

# Learning to Teach in a Global Crisis: Teachers' Insights from a Temporary Non-Formal Refugee Education Project in Gaziantep

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## ABSTRACT

Turkey is home to 1.2 million child refugees whom has been the most vulnerable since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, which is considered to be the worst humanitarian crisis of this century. More than 50% of school age child refugees are out of school (UNICEF, 2017) in Turkey. This paper reports one of the findings of a case study of a temporary non-formal education project (Learning Turkish)<sup>1</sup>, that focused on supporting 4-6-year-old Syrian children with Turkish language and literacy development. The purpose of the paper is to focus on the teachers' and administrators' experiences in learning to teach young refugees in the time of crisis. Data sources include in-person interviews and observations. Findings from this study confirm that in times of crisis teachers and administrators focus on being in the moment, teaching in the moment and learning to teach refugee children. Teachers and administrators reported that the experience in this project contributed to their teaching and personal development and enhanced their civic responsibility and personal growth. This study also confirmed that improvements are needed in making schooling available to all refugee children and training teachers to work with students who have experienced trauma. One of the limitations of the project was its unsustainability due to funding. The paper concludes with implications for educational policy makers and non-formal education providers.

## Keywords

Refugee education, non-formal education, early childhood, language learning

## Introduction

UNHCR identified Turkey as the country hosting the largest number of refugees worldwide. As of January 2018, Turkey was a home to 3.46 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2018). Of the total number of refugees, 1.3 million are children of school age. As of March 2017, more than 50% of the Syrian children living in Turkey are out of school (UNICEF, 2017). There are a few reasons why there are so many children out of school. First, many school-aged Syrian children in Turkey are forced to work as child-laborers to support their families. Second, if families cannot

receive the temporary protection card to be a legal resident, then their children cannot be accepted to register for school. Third, many children lack the Turkish language skills that is required to succeed. Some of these reasons are not new.

Turkish government has been trying to establish policies to address the educational needs of the Syrian refugee children. From 2011

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Figure 1. Refugee Children Celebrating International Children's Day on April 23, 2017

Hiçbir çocuk Savaş istemez (No child would want a war)

Bilir ki savaşın ilk günü (He/She would know that the first day of the war.)

Çocukluğunun son günüdür (Would be the last day of his/her childhood)

---Cihan Demirici (TurkishPoet)

until 2014 the education policies were developed with the assumption that Syrians would soon return to their countries (Alpaydin, 2017). However, with the ongoing conflict, more permanent solutions needed to be put in place to integrate the Syrian children into the Turkish national education system. Many non-governmental organizations along with the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MONE) are trying to improve the educational outcomes of the Syrian refugee children residing in Turkey.

Gaziantep, located 60 kilometers from the border of Syria, has been on the frontline in coping with the influx of refugees in Turkey. Gaziantep is a home to more than 350,000 Syrian refugees as well as more than 50,000 in camps near the city. The Municipality of Gaziantep has been actively trying to support

Syrian refugees and putting in place various educational and social programs. Educational needs of refugees under the age of 18 are critical and access to education paves the way for a better outlook in life to them (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick & Stein, 2012). Education is an essential commodity for refugee children that would enable them to engage with the local community. Many of the refugee families live in impoverished areas of Gaziantep, where access to education is not available. Given the difficulties of establishing education opportunities for refugee children living in Gaziantep, this article reports one of the key findings of a case study of a temporary non-governmental education project for 4-6-year-old Syrian refugees. The experiences of teachers involved in this project are explored.

## Refugee Education in Turkey

The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey ensures the right to education free of charge in line with the Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). Accordingly, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey sets policies and is responsible for organizing the schooling system in Turkey and taking any necessary precautions to improve and develop “the extent of available resources to protect the rights of everyone, regardless of nationality” (Weissbrodt & Divine, 2012: 171). Thus, the main purpose of education in Turkey is to educate a person to become a psychically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually competent individual by respecting human rights and universal ethical values. In addition, education in Turkey aims to help students to improve their skills, pursue their interest and eventually be a creative, supportive and contributing member of the society with his/her occupation.

Turkish schooling system includes early childhood education, primary, middle, and high schools, as well as tertiary education. The compulsory education was 8 years until 2012, yet the duration of compulsory education has extended to 12 years of schooling with the introduction of 4+4+4 single-structured schooling system and early childhood education and tertiary education are not included in the compulsory education. The language of instruction is Turkish in Turkish schools with a few exceptions. Several private national and international schools deliver basic education in English or other languages such as French or German.

In addition, providing compulsory education to refugee students is one of the top priorities of MoNE’s agenda because the civil war in Syria caused a mass influx of people immigrating from Syria in the last eight years. The influx of refugees caused interruptions or total drop-out for the refugee students (Hos &

Cinarbas, 2017). According to the most recent estimations, the refugee population, who came from Syria, in Turkey is over 3.7 million and 65% of Syrian refugees, of whom 572,000 are children, are expected to stay in Turkey even after the war reach a peaceful conclusion (Aras & Yasun, 2016). Thus, there needs a comprehensive work to identify the needs of the refugee children in terms of basic education in the short and long terms and the initial piloting attempts started to initiate educational accommodations at the beginning of 2014 (Bircan & Sunata, 2015; Seydi, 2014; Kirisci & Karaca, 2014).

Turkish education system is based on a monolingual approach, therefore even those Syrian refugees who attend Turkish public schools have a difficult time to adapt due to language barriers. Often, the education of the refugee children had been handled by local municipalities. Often times, they support local “Syrian Schools” but they are run on a temporary basis and there is no consistency. According to the Open Society Foundation (2016), MoNE classified the refugee children’s problems as language, financial, social integrity, and insufficient infrastructure. No doubt that the most important ones are education and language. Not speaking a country’s language is one of the most important barriers for schooling and literacy because language is the medium and means of communication and conveying meaning. However, language barrier is not an insoluble problem. The early intervention similar to the one described in this paper to teach Turkish to Syrian children would increase the schooling potential. The early intervention to language development starts during the preschool period.

## Importance of Early Literacy for Refugee Children

Early childhood education programs positively foster cognitive skills, social and affective maturation, social integration, and readiness to attend a school for the children in the adverse

environments and improving these skills can help them start schooling on a relatively equal basis compared to their more advantaged peers (Burger, 2010; Currie, 2001; Goldfeld et al., 2016; Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron & Shonkoff, 2006) because the significant differences “between the environments of advantaged children and those of disadvantaged children raise serious concerns about the life prospects of disadvantaged children” (Elango, García, Heckman & Hojman, 2015: 6). According to the Australian Early Development Census; preschool education makes great contribution the five developmental areas; physical health and wellbeing, social skills, emotional maturity, linguistic and cognitive skills and communicative skills and general knowledge. (Goldfeld, Harvey & Grattan, 2016). These contributions are more critical for the disadvantaged children like refugees. However unfortunately, the refugee children in the refugee status cannot receive sustainable and regular education due to the aforementioned reasons above.

### **Learning Turkish Project**

*Learning Turkish Project* arose from a discussion of a group of educators residing in Gaziantep, who were interested in making a difference in Syrian refugees’ lives. They founded the Association for the Education of the Disadvantaged Individuals in an effort to put in place various support programs for local Syrian refugee children who did not have access to any form of schooling in Gaziantep. The founders and the members of the association conducted extensive field visits to identify neighborhoods in Gaziantep with the highest number of Syrian refugees who did not have access to education. *Learning Turkish Project* was funded collaboratively by Open Society Foundation and the Association for the Education of Disadvantaged Individuals. Author I (Hos) was the co-founder of the association. In order to address any ethical concerns that may have risen during the data collection, Hos was not involved

in the implementation phase of the project and only participated as a participant observer/researcher. The purpose of this project was to enhance the refugee children’s Turkish linguistic skills in an effort to improve their social, cognitive and affective skills so that they can attend Turkish schools, make Turkish friends, and be prepared to enter the Turkish education system.

*Learning Turkish Project* served 100 Syrian children between the ages of 4-6. The children were invited to the Project through an advertisement that was launched in the identified neighborhoods of Gaziantep. The parents signed up their children on a voluntary basis. Parents were not asked of their legal status when they signed up for the project. Out of a pool of applicants, 100 children between 4-6 ages were chosen randomly. The duration of the project was 6 months. The project was implemented at a small community center space in the form of a pre-school education and language education for 5 days a week for six months. There were activities for Turkish language education. Additionally, creative drama, games, art therapy and music education were provided once a week. The three classrooms composed of over thirty children in each were separated by age group, 4, 5, 6-year-olds.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Turkey has very limited experience with designing programs to educate and integrate migrants or refugees (Icduygu, 2015). The ICG (2016) report clearly stated that Turkey’s temporary protection regime is unsustainable given the conflicts on the country’s borders. Thus, a constructive national dialogue on refugee integration and an inclusive definition of citizenship is needed (Ager & Strang, 2008). The Turkish government should develop and implement an organized strategy that includes interests and concerns of multiple stakeholders for Syrians. Consequently, Turkey must sincerely

consider making Syrian refugees feel comfortable in society (Kirisci, 2014).

In consideration of these issues, this study explored the experiences of teachers and administrators in a non-formal educational context for Syrian refugee children. In this context, answers for the following research question was sought:

What are the experiences of teachers and an administrator during a short-term non-formal educational program implementation?

## Data Sources and Methodology

### Data Collection

The case study method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was used to gather in-depth data about the experiences of teachers and an administrator with Syrian refugee students in the non-formal education project of Syrian refugee children residing in impoverished neighborhoods of Gaziantep. The data were collected through the duration of the *Learning Turkish Project* that took place from October 2016 to June 2017. The data sources included: Participant observation and field-notes at school and meeting; semi-structured interviews and informal conversation with teachers and administrator to capture the rich data about the teachers' experiences of working with Syrian refugee students; researcher journal and classroom artifacts.

### Participants

All the interviews were conducted in the Turkish language and Hos translated them into English. Pseudonyms were assigned to the project name and the participating teachers and administrators in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The research design incorporated a variety of evidence and used data triangulation (Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), including open-ended questions with in-depth semi-structured interviews, fieldnotes, and documents to explore deeply the multifaceted social phenomenon that participants faced (Glesne, 2011; Yin, 2009). Each participant was interviewed twice, and

each interview ranged from 45 minutes to one hour, and documents and artifacts were collected. Weekly observational fieldnotes were taken by Hos. Researcher journal served as a tool for understanding the experiences of the project participants.

### Data Analysis Procedures

A conventional content analysis approach (Berg, 2007) was adopted for examining the transcripts of the in-depth interviews conducted. Categories were developed through an inductive process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In addition, using NVivo-12 software, the researchers created a database for all interviews, field notes, and documents before disassembling data by using open coding to create level one codes upon entry into the database (Yin, 2009). Triangulation of data and member checking were carried out to ensure the reliability of the data. The analysis process revealed major thematic categories that emerged from the interviews. These themes are presented next in the findings section.

## Findings

Analysis of the data revealed themes mainly related to issues of teaching refugee children. The main themes that arose were: Overcoming challenges and celebrating small accomplishments, Understanding the children and their psychosocial needs, and Saving the day, learning to teach, develop and contribute to the integration and development of refugee children in society.

### Overcoming Challenges and Celebrating Small Accomplishments

Implementing a project under a climate of state of emergency in the country was not without a challenge for the project team. One of the first challenges was finding an appropriate location that would allow accessibility for the refugee children. With a limited budget provided from the two funding agencies, transportation became too expensive to accommodate. The administrator mentioned:



*“As we took on the responsibility of this project, we failed to take into consideration many expenses such as transportation, rental location, access. The space that we rented was not the most conducive to learning but we did the best we can with limited resources”* (Administrator Interview Transcript).

The location where the project took place was a small classroom space on the first floor of a residential building. Teaching was done in three different shifts in order to accommodate

the large classroom size of 30+ children at a time. There were kids sized tables and chairs with lots of early childhood materials in the room. There was a portable large white board, projector and a computer that the teachers often used during instruction. There were drama and dress up materials, pretend play materials, small erasable white boards with markers, legos, playdough, puzzles, arts and crafts materials for the children to use. The classroom was equipped with appropriate materials. The children were engaged in hands-on learning of the skills taught as can be seen on Figure 2 below:



Figure 2. Student Work

Children's class work was displayed around the classroom walls and were sent home to be shared with their families at the end of each week. The children were separated according to age group and each session had age appropriate instruction and activities. The project team worked really hard to organize and implement various events for the families and children. One of the difficulties that they were faced with was space as reported by the administrator:

*“We wanted to celebrate the international children's day in April and the end of the project in June where children had prepared a special presentation for. When we asked the public school that was located across from us, the principal told us that he cannot allow us to use the school's amenities for the event because of the state*

*of emergency. This was disappointing, but we held both celebrations at the public park across from our classroom”* (Administrator Interview Transcript).

Despite the obstacles, the administrator and the teachers found way to celebrate small accomplishments. The teachers and the administrator spent a lot of time online throughout the project in order to implement activities to better help the refugee children. They searched for ways that they could support the literacy and social development of young children and make their transition into the public schools easier. In a way, these teachers and administrator served as advocated for the young children. As seen on Figure 1, which is a picture from the International Children's Day celebration at the park, the children danced, sang songs in both Turkish and Arabic, and held

up posters against the war. Their voices were made public.

### **Understanding The Children and Their Psychosocial Needs**

The teachers in the study each had degrees in early childhood education and the administrators held master's and doctoral degrees in education. A common topic that came up in the formal and informal discussions with the teachers was that their prior teaching experiences had not prepared them in dealing with vulnerable group of children like the refugees. For example, Sevgi, one of the classroom teachers mentioned:

*"I feel so limited sometimes trying to meet the needs of children. They just need to be children and not worry about anything else."*(Sevgi, Informal conversation).

From our observations and the discussions with the teachers, the refugee children had been through so much difficulty at such a young age, that they could not access many of the luxuries that many families and children take granted for. Ozlem, one of the teachers spoke about how

*"Many of them come to school without having breakfast and eat the snacks that we provide for them. It may be the only meal that they may be having during the day. I wish we can do more for them"*(Ozlem, informal conversation).

Additionally, the administrator spoke about her home visits to the children's homes:

*"I could not sleep after I saw that 12-people lived in a one room basement apartment. The things that we take for granted in our lives are a luxury for some of them. Before we try to teach them anything, we need to try to understand their situations be sensitive to their needs"* (Administrator, informal conversation).

Teachers' own self-realization of the situation and their ability to critique and reflect on their practices made it possible for them to be able to make decisions on instruction and support. The experience of teaching in the

temporary non-formal context allowed teachers to be able to re-examine their values and beliefs through transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Before making instructional decisions, it was apparent that meeting the children's basic needs became a priority at many times during the project. All of the teachers and administrators stated similar insights:

*"I am glad that we were able to provide at least a snack every day for them when they came to school. We also decided to buy clothes and shoes for them because many of them didn't have anything to wear for the end of the project celebration"* (Administrator Interview Transcript).

Although most of the little Syrian children in the project did not directly experience the atrocities of the war in Syria, they experienced the obstacles associated with having to leave their countries and families behind, living in poverty in a foreign country whose language and culture is different than their own, not being able to live their childhoods. Given that Syrian and Turkish cultures a similar in essence, the cultural understanding that the teachers had influenced the way they reached out to the needs of the children. The teachers deeply cared about the children and tried to meet their social, emotional, and immediate needs. As one of the teachers shared

*"Before we try to teach them anything, they need to feel secure, welcome and happy. They are children and they need to play happily and not worry about anything else"* (Ozlem Interview Transcript).

The teachers shared during informal discussions that they received short-term professional development on play therapy and read about it extensively during the project in order to support the children better. One of the teachers shared how she does this:

*"I hug them, and I comfort them by saying everything will be okay. I try my best to create the healthiest classroom environment that I can with the resources that I have"* (Sevgi Interview Transcript).

As the project was situated in ethical care, meeting the social-emotional needs of children was a priority by the team of teachers and the administrator. They all shared the value of caring relationships. The next theme in the study was what teachers referred to as “living in the moment”, which is discussed next.

*“Saving the day, learning to teach, develop and contribute to the integration and development of refugee children in society.”*

In times of crisis teachers and administrators focus on being in the moment, teaching in the moment and learning to teach refugee children. Although all of the project personnel were educators they realized that they had never thought about the specific needs that refugees may have, therefore all of them had to be flexible in providing the most appropriate and practical education as possible. Given the limited amount of time and funding, they found themselves in revising their plans constantly. The project was able to provide ample early childhood materials, teacher’s resource books, and children’s workbooks; however they were not specifically designed to meet the needs of children without Turkish language skills. Teachers repeatedly mentioned the difficulty of adapting the Turkish texts and resources to fit into the needs of the refugee children. For example, Sevgi mentioned:

*“I am constantly planning and revising materials. Although we have a long-term plan we refer to, I still need to change things around. Sometimes, we need to go slow and spend longer time on certain skills”* (Sevgi Interview Transcript).

It was a significant challenge that the pre-planned curricula did not necessarily meet the needs of the young refugee children. The teachers had to integrate more relevant and practical linguistic input to both support the linguistic and developmental skills of the children.

Aygul also added:

*“I feel like the things that I learned when I was training to be an early*

*childhood teacher were not enough. I am learning as I teach the refugee children”* (Aygul Interview Transcript).

Teaching refugee children meant more than academic and social support but going beyond and understanding their individual situation and providing culturally, linguistically, and socially relevant materials. As teachers engaged in “informed and reflective decision” (Mezirow, 2000: 23-24) making, they became “critically reflective” (Brookfield, 2005: 125) and this led them to become transformative learners. One of the main reasons for the refugee children’s slow language development was their lack of interaction and socialization with other Turkish children. The project administrator stated:

*“From the home visits that we have completed, the children often interact only with other Syrian children around their neighborhood. The neighborhoods that they live in are impoverished. Many of the Turkish families that live in the neighborhood also suffer from poverty so there are limited relations between the two communities. Children’s Turkish language skills are slowly developing. Because they are not interacting with any other Turkish children, it makes it more difficult for them to improve”* (Administrator informal conversation).

Social interaction plays an important role in language development in the early childhood. Even though the young Syrian refugee children did not interact with their Turkish peers, they were still exposed to language on the streets, at the park, and throughout the project. The teachers and the project administrator reported that the children’s Turkish language skills developed immensely during the six-month period that the project was being implemented. Along with the children’s language skill development, they also improved in their social, emotional, and motor skills through the many activities that they were engaged in. For example, in one of her observations Hos had witnessed that “Eva (a student participant),



who was shy and did not participate at the beginning opened up to raise her hand to speak in class in such a short time" (Field note, 02.01.2017). All of the teachers and the administrator regularly reported positive improvements in children's social and linguistic development. Ozlem reported enthusiastically:

*"Despite all the difficulties, when I see the kids smile I forget about everything. I see light in their eyes and that is all that matters"* (Ozlem, informal conversation).

Sevgi added, *"I really believe we made a difference in children's lives."* The teachers and administrators were pleased with the overall experience of being part of the project and agreed that it contributed to their professional development as well. Aygul commented:

*"I did not have any experience working with refugee children previously. This project helped me to learn to teach, develop professionally, and really be aware of my duties as a citizen. I had no idea about the needs of refugees that lived in my city and this project allowed me to grow both personally and professionally"* (Aygul informal conversation).

By being part of a short but transformative experience of teaching young refugee children allowed all of the project personnel to become reflective practitioners. Teachers and administrators reported that the experience in this project contributed to their teaching and personal development and enhanced their civic responsibility and personal growth.

## Discussion

This study focused on the experiences of the teachers and administrators in a non-formal education project for 4-6-year-old Syrian refugee children in impoverished neighborhoods of Gaziantep. The three themes that emerged as a result of our observations, interviews and field notes were: Overcoming challenges and celebrating small accomplishments, Understanding the children and their psychosocial needs, and Saving the day, learning to teach, develop and contribute to the

integration and development of refugee children in society. The temporary non-formal education project for early childhood education was a challenge for the teachers and the administrators but they overcame the obstacles with their dedication and hard work. With the foundation of ethics of care (Noddings, 1988), the teachers and administrators got to know the children closely and tried meeting the psychosocial needs of them.

Through being part of this project, the teachers and administrators became transformative learners which allowed them to shift their outlook into teaching through critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2000). Through their own critical lens, the project personnel provided access to early childhood education and a safe welcoming learning environment. Many young refugee children are still unable to attend early childhood education, which prevents their integration into the Turkish society. Because many of these young children live in impoverished neighborhoods with malnutrition and economic difficulties also make it difficult for them to grow physically, socially and emotionally (Kirisci, 2014). As Bourgonje (2010) states, the psychological problems, malnutrition, and economic difficulties negatively affect refugee children. The project provided the personnel with the opportunity to demonstrate the values of social justice in their teaching and allowed them to develop a greater respect for diversity, equity, care and compassion.

There are limited opportunities for refugee children to attend Turkish public schools. There are no programs in the Turkish public schools that would help Syrian refugees to learn Turkish (Aydin & Kaya, 2017). While in many refugee hosting countries in the world, there are additional language courses as they are integrated into the mainstream classes in schools. For young refugee children, there are early childhood programs that support the linguistic and social development of children. One of the reasons for the failure of the integration of the refugees into the Turkish education system may be due to the fact that at

first the Syrian refugees were thought to be likely to be returning to Syria once the war was over but it is a reality that the Syrian refugees may not be able to return home for many decades to come and will become citizens of Turkey. Needless to say, that there are many humanitarian efforts by various organizations and associations in Turkey are working hard to ensure that the basic human rights of refugees are met, including the children's right to education. Early childhood education makes great contribution overall development and well-being of children (Goldfeld et al, 2016), especially for those that are disadvantaged like refugees. The teachers and administrators in this study were confident in their efforts that they helped to contribute to the development of young and bright refugee children who each had a promising future when provided with the opportunities to flourish.

### Limitations

This study is not without a limitation. As with qualitative studies, the findings may not be generalizable but may still be useful given the shortage of research on early childhood education for young refugee children. The context of one city in Turkey presents only one case of non-formal temporary education project for young refugees but the purpose of this qualitative case study was not to generalize but produce evidence based on the investigation of the particular context. Finally, although Hos was associated with the development of the project, potential researcher bias was addressed by not including her on the implementation phase of the project during the data collection and by including the second author (Cinarbas) (who was not associated with any of the project phase) to support with coding and analysis of the data.

### Conclusion and Implications

There are numerous non-formal educational programs to support the integration of refugees into the Turkish educational system. *Learning Turkish*, was one of these temporary educational programs for young refugee children. This study

explored the experiences of teachers and administrators in this project. The findings of this study demonstrated that despite the limitations and challenges, the teachers and administrators focused on being in the moment, teaching in the moment in order to do what was best for the children.

There are many barriers for Syrian refugees to attend public schools in Turkey. The first one is the systematic difficulties that do not allow refugees to register for school. As Turkey is the country with the largest refugee children population, there needs to be consistent and equitable opportunities for refugee children to attend school without a question of legal status in the country. The second one is the lack of language education programs that would support the successful integration of Syrian refugees into the Turkish educational system. In cities such as Gaziantep, there needs to be public schools that offer Turkish as an additional language courses so that all refugee children attending public schools can catch up with their peers. Additionally, the lack of educational policy for the refugees in Turkey make it difficult to create uniform and equitable access to schools.

Finally, teachers in Turkish schools do not have the necessary training to meet the needs of increasing number of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Teachers at schools with Syrian refugees need to be trained to meet the educational needs of the students. Syrian refugee children may not only need academic support but also psychological support as well. Teachers and service providers need to be trained in meeting the needs of refugee children who may have experienced trauma due to their experiences of fleeing the war and migration. Despite the systematic difficulties in Turkey in serving the refugee children in schools, there are numerous efforts that make a positive impact on their lives. More studies on the experiences of implementation of non-formal educational programs need to be conducted to further investigate the impact of these programs.

## Notes

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