

How to Organize Schools for Integration of Syrian Children in Turkey; Constructing Inclusive and Intercultural Institutional Habitus in Schools

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1

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The civil war in Syria has displaced more than 6.5 million Syrians internationally, especially in neighboring countries. Of those, Turkey alone accommodates around three million. Together with people taking shelter from Afghanistan and Iraq, the protracted situations refugees have become the norm rather than the exception in Turkey.¹ This forces Turkey to develop new plans and strategies to cope with the challenges of protracted refugee situations particularly in the fields of education, housing, health, and the labor market. While new policies are urgently needed in each of these fields, the fact that 50 percent of Syrian refugees are under 19 years old and that there are around a million school-age children, make the regulations and reforms more acute particularly in the field of education.² Education is the most important instrument for refugee children to remove the traces of trauma, provide significant aims for social mobility and enhance their social and structural integration to society. However, an unjust education system and exclusive schools may exacerbate the integration process and give way to potential conflicts between majority and minority groups.



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In the following, this brief first sketches the current situation regarding educational opportunities and constraints for Syrian refugees in Turkey with a focus on primary and secondary education. Afterward, drawing occasionally on a study on a best practice model school on migrant and refugee education in Germany³, the brief makes some recommendations about the transition from Temporary Education Centers (TECs) to Turkish public schools as well as the organization of Turkish public schools for smooth integration of Syrian children into the educational system.

The situation and issues for Syrian students

Syrian people in Turkey were initially considered guests who will return to their country of origin when the war ends. However, as the war continues and restoration of the country is delayed, the legal regulation of the status of Syrian people in Turkey becomes inevitable. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) passed in 2014, which regulated procedures for foreigners and provided Syrian nationals and stateless persons from Syria the status of temporary protection.⁴ Rather than rights, this status grants them access to certain services in the fields of healthcare, education, and employment.⁵ The Ministry of Education is responsible for arranging the access of Syrian children to education and it is regulating the activities of refugee students at primary and secondary schools by the LFIP.⁶ Accordingly, the Syrian children and youth mainly continue their education in Turkey either through TECs or Turkish public schools. The Ministry of Education arranges regulations regarding recognition of previous certificates and integration of TEC certificates to Turkish public schools and accredits the certificates given by both institutions.⁷

Students and their parents need to receive Temporary Protection IDs to enroll into public schools. The students wishing to attend Turkish public

schools are placed in the schools closest to their place of residence. Syrian students are placed into different grade levels in public schools by either proving their previous educational trajectory with necessary documents or taking placement tests. The placement is arranged by district directorates of national education and may include written and oral tests. If the students require an equivalency certificate for university registration, they can take the Foreign Students High School Equivalence Exam (YÖLDS), which is organized once a year in certain cities.⁸

While various arrangements have been made at the policy level, hardships are observed with respect to the implementation of these policies in practice. It is regularly reported, for example, that there are ongoing difficulties with the content and format of placement tests prepared and provided by district directorates of national education. It is often articulated that the Syrian children have difficulties with accessing and understanding the placement test and presenting their documents for the school registration.⁹ There are also some hardships concerning placement of children in proper grade levels; many Syrian children lost some years of education and when they are placed into classes with younger classmates, the age difference leads to difficulties in adaptation.¹⁰ These issues should be resolved immediately with extreme care before the full integration of TECs to regular public schools.

There are short and long terms plans to fully integrate students in TECs to the public schools in the following three years. Presently, almost 60 thousand Syrian children are getting the education in Turkish public schools together with their Turkish counterparts, whereas slightly more than 260 thousand Syrian children receive education in TECs.¹¹ As the infrastructure improves in public schools, Syrian children will be incorporated in the Turkish educational system rapidly. As of the 2017-18 school year, first-grade students must attend Turkish public schools by law. Overall, there are plans to incorporate 70 to 100 thousand Syrian children into the first year of primary school in the 2017-18 school year.¹²

The integration of TECs into the Turkish educational system and gradual incorporation of Syrian children into public schools is a right approach for future smooth integration of these children to Turkish society. However, this incorporation process should be handled with extreme care. Against this background, I would like to introduce first the concept of institutional habitus as a framework and then make some recommendations as elements of this framework for the successful integration of Syrian children into Turkish public schools.

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The term institutional habitus refers to a set of predispositions, taken-for-granted expectations, and schemes of perceptions in which institutions, in this case, schools, are organized. More concretely, it refers to educational status, organizational practices of school and expressive order that covers certain expectations, conduct, character, and manners. The institutional habitus of schools are to be arranged in a way that welcome both class and cultural values of Syrian students to successfully accommodate them. The main factors underlying educational underachievement and withdrawals for socioeconomically poor migrant and refugee children are related to incompatibility between institutional habitus of schools and the students' class and cultural habitus.¹³ This mismatch discourages families from sending their children to school and students lose interest in their education as they think they are excluded. This is empirically substantiated by the fact that the great majority of Syrian families prefer TECs over Turkish public schools and they are reluctant to send their children to public schools as they do not understand the language and education there.¹⁴ Within this context, the following organizational elements are necessary for the development of an inclusive institutional habitus in Turkish state schools for proper

integration of Syrian children into the Turkish educational system.

Some organizational elements of an inclusive and intercultural institutional habitus

Curriculum: The Ministry of Education and the Syrian interim government are responsible for the formation of the curriculum that is used in TECs.¹⁵ Syrian refugees do not make up a homogenous group in terms of ethnicity, religion and political ideology. Thus, the curriculum must be prepared to represent all peoples of Syria without any bias towards a certain community. The absence of such a curriculum may lead to feelings of exclusion and withdrawal of students from education over time. The curriculum should also include components of differentiated education such as practical and artistic regulations and trainings for traumatized children and those who never attended school in Syria.

Incorporation of Syrian teachers into Turkish public schools: There are efforts put into incorporating Syrian teachers to the schools. Syrian teachers take orientation training and receive a certificate to teach in TECs. While the efforts are well-intentioned, the findings from field research indicate that there are serious problems with respect to this incorporation of Syrian teachers to the schools. First, the content and quality of the orientation training and the qualifications of the Syrian candidates

selected for these training courses are not sufficiently clear nor standardized.¹⁶ The teachers with these certificates are often seen as unqualified. This causes resentment among already qualified and experienced Syrian teachers. While integrating Syrian teachers into the Turkish education system is laudable, the content of the training should be improved and standardized. The criteria for both attending the program and receiving the certificate should be monitored and standardized.

Second, it has been often reported that some teachers work in TECs without adequate certificates. While there is an urgent need for Syrian teachers in schools and TECs, the quality of teachers should be strictly scrutinized. Lack of proper inspection may create grounds for unqualified teachers to work with false documents which would only exacerbate the situation. The certificates and diplomas should be rigorously scrutinized for standardization, justice, and security.

Third, the integration of Syrian teachers should not be limited to only TECs. In Germany, Syrian teachers are joining the courses alongside German teachers in the classroom. Alternatively, Syrian students are pulled out of some classes in German to learn in classrooms instructed by qualified Syrian teachers. This contributes to teachers' integration to the labor market gradually. Similarly, Syrian teachers should be encouraged to take more active roles in the public schools in Turkey. They can undertake various functions such as: forming role models for Syrian children, undertaking the task of translation in Parent-teacher meetings (PTMs), and most importantly, facilitate parent-teacher interactions in various ways, which is pivotal for forging a sense of belonging in children to school.

Fourth, Syrian teachers should work with Turkish teachers under equal terms. The payment the Syrian teachers receive in Turkey fluctuates between 800 TL to 2300 TL monthly salary. The payments should be standardized based on certificates and diplomas. Along the same line, the insecure working contracts and generally low payment discourage qualified teachers to stay and work in Turkey. It should be kept in mind that Syrian teachers are the backbones of an integration model in which families interact with Turkish society through school.

For the successful integration of Syrian teachers into the Turkish educational system, Syrian teachers can take additional ten-hour language and organizational courses on a weekly basis and this time can be counted as a normal working hour. Simultaneously, Turkish teachers should be provided orientation programs for intercultural education that would facilitate their interaction with Syrian teachers and children in the same working environment. The intercultural compatibilities of teachers are vitally important

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Social workers: Many of the refugee children may have post-traumatic disorders as they were exposed to consistent violence and conflict. Employing social workers who speak Turkish or Arabic as well as guidance counselors in schools, would help to connect these children to school. Counseling teachers work at the psychological level and employ an individualized child-centered. Social workers move in a wider environment that spans many different components surrounding refugee children's lives. Therefore, they can form bridges between family and school more successfully.

Language education: Language is the most important factor for both social and structural integration of Syrian children into Turkish society. It is often recommended that a language preparation year might facilitate the language acquisition process for Syrian children. It should be noted, however, that the language preparation classes may result in ethnically homogenized classrooms and contribute to the formation sub-culture that often clashes with the culture of the majority.¹⁷

The students can start school with other Turkish students as of the first year and they can be provided extra language assistance courses. Attending school with locals helps to facilitate peer group exchange, increase intergroup contacts, and potentially reduce ethnic prejudice and stereotypes. The research from German context shows that the refugee students commonly attending school with German students can succeed in the courses such as math and natural sciences and, this way, gain self-confidence, which is extremely important for their future investment into education. If it is possible within the limits of infrastructure, language assistance courses should be given in the mornings. Language courses in evenings are not fruitful for learning as children are extremely tired and want to go home.

Refugee representative staff: The schools can form a "representative for refugee" position and appoint Syrian teachers, desirably one female and one male, who speak Turkish and Arabic, to this position. In addition to regular duties, the additional task of these teachers in this position is to facilitate the interaction between Syrian families and school through extra meetings with the families and the centers in the neighborhood. They also should work with school administration closely to prepare important school bulletins for parents in Turkish and Arabic and organize gatherings for parents. Given that many Syrian families do not give consent to their children to receive an education in a language and context that they are not familiar with, the "representative for refugee" position would solve this

issue by enhancing family-school interaction.¹⁸

Parent-teacher meetings: Language is vitally important for increasing parent-school interaction. If parents need, parent-teacher meetings should be conducted in the language of the parents. The major task of school is not to teach language to parents but increase academic achievement of children. These meetings should be organized at least four times a year and the children should also take part in these meetings.

Delaying grading: Grades should be delayed to later years of education as much as possible. Grades are strong markers of how students see each other and see themselves through the eyes of others. The low grades in early classes may have detrimental effects on self-confidence and identity formation of refugee children and cause them to withdraw from education in various ways.

To conclude, schools which have an intercultural and inclusive institutional habitus, may play major roles in the integration process of Syrian refugees while teachers, parents, and students may contact and enter Turkish society through their involvement in school. The inclusion of students into Turkish public schools is highly important, however, the pathways these students will follow later should be carefully discussed and organized in order not to render the certificates the students receive from these schools into dead-end certificates. A need for intermediary schools in which vocational education options are combined with language courses may also arise.

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