syrian children under temporary protection in Turkey. For instance, Plato's notion of education as a means of guiding individuals towards a better understanding of ideas can be seen as analogous to the need for educational policies that help Syrian children navigate their new realities and potential futures. Similarly, Aristotle's argument that the state should play a central role in shaping virtuous citizens through education is particularly relevant in the context of refugees, where state intervention is crucial in ensuring that these children, displaced by war, can develop into engaged and informed members of society. Moreover, Peters' view that education reflects the value judgments of a society challenges us to consider how Turkish societal values—rooted in equality and inclusivity—are being translated into policies and practices that affect the integration of Syrian refugees into the education system. It is within this philosophical framework that we must explore the specific barriers Syrian children face in accessing education under temporary protection, as well as the ways in which the evolving Turkish education system attempts to address these challenges. By bridging these theoretical ideas with the lived experiences of Syrian refugees, we can better understand both the opportunities and limitations of Turkey's efforts to provide equitable education to all.

Providing education to individuals through the state facilitates their access to more egalitarian, controllable, and disciplined institutionalized education. In this sense, one of the concrete examples of the delivery of institutional education to individuals is the Turkish education system. In the Turkish education system, the principle of inclusive education is adopted, and the education of individuals from different communities, cultures, and beliefs is organized in accordance with the principle of equality. In addition to the inclusion of locals in education and training, efforts to

integrate foreigners into the Turkish education system also open the doors to quality education in the Turkish education system. In this context, one of the most concrete indicators of the inclusion of foreigners in education has been the efforts made for Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey. Turkey, which has a 911 km land border with Syria, has been one of the countries most affected by the turmoil in Syria. Turkey, which has an "open door" policy towards Syrians under temporary protection, accepted the first mass population movement from Syria on April 29, 2011 and a group of 252 people entered the country. Following this migration mobility, mass migration started (Güçlüten, 2023: p. 49). According to the data of the Directorate of Migration Management, as of May 30, 2024, 3,114,099 people ([www.goc.gov.tr](http://www.goc.gov.tr)) are living under temporary protection in Turkey. Such an intensive migration has undoubtedly necessitated the reprogramming of the Turkish education system and the emergence of a more inclusive education approach. In this study, the access of Syrians under temporary protection to education in the changing Turkish education system is evaluated within the scope of the difficulties encountered and solution suggestions. This study, which examines the changes and transformations in the Turkish education system in general terms, examines the difficulties in access under the headings of language barrier and lack of language education, legal regulations and difficulties in accessing official documents, economic difficulties and social cohesion. This study aims to address the difficulties faced by Syrians under temporary protection in the process of inclusion in the education system as sociological factors and to offer solutions to these problems. In this study, it is analyzed that it would be more inclusive to carry out studies on Syrians under temporary protection at the ministry level which could be named as Ministry of Immigration.

## **2. Education of Syrians in the Turkish education system**

In 2011, Turkey was one of the countries most affected by the repercussions of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. As the country hosting the largest number of asylum seekers and refugees in the world, Turkey's "open door policy" after the Syrian crisis has turned Turkey into a living space for millions of Syrians. In light of the fact that women and children are the individuals most affected by the phenomenon of migration, the education of Syrian children and youth constitute one of the sensitive points of Syrian migration. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are among the stakeholders of civic responsibility in education in Turkey, projects carried out by the Ministry of National Education, and local governments' activities for Syrians have come to the fore as organizations that contribute to the educational processes of Syrians.

The legal arrangements for the education of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey were put on a legal basis after the arrival of Syrians to Turkey. Between 2010 and 2014, regulations, circulars and laws that came into force accelerated and formalized the process of integration of migrants into education in Turkey. The first regulation issued in this context was the "Circular on Foreign Students" (Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenciler Genelgesi) dated August 16, 2010. This circular, which included registration and admission requirements and data entry procedures, addressed issues such as receiving applications from foreign students and processing data via e-devlet (e-state). This regulation was repealed in 2018. Following this regulation, the "Ministry of National Education Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions" ([www.ogm.meb.gov.tr](http://www.ogm.meb.gov.tr)) was published on September 7, 2013. This regulation was aimed at rewarding individuals who support victims of forced migration and awarding certificates of honor. The most comprehensive regulation published in 2013 was the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" (Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu) ([www.mevzuat.gov.tr](http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr)) dated April 11, 2013. The purpose of this law is to regulate the procedures and principles regarding the entry of foreigners into, stay in and exit

from Turkey and the scope and implementation of the protection to be provided to foreigners who request protection from Turkey. This law regulates the necessary measures to be taken by the Ministry of National Education to ensure that children benefit from education and training and the uninterrupted continuation of Syrian children's education through the issuance of the necessary residence permits, as well as the procedures for foreigners who will enter the country for educational purposes. In addition to this law, Temporary Education Centers (Geçici Eğitim Merkezleri – GEM) (TECs) were established for the continuation of the education of Syrian children with the circular titled "Measures for Syrian Citizens Hosted Outside Camps in Our Country" (Ülkemizde Kamp Dışında Misafir Edilen Suriye Vatandaşlarına Yönelik Tedbirler) ([www.orgm.meb.gov.tr](http://www.orgm.meb.gov.tr)) approved on April 26, 2013 and the circular titled "Education and Training Services for Foreigners" dated September 23, 2014, which was further expanded (Coşkun & Emin, 2016: p. 17). Syrian students, who can continue their education with a Temporary Protection identity document or with guest student status, receive this education not for the purpose of adaptation to Turkey, but to ensure that their education is not interrupted when they return to Syria. For this reason, the language of instruction at TECs is Arabic, not Turkish.

In addition to TECs, temporary education programs designed to help Syrian students learn Turkish and adapt to the Turkish education system, pre-school education programs to help children develop their social and academic skills have also taken their place among the education programs provided under temporary protection. However, over time, as a consensus was reached that the return of Syrians should be voluntary and honorable, it became clear that more long-term and permanent solutions were needed instead of looking at Syrians as "guests". In this context, as a result of the work carried out by the Ministry of National Education, a "Strategic Plan" ([www.sgb.meb.gov.tr](http://www.sgb.meb.gov.tr)) for the years 2015-2019 was prepared on September 8, 2015 and it was decided that Syrian students in the first, fifth and ninth grades would be placed in public schools instead of TECs in 2016 (Kocaoğlu & Güner, 2023: p. 419). It would be accurate to say that directing Syrian students to Turkish public schools after their education in TECs contributed not only to the expansion of access to education but also to the adaptation process of Syrian students. Temporary protection beneficiaries could receive education not only within the scope of MoNE (MEB) but also in higher education institutions. To attend higher education, it is necessary to have completed primary and secondary education. Those who have successfully completed high school education in schools within the formal education system in Turkey are deemed to have fulfilled this requirement. However, those who have completed their education in Syria or in temporary education centers in Turkey are required to have the "Foreign Students High School Proficiency Equivalency Examination (YÖLDS) score. Moreover, all foreigners wishing to pursue higher education in Turkey must take the Foreign Student Examination (YÖS) administered by the university to which they will apply and demonstrate sufficient academic success ([www.mhd.org.tr](http://www.mhd.org.tr)). The fact that Syrians under temporary protection in the Turkish education system can be legally provided with education from primary school to university proves the developing and changing face of the Turkish education system. To exemplify, Syrian refugee children primarily attended Temporary Education Centers (TECs), which provided instruction in Arabic and followed a curriculum adapted from the Syrian system. However, recognizing the limitations of this segregated system, Türkiye initiated a gradual transition towards integrating Syrian students into public schools under the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). A key milestone in this process was the implementation of the 2014 Circular on Education Services for Foreigners (MoNE, 2014), which laid the groundwork for the inclusion of Syrian children in the Turkish formal education system.

In 2016, the Turkish government announced the closure of TECs and prioritized the mainstreaming of Syrian students into Turkish public schools. This policy shift was supported by partnerships with international organizations such as UNICEF and the European Union, which provided financial and technical support to enhance school capacity, teacher training, and resource development. The Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System (PICTES) project, launched in 2016, played a crucial role in supporting this integration by providing language support, training teachers, and ensuring the social adaptation of Syrian students (UNICEF, 2018). Furthermore, legislative frameworks such as the Temporary Protection Regulation (2014) and the Foreigners and International Protection Law (2013) have provided a legal basis for Syrians to access not only primary and secondary education but also higher education in Türkiye. These laws ensured that Syrian students could enroll in Turkish universities under certain conditions, including language proficiency and completion of required secondary education credentials. By 2021, the Ministry of National Education reported that more than 770,000 Syrian students had enrolled in Turkish schools, demonstrating the significant progress made in educational access for refugees (MoNE, 2021).

### **3. Challenges faced by Syrians under temporary protection in accessing education**

In the unpublished report of the Global Initiative for Out-of-School Children (OOSC), conducted by UNICEF in collaboration with UNESCO Institute for Statistics, different dimensions of Syrian children under temporary protection's access to education are discussed. In the said report, it was stated that economic factors, changing gender perception in literacy rates due to traditional codes, boys not being sent to school to provide economic support, health problems, parents' education status and language barriers negatively affect access to education ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)). Additionally, according to the European Commission's Turkey Report of October 6, 2020 ([www.ab.gov.tr](http://www.ab.gov.tr)), Turkey has continued its considerable efforts to provide support to refugees and ensure greater access to health and education services, with 63.27% of Syrian children currently attending school. Municipal services are available to refugees in many cities. As of December 2019, 684,728 out of 1,082,172 school-age Syrians in Turkey had access to primary and secondary education. In contrast, 36.73% of Syrian children under temporary protection do not have access to education. In the report published by the Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Lifelong Learning in 2022 ([www.hbogm.meb.gov.tr](http://www.hbogm.meb.gov.tr)), the schooling rates of Syrians under temporary protection were shared. According to the data shared, 35% of Syrian children under temporary protection cannot attend school. The MoNE report states that this situation is related to the education system in Syria, economic inadequacies, language barriers and cultural codes. Below, difficulties in access to education are discussed under headings.

#### **3.1. Language barrier and lack of language training**

When we look at the educational background of Syrians who came to Turkey due to forced migration, it is seen that their foreign language education is in English and French due to different reasons. The fact that Turkish is not included as a foreign language in the Syrian education curriculum reveals the reality of the language barrier. After 2011, access to education for Syrians who came to Turkey varies according to their ethnic origin. In fact, while Syrian Turkmens who came to Turkey do not have any problems in writing and speaking Turkish, Syrian Arabs speak and write Turkish at much lower rates than Turkmens. In 2016, SETA published a report titled "Roadmap for the Education of Syrians in Turkey: Opportunities and Challenges" published by

SETA in 2016 (2016: p. 29), the language barrier was cited as one of the reasons for Syrian children's limited access to education in public schools. In a 2020 study on Syrian children in Ankara (Büyükhan & Karagöl, 2020: p. 959), 256 participants were interviewed using a mixed method and 23.1% of this number stated that they could not continue their education due to language barriers. It should be noted that language barriers and lack of language education are not an issue in TECs. Since the predominant language of instruction in TECs is Arabic and training is provided within the scope of short-term solutions, the difficulties Syrian children in TECs face in accessing education are not related to the language barrier. However, within the scope of MoNE's Strategic Plan, Syrian children started to receive education with Turkish children in public schools, which created a language barrier.

Problems originating from language differences, which is a cultural element, are in question in almost every place where migration mobility takes place. Apart from migration movements between countries that speak the same language, it is possible to see examples of the language barrier, which is a common problem of all migrants in the world, in different countries. It has been found that Pakistani immigrant parents living in the UK have difficulties in communication (Akbar & Woods, 2020: p. 670-673). The language barrier in education causes significant obstacles not only for the child but also for the parents. In a study conducted on individuals who immigrated to the United States (Cummings & Hardin, 2017: p. 115-127), it was revealed that parents could not attend the meetings organized because they could not communicate with teachers and could not pay enough attention to their children. In such cases, children act as a bridge between the parents and the locals to the best of their knowledge and act as interpreters, which causes children to become "child language brokering", which is translated into Turkish as "dil komisyonculuğu". Previous studies have documented that language mediation is sometimes linked to emotional maladjustment and developmental disadvantages; however, other studies have shown that social and language skills are acquired more quickly. In this context, the language barrier can be cited as a reason for the possible negative emotional impact of Syrian children, like migrant children all over the world.

### **3.2. Economic challenges and legal limitations**

Syrian migration is political in terms of its causes, compulsory in terms of its consequences, and mass migration in terms of its form. Turkey became a party to the 1951 United Nations (UN) Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees ([www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/refugees.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/refugees.pdf)) in 1951 and acceded to the 1967 New York Protocol in 1968, which expanded the scope of the convention. Therefore, Syrians who came to Turkey due to forced migration and are under temporary protection cannot be called "refugees". The fact that Syrians under temporary protection are not defined as refugees has led to new amendments to the national legislation in terms of social rights and in this context, social and economic rights have been tried to be protected. The conditions of residence and meeting their food and beverage needs are among the main economic contributions.

The settlement and reception conditions for Syrians under temporary protection have changed significantly in response to the increase in new arrivals and differentiated settlement patterns. Until early 2013, almost all Syrians resided in camps funded by the Turkish state and non-governmental organizations. However, as the capacity of the camps became insufficient over time, Syrians now reside in cities (Erdoğan, 2015: p. 4). With the Syrian migration, millions of Syrians have settled in different parts of Turkey to date. This massive wave of migration has profoundly affected not only

the demographic structure but also the education, health and economic systems. Especially in the field of education, Syrian children's access to education and the challenges they face in this process are of critical importance for both Turkey's future and the integration of refugees into society. While access to education is recognized as a fundamental right of every child, Syrian children face various obstacles in accessing this right. Economic difficulties are at the forefront of these obstacles. Due to their low-income levels and unstable working conditions, many Syrian families have difficulty in covering the costs of their children's education. This situation leads to children not being able to attend school or having to make various sacrifices in order to continue their education.

Most Syrian families have low-income levels. Many families try to make ends meet by working in unregistered and irregular jobs. This situation makes it difficult to meet the educational expenses of children. The economic hardship of migrant families is one of the most important factors affecting children's school attendance (Erdoğan, 2019: p. 45-59). Education-related expenses such as school clothes, stationery, transportation and nutrition strain the budgets of Syrian families. Furthermore, in some regions, school fees and additional educational materials are also an economic burden. This situation prevents children from attending school or disrupts their education.

The work permit status of Syrians under temporary protection is described in the "Implementation Guide on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection" ([www.csgb.gov.tr](http://www.csgb.gov.tr)) published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. In this regard,

The work permit status of Syrians under temporary protection is described in the "Implementation Guide on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection" ([www.csgb.gov.tr](http://www.csgb.gov.tr)) published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. The articles are as follows:

- a) Temporary protection identity document/foreigner identification document indicating that the foreigner is under temporary protection and foreigner identification number,
- b) At least six months of temporary protection period has been completed as of the date of the work permit application,
- c) Applying to work in the province where the foreigner is granted the right to stay according to the temporary protection registration (Art. 3/1)”

According to the information above, Syrians under temporary protection can only apply for work permits at a workplace in the province of their residence. Furthermore, according to the relevant text, it is essential that the number of employees under temporary protection in the workplace does not exceed ten percent of the number of Turkish citizens working in the same workplace. However, in workplaces where there are no Turkish citizen employees or the total number of employees is less than ten, work permits may be granted to a maximum of one foreigner under temporary protection (Art. 3/5). In this context, the fact that Syrians have the right to work only in the province where they reside, that they can use the employment opportunities offered by the private sector within limitations, and their low economic power due to forced migration cause the economic power of Syrians under temporary protection to be lower than that of locals. Therefore, limitations on the employment of Syrians under temporary protection, quotas on work permits, the inability to leave their cities of residence and other legal obligations cause Syrian children not to have adequate access to education due to economic inadequacies. In this context, government could introduce a more flexible work permit system that allows Syrians to work in different

provinces based on job availability and skills. This could be managed by a national employment database that tracks job openings across regions and matches them with Syrian job seekers, encouraging internal mobility. Additionally, the private sector can play a key role in addressing these economic challenges. However, Syrians face barriers due to limitations on the types of jobs they can access. Incentivizing private companies to hire Syrian refugees through tax breaks, subsidies, or financial incentives could encourage the private sector to open more employment opportunities to Syrians. This approach has been effective in other refugee-hosting countries and can be adapted to Türkiye's context.

### **3.3. Social cohesion and impact of diversity**

Social cohesion and cultural differences are important concepts that describe how people interact and adapt across different cultures. These concepts explain how individuals perceive, adopt and adapt to their roles, relationships and values within society. Social adaptation refers to the process by which individuals integrate into a particular society and exhibit behaviors in accordance with the norms of that society. This process involves the need to adapt to elements such as language, traditions, values, social norms and rules. Cultural differences, on the other hand, define cultural diversity among individuals and include people's beliefs, values and behaviors that come from different cultural contexts. The process of integration of migrants with the indigenous population may require a long process, both socially, psychologically and economically. Migration mobility may not always lead to integration, migrants may integrate into the native society or become marginalized through alienation and exclusion. Similarly, they may undergo assimilation to lose the cultural values of the society they come from and gain a new identity (Güçlüten, 2023: p. 122). Social cohesion is the process by which individuals and groups establish a peaceful and constructive relationship with the society they live in. Education is one of the most important components of this process, as schools are places where individuals from different cultures come together and interact. This suggests that the encounters between indigenous peoples and migrants in the public sphere will largely produce new outcomes. It can be said that migration, besides being a physical movement of relocation, can lead to a change in traditional cultural codes and create a new practice of living. Robert Ezra Park, who stands out as the first researcher to address human life in the context of the "city", based his urban studies on a theory he called "human ecology". Inspired by Darwin's view of the "vital web", Park affirmed the view that animals and plants are related to each other in human relationships. According to Park, humans set out to struggle for life and as a product of this struggle, they continue to live in the same society (Park, 1952). In this context, based on the cycle of "human ecology", Park describes the integration and adaptation processes of migrants as encounters and relationship building, competition for limited resources, state efforts to peacefully integrate newcomers into the public sphere, and voluntary or forced assimilation/adaptation processes. Therefore, since the completion of the integration process of migrants is directly related to the completion of different stages, this process affects all family members. Children are undoubtedly the family members who have the most contact with the local people.

Social cohesion and cultural differences are critical factors in the integration process of students within the education system. Turkey has taken on a huge humanitarian burden by hosting a significant number of Syrian refugees. A large part of this population seeking refuge in Turkey lives under temporary protection status. This has led to an increase in the number of Syrian children and youth under temporary protection, which has had significant impacts on their integration into the education system in Turkey, social cohesion and psychological well-being. The devastating



effects of war, the migration experience and the adaptation process have a profound impact on the psychological well-being of Syrian students. Traumas, losses, feelings of insecurity and uncertainty experienced in the war environment are the primary factors that negatively affect the emotional and mental health of children and youth. It is also known that severe traumatic experiences such as loss of family members, physical injuries and witnessing violence play an active role in this process. The social and educational adaptation of Syrian students after their arrival in Turkey is also an issue that needs to be carefully examined. Factors such as having to learn a new language, adapting to a new education system and trying to be accepted create pressure on these students. Also, adaptation problems and prejudices arising from cultural differences complicate the social integration of students. In this process, the attitudes of teachers and other students in educational environments are also important variables reflected on the educational lives of Syrian students. In this context, peer bullying that Syrian children face during their education is a serious problem that negatively affects their academic achievement, psychological health and social adaptation. For immigrant children and youth, in-school relationships play an important role in their psychological well-being. Various studies indicate that receiving social support, being accepted by peers and perceiving the school environment as safe are factors that protect psychological well-being after migration. In contrast, loneliness and social isolation as a result of discrimination and exclusion are risk factors that threaten psychological well-being. This situation can turn into school phobia and cause migrant students to drop out of school. According to a study by Alpak et al. (2015), nearly one-third of Syrian refugees in Turkey have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with children and youth being especially vulnerable to such mental health conditions. The trauma they carry significantly impairs their ability to adapt to new educational environments. In terms of adaptation, the experience of learning a new language, adjusting to a different education system, and seeking social acceptance often creates immense pressure on Syrian students. Studies have shown that language barriers are one of the primary obstacles preventing refugees from succeeding academically and socially. For instance, research conducted in Germany, where many refugee children also face language learning barriers, suggests that bilingual education programs and targeted language support significantly improve academic outcomes for refugee students. Applying similar approaches in Turkey, such as providing comprehensive language support through Turkish as a Second Language (TSL) programs, could facilitate smoother integration for Syrian students. In-school relationships are crucial for the psychological well-being of refugee students. Research indicates that the presence of a supportive peer group and positive relationships with teachers can serve as protective factors for refugee students, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation (Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008). Conversely, the lack of such support can exacerbate feelings of social exclusion, contributing to anxiety, depression, and low academic performance. Refugee students in countries like Sweden, where schools implement structured peer-support programs, report better psychological outcomes and higher levels of social cohesion (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Incorporating peer-support systems and mentorship programs in Turkish schools could provide Syrian students with the necessary social support to thrive both academically and emotionally.

Syrian students may exhibit various psychological symptoms that reflect the effects of the traumatic events they have experienced. These symptoms include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, adjustment disorders and behavioral problems. The social integration of Syrians under temporary protection in the Turkish education system and their ability to balance cultural differences can have a direct impact on the quality and success of education. In fact, a

meta-analysis study conducted in 2021 (Aytaç, 2021: p. 185) tried to identify the problems faced by 3092 Syrian students in Turkey during the education process. According to the results of this study, it was understood that the biggest problem in terms of effect size was social cohesion. Othering factors such as slow social cohesion or xenophobia may have a negative impact on Syrian immigrants, even if they do not spread to the grassroots of society. Research on the psychological conditions of Syrian children who had to leave their country due to the war environment also shows the importance of social cohesion. Kılıç and Özkor (2019), Yaşar and Amaç (2018) Gürel and Büyükşahin (2020) revealed in different studies that the majority of Syrian students need psychological support and experience psychological problems such as introversion and aggressive behaviors. When we look at the international literature, it is seen that such studies are widespread. To exemplify, Resilience and Mental Health Among Syrian Refugee Children (Dehnel et al., 2022: p. 420-429) and Predictors of psychological risk and resilience among Syrian refugee children (Popham, 2023: p. 90-99) also addressed the impact of war trauma on depression and individual differences in post-war psychological health outcomes. As a result of these studies, it was observed that the majority of Syrian students need psychological support.

At first glance, it is seen that the cultural codes of Syrians under temporary protection are compatible with Turkish culture, especially religious factors. This compatibility manifests itself both in daily life practices and social relations. For example, cultural elements such as eating and drinking habits and religious affiliation constitute important commonalities between Syrians and Turks. The fact that the vast majority of Syrians are Muslims facilitates their harmonization with Turkish culture in terms of religious rituals and beliefs. The similarities in the forms of worship, holidays and religious rituals adopted by Islam in both societies reinforce this harmony. During important religious periods such as religious holidays and the month of Ramadan, Syrians maintain practices that are widely accepted in Turkish society. Eating and drinking habits also constitute an important common denominator between Syrians and Turks. On the other hand, in terms of lifestyle, the fact that Syrians belonging to the Sunni sect who migrated to Turkey adopt a more religion-oriented lifestyle stands out as a cultural difference. For instance, in Syrian society, gender roles are more traditional and conservative. Attitudes towards girls' education are generally more negative than boys' education. In Syrian families, there is a widespread belief that girls should marry at an early age and be busy with housework (Çelik & İçduygu, 2019: p. 253-267). This situation negatively affects girls' educational continuity and school participation. These rigid and traditional codes that emerge as a result of social norms and behaviors vary in Turkey. Gender segregation in social activities is less evident in Turkey, where more modern and western social norms prevail, especially in big cities. In the aforementioned report published by the MoNE, 359,735 (49.33%) of the students enrolled in school are girls and 371,071 (50.77%) are boys. However, this data can be interpreted more accurately when it is considered that the majority of males stayed in Syria or lost their lives there due to the war conditions. The successful integration of Syrians into Turkish society depends on several key factors such as language acquisition, economic stability, social acceptance, education, and psychosocial support. Language barriers make it difficult for Syrians to access education, employment, and social services, and thus, intensive Turkish language programs are crucial. Economic hardships, driven by limited job opportunities and work restrictions, further hinder integration, requiring more flexible employment policies and vocational training programs. Social acceptance from the local community, enhanced by programs that promote empathy and reduce prejudice, plays a vital role in fostering harmonious coexistence. Access to quality education is essential, but challenges such as language, economic difficulties, and cultural differences can impede the continuity of education, particularly for Syrian

girls. Lastly, many Syrians, especially children, suffer from trauma due to war and displacement, making mental health support critical. Addressing these factors together will not only facilitate the adaptation of Syrians under temporary protection but also promote long-term social cohesion between Syrians and Turkish communities.

#### **4. Pathways and strategies for improvement: Improvements in access to education for Syrians under temporary protection**

##### **4.1. Development and dissemination of language education programs**

One of the most important cultural barriers to access to education for Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey is the language barrier. The learning of the Turkish language by students studying both within the MoNE and in higher education institutions is one of the leading factors leading to cultural integration and accelerating the encounters between local populations and migrants in the public sphere. It is essential that the programs to be created especially for immigrant children consider the examples of good practices that will facilitate the language learning process. One of the methods known in the international literature as one of the best practices in language education for immigrant children is *Willkommensklasse*, which is implemented in Germany and translated into Turkish as "Welcome Classes" ([www.familienportal.berlin.de](http://www.familienportal.berlin.de)). To participate in a welcome class, parents must first register their child at the coordination office of the school administration in the residential area. The school administration decides in which school and in which class the child will be enrolled. The child's age, language test and school medical examination are considered. The parents then personally take the child to the designated school and register the child there. At this point, the fact that this step, which is taken to prevent children from having language problems, is also taken with demographic characteristics in mind, shows that it also facilitates children's social adaptation. However, even if demographic characteristics are taken into consideration, the fact that "welcome classes" in Germany only include immigrants may cause immigrant children to face the danger of marginalization and alienation. For this reason, a more inclusive "welcome class" in Turkey and the inclusion of Turkish as a second language can alleviate these problems. Another good practice example is the "LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada)" project in Canada. The LINC program is a freely accessible program that helps newcomers improve their English and French language skills. The program also provides computer skills and sociolinguistic and cultural awareness through real-world tasks ([www.canada.ca](http://www.canada.ca)). The program's social tasks and sociolinguistic content that brings individuals closer to Canadian culture stand out as an example of good practice that blends language learning with social convergence. Another example is the "Preparatory Education for Immigrants" program implemented in Finland. In this program, there are real-time tasks that facilitate migrants' learning of Swedish and Finnish and activities that promote social integration (Blaine et al. 2023: p. 2). From this point of view, when we look at the examples of good practices around the world, it is understood that language education for migrants is provided by governments and these programs are equipped with real-life tasks to reinforce and improve social integration. A useful approach would be for the language education in Turkey to be provided by the state, as it already is. Hence, it would be useful if the teaching materials were incentivizing language learning and diversified according to the students studying at MoNE and Higher Education institutions. Options such as vocabulary cards with Turkish words and conversation cards for listening and speaking can be considered in this context. As an innovative and inclusive language learning method, it is considered that this model to be applied

in Turkey as an innovative and inclusive language learning method will provide important contributions to immigrant children in language learning.

When evaluating these international examples, while each offers valuable insights, the direct applicability of these models in Türkiye is limited due to differing cultural, social, and educational contexts. Türkiye faces the challenge of educating a much larger number of refugee children, often in regions that are underfunded or lack sufficient resources. Moreover, the socio-political dynamics surrounding Syrian refugees in Türkiye—such as tensions between local communities and refugee populations—necessitate a more inclusive approach than the more segregated models seen in countries like Germany. A tailored solution for Türkiye would need to incorporate elements from these international models but adapt them to local realities. For instance, while welcome classes and task-based learning could be effective, they should be designed in a way that minimizes segregation and fosters interaction between Syrian and Turkish students. Additionally, Türkiye's existing infrastructure could be leveraged to develop technology-driven language learning solutions, particularly in urban areas where access to digital tools is more widespread. Finally, the teaching materials could be diversified to address the specific needs of Syrian students, incorporating not only vocabulary and conversation practice but also cultural competencies that enable these children to better understand and navigate Turkish society.

#### **4.2. Amendments to legal regulations**

Although Syrians under temporary protection have migrated to Turkey since 2011, their distribution across cities in Turkey has not been regular and proportionate. According to data from the Directorate of Migration Management ([www.goc.gov.tr](http://www.goc.gov.tr)), the three cities with the highest number of Syrians as regular migrants are Istanbul, Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa, with over 1 million Syrians living in these cities. Considering that this number is higher than the number of Syrians living in 70 provinces in Turkey, it is understood that the concentration in some cities is also reflected in the education process. The rapid filling of school quotas in these areas where Syrians live in large numbers and the fact that Syrians under temporary protection cannot legally leave the cities where they live shows that both locals and Syrians are not being schooled in a balanced manner. Changes in legal regulations to allow Syrians to be resettled in other provinces, especially in the Eastern provinces, may contribute to solving this problem. In addition, the construction of schools and mobile portable classrooms in regions of Turkey where the Syrian population is dense, and increasing the number of these existing structures with the grants to be allocated from the European Union can be considered as another solution suggestion.

Following the arrival of Syrian refugees in Turkey, access to education for Syrian children under temporary protection has become a critical agenda item. Although Turkey has made legal arrangements recognizing Syrian refugees' right to education, it faces a number of problems in implementing them. At this point, it is essential to eliminate bureaucratic obstacles for children under temporary protection to access education. The process of enrolling Syrians in schools is another issue that needs to be centralized in terms of legal regulations. Especially in MoNE-affiliated schools, the documents required from students vary across schools, which prolongs the time it takes for Syrians to enroll in schools and leads to problems in their access to education. At this point, information and documents of migrants can be gathered through an application such as e-government (e-migrant as a name suggestion) and access to education can be provided in a more centralized and faster way. While legal regulations aim to facilitate access to education, it would also be useful to inform Syrian families about the process. Informing Syrian families about

the education system and increasing their access to guidance services will play an important role in overcoming bureaucratic difficulties. MoNE and local governments should provide guidance services to Syrian families that provide detailed information about the enrollment process in educational institutions. These services should help families quickly solve the problems they face during the enrollment process. In this way, awareness of legal obligations and limitations will be raised and bureaucratic obstacles can be avoided.

### **4.3. Funding programs to reduce training costs**

One of the obstacles to schooling is the economic difficulties experienced by Syrian children (SETAV Syria Report, 2016). The budget that needs to be allocated for transportation, food and education expenses of children enrolled in public schools and the fees demanded from families due to the high building and personnel costs in TECs are among the major problems that pose economic obstacles to Syrians' access to education. To solve this problem, an education fund to be established to cover education expenses free of charge through the effective use of EU grants is considered to be an effective method. Also, establishing scholarship and support programs, providing free food and transportation services, abolishing or reducing tuition fees (for TECs), strengthening social assistance programs and increasing the number of community supported projects can be considered as solution suggestions in general terms. When these topics are blended with examples from the international community, more effective and beneficial results are likely to emerge. From this point of view, Germany implements the "Integration through Education" program to economically support migrant children's access to education. Under this program, migrant children are provided with free textbooks, notebooks and other stationery. Moreover, school meals and transportation costs of children are covered, reducing the financial burden on families. In this way, the participation of migrant children in educational processes is encouraged (BAMF, 2019). Canada has implemented the "Welcome to School" program to cover the educational costs of migrant children and alleviate the economic hardship of families. This program provides children with free school supplies, clothing and nutrition services. Furthermore, school transportation costs are covered, ensuring that children attend school regularly. The program aims to increase the educational success of migrant children and facilitate their integration into society (IRCC, 2018). In the United States, the "Refugee School Impact" program (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov>) is carried out to provide economic support for the education of refugee children. The program provides basic needs such as school supplies, uniforms and nutrition services free of charge. Also, families receive financial assistance to alleviate the cost of education. These supports enable refugee children to attend school and succeed in education (ORR, 2017). Sweden implements the "Educational Support for Migrants" program to provide economic support for migrant children's education. This program provides children with free textbooks, stationery and school clothes. Moreover, school meals and transportation costs are covered, reducing the economic burden on families. The program aims to increase equal opportunities in education for migrant children (Skolverket, 2018). The "Schools Support Program" in Australia provides economic support for the education of migrant and refugee children. The program provides children with free textbooks, stationery and school clothes. In addition, children's school meals and transportation costs are covered, and families are provided with financial assistance. These supports aim to ensure the uninterrupted participation of migrant children in educational processes (Department of Education and Training, 2019). These programs offer a variety of economic assistance to alleviate the educational costs of migrant children and overcome the economic difficulties of families. These support programs, which are implemented in countries

such as Germany, Canada, the USA, Sweden and Australia, help overcome economic barriers by providing free textbooks, stationery, school uniforms, meals and transportation services to children's education. Furthermore, financial assistance to families encourages children's uninterrupted participation in educational processes. The implementation of such programs in Turkey can provide effective results in overcoming economic barriers to education for Syrian refugee children. Similar programs in Turkey can support equal opportunities in education by increasing the participation of refugee children in educational processes. Support such as free educational materials, meals and transportation services will ease the financial burden of families and facilitate children's school attendance. Therefore, financial assistance to families can help cover the cost of education and encourage children to succeed in education. Economic support and financial assistance, which are common aspects of these programs, will significantly facilitate migrant children's access to education and their integration into society.

#### **4.4. Education and awareness raising activities to increase social cohesion and cultural sensitivity**

The commonality and diversity of cultural values is one of the main factors affecting the components of a society and the desire to live together. In terms of immigrant individuals, they can continue their lives by preserving their own cultural values or they can choose to adopt the culture of the native society in the destination country. At this point, the state actor has important duties to ensure the integration of migrants into society. Ensuring access to education for migrant children stands out as one of these steps. To accelerate social cohesion and ensure that migrant individuals adapt to society at an early age, it is essential to increase education and awareness-raising activities. In this regard, it would be useful to examine examples of good practices in the world. From this point of view, the "IRCC Settlement and Integration Program" implemented in Canada aims to raise awareness about tolerance, respect and cultural diversity in schools. In this program, immigrant children are provided with comprehensive trainings on topics such as digital literacy sessions, financial literacy sessions, domestic violence and women's rights workshops, Canadian citizenship and civic engagement, health and welfare workshops, workshops for pregnant refugee women, and new living conditions in Canada ([www.pics.bc.ca](http://www.pics.bc.ca)). At the higher education level, the "INTEGRA" project, which is carried out in Germany and aims to facilitate the higher education of qualified refugees, enables qualified migrants to receive education in Germany by ensuring the social adaptation process culturally ([www.daad.de](http://www.daad.de)). It is considered that such projects will contribute to the projects to be created as good practice examples.

We propose the "Learning and Adaptation Together Program (LEAP)" (Birlikte Öğrenme ve Uyum Programı) model to accelerate Syrian migrant children's access to education and social cohesion in Turkey. The components of this program will include bilingual language programs, well-being and diversity programs, emotional learning programs, economic support programs and cultural adaptation activities. In the bilingual program, teachers working in schools affiliated to the MoNE who know Arabic will be assigned to the classrooms where Syrians are educated for an additional fee, and Turkish and Arabic education will be provided together. In this way, migrant children will be able to study in higher education institutions in harmony with Turkish education, and the learning of Turkish by migrants will accelerate social cohesion. Within the scope of the kindness and diversity programs, educational programs will be organized in schools to raise awareness on tolerance, respect and cultural diversity, and classroom activities, seminars and workshops will be organized for students to recognize and understand different cultures. The main objective of such activities will be to promote integration with the children of indigenous peoples.

Emotional learning programs will also be implemented to improve students' emotional intelligence and social skills. These programs are expected to help students express themselves better and facilitate their integration into society. Economic support programs will help overcome economic barriers by providing free textbooks, stationery, school uniforms, meals and transportation services to children's education. As a result of the implementation of these programs, cultural cohesion activities will include cultural events and awareness-raising activities in schools by implementing the above-mentioned components, community-based projects will be carried out to support the social cohesion of students and their families, and social activities will be organized to ensure the integration of migrant children and their families with the Turkish community. Thanks to the NCD program proposed by us, Syrian children under temporary protection will have access to education in a cultural dimension and will be able to experience the stages of social cohesion, getting to know each other and getting closer to the local communities in a more effective way.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Turkish education system has adopted inclusive policies to ensure the integration of individuals from different cultures into educational processes. However, Syrian children under temporary protection face various barriers in accessing education, such as language barriers, economic difficulties, social cohesion and cultural differences. The solutions and strategies proposed to overcome these barriers will increase Syrian children's success in education and facilitate their integration into society. The development and dissemination of language education programs is of great importance to facilitate the integration of Syrian children into the Turkish education system. Good practice examples such as "Welcome Classes" in Germany and "LINC" programs in Canada can be implemented in Turkey to accelerate language learning and social integration of migrant children. Changes in legal regulations will increase the capacity of schools in areas where Syrian migrants live in large numbers and enable migrants to be resettled in different provinces. Furthermore, to reduce bureaucratic obstacles, the central government can collect migrants' information through applications such as e-government to speed up the enrollment process. Economic support programs should be established to reduce education costs. Free textbooks, stationery, school uniforms, school clothes, food and transportation services can be offered in Turkey, following the example of programs implemented in countries such as Germany, Canada, the USA, Sweden and Australia. These supports will ease the financial burden of families and ensure children's uninterrupted participation in the education process. Education and awareness-raising activities should be increased to increase social cohesion and cultural sensitivity. Good practice examples such as the "IRCC Settlement and Integration Program" in Canada and the "INTEGRA" project in Germany can be implemented in Turkey to support the social cohesion of migrant children and their families. These programs will promote tolerance, respect and cultural diversity between locals and migrants. The Turkish education system should implement comprehensive and sustainable policies to support access to education for Syrian children under temporary protection. Proposed strategies to overcome language barriers, alleviate economic challenges and ensure social cohesion will increase Syrian children's educational achievement and facilitate their integration into society. Regulations and support programs in this context will contribute to achieving Turkey's goals of ensuring equal opportunities in education and increasing the contribution of migrants to society.

The Learning and Adaptation Together Program (LEAP), or Birlikte Öğrenme ve Uyum Programı (BOU), offers a comprehensive and holistic approach to accelerate the educational inclusion and social cohesion of Syrian migrant children in Türkiye. By addressing key barriers such as language,

emotional well-being, economic challenges, and cultural adaptation, the program has the potential to fill critical gaps in the current educational landscape for refugees. However, while the components of the LEAP program are promising, it is essential to critically assess its feasibility, consider potential obstacles, and compare it to existing initiatives to provide a realistic outlook on its implementation. The bilingual language component, which involves assigning Arabic-speaking teachers to classrooms, is a cornerstone of the LEAP program. While this approach could effectively address the language barrier, its feasibility depends on the availability of qualified teachers proficient in both Arabic and Turkish. In many regions of Türkiye, especially in rural areas where Syrian refugee populations are concentrated, there may be a shortage of such bilingual teachers. Furthermore, the financial implications of providing additional fees to these teachers could strain the already stretched educational budget. To mitigate this, a phased implementation or pilot program in regions with higher concentrations of Syrian students could be considered, allowing for the gradual scaling of the program as resources and personnel become available.

Another aspect to consider is the inclusion of emotional learning and cultural adaptation activities. These programs aim to improve students' emotional intelligence, social skills, and cultural awareness. While these goals are commendable, implementing them on a national scale could face logistical challenges, particularly in training teachers and school staff to deliver these specialized programs effectively. Teacher training programs would need to be developed, and continuous professional development would be required to ensure the sustained quality of these initiatives. In this regard, collaboration with NGOs and international organizations experienced in refugee education could enhance the program's effectiveness and help overcome resource limitations.

Despite the potential benefits of the LEAP program, several obstacles could impede its successful implementation. First, the current political and social climate in Türkiye may pose challenges. Public sentiment toward Syrian refugees has been mixed, with growing concerns about social and economic competition. Resistance from local communities to programs perceived as prioritizing refugees could hinder the integration efforts, making it crucial to design the LEAP program in a way that benefits both Turkish and Syrian students. Integrating cultural awareness programs for local students, as part of the "kindness and diversity" initiative, would be an essential step in mitigating this tension. However, this requires careful balancing to ensure that neither group feels marginalized or neglected.



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