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The psycho-social needs of displaced Syrian youth in Turkish schools: A qualitative study

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Abstract

This study investigates major challenges encountered by Syrian refugee youth in public high schools in Turkey, focusing on three sources of assessment: the refugee students themselves and their parents and educators. Based on qualitative interpretive research methodology, twenty-three individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. The study simultaneously hears the voices of the Syrian refugee students as well as those of their parents, teachers, and principals. Making friends among Turkish peers, social integration in school and the host society, discrimination, feeling lonely or even depressed, and other displacement problems are the crucial issues identified by this study. While most of the teachers and principals interviewed focused more on academic problems as the main reason for the deterioration of the majority of Syrian youth's education, refugee students and their parents claimed that the psycho-social challenges are more difficult and thus problematic.

Keywords: Acculturation, Psycho-social needs, Refugee education, Syrian students.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of refugees, displaced and/or stateless people, is constantly increasing worldwide. Huge waves of refugees are reshaping the political, economic, and cultural systems of the world as they move to countries for asylum because of crises, wars or simply due to a decrease in opportunities in their own native communities (Hatton, 2017; Waite, 2016). According to the United Nations Refugee Centre (2017), 65.6 million people have been forced from their homes. Around 22.5 million of these are refugees (over half under the age of 18) and most have been denied access to basic rights such as education (Obradović-Ratković et al., 2020). Refugees are forced to cope with various challenges and traumas upon reaching their host destination. They have to learn and adapt to the legal system of the country of refuge, and are often denied some of their rights including acquiring citizenship, learn the local language, and often suffer from being separated from their social networks and family, sometimes suffering from the loss of family members or property and capital. Losing peace and security and going through uncertainty about their future, can create severe psychological damage (Sinclair, 2001; Alpaydin, 2017).

The ongoing Syrian conflict is identified as being the gloomiest and most devastating in modern history. It has generated the 21st century's worst and most catastrophic humanitarian crisis with more than 500,000 Syrians killed and more than half of the population displaced inside or outside Syria (Anis, 2020). According to the UNHCR (2019), more than 6.6 million Syrians have been forced to flee their country and another 6.7 million have been driven from their homes but remain displaced and trapped inside the country. Neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, have received the bulk of the tidal waves of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the violence of war (UNHCR, 2020b). As the war reaches its ten-year mark, Turkey has demonstrated remarkable resilience by absorbing more than 3.6 million officially registered Syrians and hundreds of thousands of unregistered refugees, the lion's share of Syrian refugees worldwide. As well as Syrian refugees, Turkey receives about 330,000 from other countries.

The generous open-door policy toward Syrians and others suffering from war and violence makes Turkey host to the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide, hitting record levels. The challenge to integrate such a massive number is never easy particularly "in a country which is already struggling with socio-economic and political tensions" (International Crisis Group, 2018). In October 2014, Turkey adopted the Temporary Protection Regulation, which sets out rights and obligations for these accepted refugees and asylum seekers, including health and safety, shelter, and education. The current refugee problem has also had a knock on effect on the education of students and families. In line with this problem, this study aims to investigate the experiences of Syrian refugee students from the basis of their psycho-social needs.

The paper continues in the following manner: The introduction provides a brief review of the supporting literature and the purpose of the study, the second part outlines the research methodology, and the third part presents the voices of students, parents, teachers, and administrators. A full analysis and discussion of the key findings of the research in relation to the literature is provided in the discussion part, followed by recommendations.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

By reducing uncertainty and rebuilding a sense of confidence, education can play an important role in compensating for the social, economic, and cultural losses that refugees go through (Richman, 1998; Hek, 2005; Andron & Gruber, 2020; Alpaydin, 2017; Arar et al., 2019; Soylu et al., 2020). Education is

crucial in times of displacement. It can “foster social cohesion, provide access to life-saving information, address psychosocial needs, and offer a stable and safe environment for those who need it most. It also helps people to rebuild their communities and pursue productive, meaningful lives” (UNHCR, 2019). An appropriate education policy implemented in response to a refugee crisis can reduce the risk of stigma, isolation, intra-community tensions, marginalization, and even radicalization (Sinclair, 2001; Deane, 2016). Inclusion of refugee youth in equitable quality education, in fact, contributes to their own resilience and prepares them for positive participation in their host, native, and even international society. Such an education would aim to foster the conditions, partnerships, collaboration, and approaches to empower all refugee, asylum seeker, stateless, and returnee youth to show them how to find suitable solutions in conflicts and crises and how to thrive and develop their own potential in the future. Much has been written in the last two decades about refugee education, the main academic, psycho-social, financial, and other problems such students encounter in countries of asylum, and many helpful suggestions have been provided to improve the quality of their education. Recently, international scholars in the fields of education and social studies have begun to tackle the threatened status of the deteriorating education of Syrians displaced inside and outside Syria. An increasing number of Turkish educators and scholars (Aydin & Kaya, 2019; Alpaydin, 2017; Gormez et al. 2017; Kaysılı et al. 2019; Soylu et al. 2020) have studied refugee youth, concerned about the performance of Syrian children in Turkish schools. Syrian academics have, unfortunately, been displaced for almost a decade now, either inside or outside their country. They have struggled with various difficulties and distresses that have accumulated due to the non-stop tragic war, extremely worried but too busy to write about the deteriorating status of the education of the Syrians. To the best of our belief, our research is unique for being a collaborative work among Syrian academics in exile, Turkish, and Italian colleagues. The two Syrians of the research team articulate the true voices and needs of the Syrian refugee students in Turkish schools as well as the voices of their parents. The three Turkish fellows of the team took the responsibility of reflecting the voices and concerns of the refugees’ Turkish teachers and administrators. Given the rarity of hearing the voices of Syrian researchers in exile, this study is unprecedented. It encourages collaborative work between Syrians and international colleagues in solidarity in an attempt to contribute to the provision of quality education for Syrian refugee children and youth in Turkey. The study is expected to contribute to the globally accumulated, consultative, and collaborative efforts to provide prompt solutions to the World’s increasing phenomenon of displacement, where refugees’ perilous journeys affect negatively their education and thus their futures.

1.2. Purpose

This study shares accounts provided by Syrian students and their parents as well as their Turkish teachers and principals to reflect refugees’ multidimensional struggles. They must adjust to the new environment of a host school and community while struggling to meet their social, psychological, and academic needs, and while cultivating their wellbeing as teenagers. The study closely examines Syrian refugees’ academic and private lives and their social isolation from their own perspective as well as through the lens of Turkish teachers and administrators. It seeks strategies to develop their resilience and wellbeing, the main factors for achieving quality education. The study is an attempt to share Turkey’s burden and responsibility to develop education for both refugees and native youth learning together in the same class on an equal basis. The two Syrian researchers of the team have personal experience of the urgent necessity for acculturation to be implemented in the strategies and pedagogies of Turkish public schools where their own children and the biggest number of the Syrian refugees study. The study is an attempt to contribute to empowering refugee students to attain

quality education and well-being, so they are able to participate in building up both their host and native country.

The purpose of this study is to explore the educational status of Syrian refugee youth and their needs, especially psycho-social needs, in the Turkish public high-schools of Gaziantep. The study shares accounts provided by both Syrian students and their parents as well as their Turkish teachers and principals to reflect the refugees' multidimensional struggles to adjust to their new environment of the host school and community while meeting their social, psychological, and academic needs. It seeks strategies to develop the resilience and wellbeing of these refugee students. The study calls for recognition of the urgency of addressing and fulfilling the psycho-social needs of these refugees as a first step to improving their learning and achieving wellbeing.

This qualitative case study addresses the following research questions:

- a) How are Syrian students currently performing/achieving in Turkish public high schools?
- b) What are the barriers to their school success?
- c) What types of intervention are needed to overcome these barriers?
- d) What are the psycho-social needs of the Syrian refugee youth which affect the quality of their education and well-being in the host schools?
- e) How can culturally informed teachers support these vulnerable children to gain a good education?

2. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative method and is based on holistic case study design. The six members of the research team were of three different nationalities, 2 Syrian, 3 Turkish, and one Italian. The two Syrian researchers are themselves asylum-seekers in Turkey. With their own children studying in Turkish public schools, they have personal experience of the urgent need for intercultural strategies and pedagogies to be implemented in Turkish public schools in order for refugees and Turkish students to receive quality education and achieve well-being. All research participants were volunteers. They were assured that all their background information and identities would be anonymous. Two ethical approvals were obtained, one through Hasan Kalyoncu University (Gaziantep, Turkey) and a second through the University of Edinburgh (UK).

2.1. Participants

Twenty-three semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 4 categories of people who were either affected by or affecting the learning/teaching process. Five different public high schools in Gaziantep were selected. Classes in these schools integrated natives and refugees; they included a majority of native Turks, a considerable number of Syrians, and a few Iraqis, Palestinians, and Afghanis. Interviews involved 8 Syrian students (4 male and 4 female ranging in age range between 15 and 18), 5 parents (2 male and 3 female ranging in age range between 38 and 52), 8 teachers (5 male and 3 female ranging in age between 28 and 54) and 2 principals (both male). Participants were both male and female, except for the principals who were both male because none of the five schools had a female principal. All students and parents were displaced Syrians that arrived in Turkey between 2012

and 2016. All educators were Turkish and taught different subjects (Turkish Language, English, Science, Math, History, Islamic Studies, Geography, and Philosophy).

2.2. Context

The five selected integrated schools are all located in neighborhoods with high populations of Syrians (there were 3 to 19 Syrian students in each classroom containing about 30 students) in Şahinbey district of Gaziantep Province. All of them are public schools, free of charge suiting the financial status of the majority of displaced Syrians, whether refugees or asylum-seekers. 20% to 40% of the students of these integrated schools were Syrian. All participants (students, parents and staff) had more than two-year's experience in these integrated schools. Each participant was interviewed for 45 to 55 minutes. The Syrian field researcher interviewed the Syrian students and parents. The Turkish field researcher interviewed the Turkish teachers and school principals. All participants were interviewed in their native language.

2.3. Interview Process

The 23 interviews took place between mid-July and the end of August of 2020 on WhatsApp video calls for Covid-19 safety considerations and were recorded. Researchers designed a number of open-ended questions for all the participants to explore in depth covering the struggle and psycho-social needs of Syrian youth while integrating into the host schools. All interviews were transcribed, translated from Arabic or Turkish into English and then analyzed and interpreted by the research team. Researchers applied an inductive content analysis approach (Patton, 2002) in order to identify overarching themes. Having native speakers of Arabic and Turkish among the team members enabled the researchers to understand comprehensively the cultural differences and the linguistic nuances reflected in the narratives of the interviews.

3. Findings

Although this study was designed to gain insights into the main challenges that a considerable number of Syrian teenagers have faced in public high schools in Gaziantep, it was equally important to interview their parents and teachers. As academic agents of change, the research team were concerned to share the results of our research in the hope that it will lead to reflection on the possibilities of improving the status of these young refugees, the future generation of both their native and host countries. The analysis of interview transcripts demonstrates that participants faced several similar yet different challenges in Turkish public high schools that affected their academic performance and achievement. Although all participants were asked the same questions, the main themes that emerged after analysis of the interviews conducted with the Syrian students and their parents were slightly different from those obtained from the interviews with the Turkish educators.

3.1. Students' and Parents' Perspective

The interviews with the students and their parents reflected psycho-social concerns and worries about being ignored, rejected or discriminated against either in school or in the wider host community. They explicitly declared that such challenges they daily face affect their well-being and academic achievement more than anything else. The four core themes that emerged were: a welcoming school, culturally well-informed and supportive educators, social integration, and discrimination and bullying.

3.1.1. A welcoming school

The student interviews reflected the long-lasting psycho-social struggles of displaced Syrians while trying to study and become accepted by culturally different host schools and communities, which

emerged as the main as yet unsolved problem. They cared about receiving a sincere welcome from schools, principals, teachers, and classmates but felt that only a few offered this. They missed their time in Syrian schools, both back home and the temporary Syrian schools they attended in Turkey before joining the Turkish public integrated schools. They explained how such attitudes made a big difference and supported them. One 18-year-old male student nostalgically expressed the following: "School was a social gathering for the Syrians. We used to have many friends. It is different here. Most of our Turkish schoolmates don't want us. Most of the teachers don't care." Parent participants also expressed how a welcoming school and educators would positively affect the well-being of their children, especially when they first join the school. A mother of a Syrian female student said: "A little welcome to our children from school and the educators' team is always very helpful." Another mother of a Syrian male student declared: "It is very encouraging when new students, especially foreigners, receive such a school welcome. Unfortunately, our kids never received such a thing in the public schools of Gaziantep."

The findings reflected the importance of a welcoming school environment, which should be a zone free of any discrimination, inequality or even indifference, caring and encouraging refugee children to make them feel they are wanted. This will directly reflect on their productivity in school and later in the host community. Without such mechanisms of welcoming and caring, the vulnerable newcomers are likely not to feel safe nor that they belong. The psycho-social impact of conflict-related violence, coupled with the stressors of displacement, including the lack of making a livelihood, violence, disruption of social networks and traditional ways of coping, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic are having an unprecedented negative impact on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of children, adolescents, youth, and their families. The integration of psychosocial support and interventions in formal and non-formal education can be pivotal in supporting children, adolescents, and youth and their psychosocial well-being which, in turn, may positively contribute to their educational experience. The training of teachers, school counselors, and other school-based staff in psychosocial support and social emotional learning (SEL) can equip them with the knowledge and skills to better deal with their students, creating a more nurturing environment which, in turn, will enhance the learning environment for students. Additionally, teachers may be better able to manage classrooms and better prepared to identify cases that may require additional support and either provide that support or refer them to specialist services if required (No Lost Generation, 2020).

3.1.2. Culturally well-informed and supportive educators

All students and parents referred to the significant role of supportive teachers in achieving quality education for refugees. All the 13 participants, students and parents, talked of the urgent need for culturally well-informed and supportive educators as a priority for good education and to achieve well-being. For example, a 15-year-old Syrian female student stated: "Some of our Turkish teachers were supportive, some of them didn't care. A few of them never wanted to accept our cultural background positively. I can recall two teachers who didn't like Syrians, but the rest were fine. I still remember the nice teacher who stood for me and really supported me when I was a new student. His aid enhanced my education." Another 16-year-old Syrian female student acknowledged: "I liked my math teacher, unlike another one who once accused me of cheating. He usually accuses Syrians of being cheaters. My math teacher was a very understanding, nice guy. He made me good at math. I used to study for the subject almost every day. As a result, I often scored high points in math. Honestly, this supportive attitude gave me a lot of motivation." Two out of the eight Syrian students experienced studying in two different host countries. An 18-year male student had an experience with teachers in three different countries: "In India, teachers were culturally informed, encouraging native and non-native

students. So, I didn't face any discrimination. School was cool there. This, of course, tremendously supported my education. I excelled. I faced some discrimination in Syrian public schools because we moved from my native town, Idlib, to the Capital, Damascus. Also, I encountered a few cases of discrimination in Turkish public schools at the beginning." Similarly, a 17-year male student noted, his experience studying in two different host countries, Saudi Arabia and Turkey: "Most teachers were good here and there. There were a few who didn't like foreigners. In Saudi Arabia, we spoke Arabic, but with a different accent. They are closer to us in culture and language. Here, I faced a few problems in my Turkish school at the beginning. There were supportive and non-supportive teachers." All parents interviewed expressed the necessity of having culturally informed educators in the public integrated school. A mother of two Syrian students in two different public high schools in Gaziantep noted: "Courses for providing cultural awareness are needed for educators, refugee students, and native students to prepare them before they join such pluralistic classes so all can learn how to integrate successfully. Unfortunately, no one receives any kind of such orientation or training in Turkish public schools. Teachers have to encourage Syrian students to learn to respect the Turkish language and culture as well as being proud of their native culture and language. I think these things are really important. I mean, not to make Syrian students feel like foreigners." Similarly, a father of three Syrian students confirmed: "A competition among students from different cultures in pluralistic classes, as is the case in schools in India and the UK where we lived for a while, can enrich the experience of native and non-native students culturally and academically. This is definitely a very positive chance for all to compete and learn the art of communication. We must have culturally well-informed teachers and principals in Gaziantep public schools."

3.1.3. Social integration vs discrimination and bullying

Most students expressed feeling uncomfortable socializing with Turks, whether in school, neighborhood or elsewhere, because they felt not welcomed by the majority of natives. Seven out of the eight Syrian students confirmed that they encountered prejudice from most of their Turkish classmates and a few of their educators and therefore felt socially excluded. One 16-year female student expressed: "It is much easier to make real friends with the Syrians in school; they already have the tendency to befriend you as a Syrian. My relationship with the Turks is rather formal. They are rarely open to you as a foreigner." Most of the Syrian teenagers expressed their frustration with the education system of Gaziantep public high school because their efforts, participation, and their own native identity were never appreciated. The majority felt their voices were muted by some educators because they were "the others" or "foreigners". A 17-year male student declared: "I liked the Temporary Syrian schools in Turkey because I was friends with most of my classmates. School was a social gathering for the Syrians after leaving our country. We used to miss school in summer. Now, I have some Turkish friends but more Syrian friends of course. It is much easier to make friends with Syrians. Some of our Turkish classmates still consider us foreigners after having been together for three years!" Unequal reward/punishment procedures by some educators also hurt refugee students. For example, A 17-year-old male Syrian student said: "If a Turkish student makes problems in school, including bullying others, they (educators) just tell him not to do so or simply shout at him. But if a Syrian is in trouble, they summon his parents to school, give him detention or even kick him out of school. Only a few teachers treat all students the same. We love them." Interviews of the eight students (4 male and 4 female) revealed a gender-difference when faced with discrimination, whether by educators or peers. Syrian girls' reactions to racism were less aggressive. A 16-year-old Syrian female student reflected on such a gender difference in reaction to discrimination by some Turkish educators: "We, girls, usually sleep in the classes of those teachers who treat Syrians unequally or with indifference. Sometimes, we bring sweets and seeds into the classroom. We sit at the back and enjoy

chatting and eating because these teachers don't mind. They treat us as if we don't exist. They never want to answer any of our questions. So, we don't understand their lessons anyway. As for male students, such as the case with my brother and his male friends, sometimes they fight with bullying Turkish classmates or racist teachers, but then it is in vain, unless the principal cares."

3.2. Teachers' and Administrators' Perspective

Unlike the interviews conducted with students and their parents, those conducted with the educators reflected different perspectives on the reasons for Syrian refugee education and well-being problems in school. The five main themes that emerged from the educators were as follows: limited language skills, trauma and well-being, social integration, and discrimination and bullying.

3.2.1 Limited Turkish language skills

Insufficient language skills hinder educational achievement. Refugee students' priority, therefore, should be to master the language of the host country. Once they are settled, refugee children learn faster than their parents. As a result, they often translate for their adult carers. The analysis of interview transcripts with the selected eight teachers and two principals shows that seven out of the ten educators thought that problems in education were language-related issues. They related academic success, communication, and integration directly to students' proficiency in the Turkish language. Lack of language skills, they believed, prevented some Syrian students, especially the newcomers, from understanding others and expressing themselves properly, which hindered the integration process. Teachers ranked language as the key issue. Some educators were more optimistic about the ability of Syrian students to acquire a high level of proficiency in Turkish in a short time. One male principal claimed: "The obstacle facing the Syrian students in our school is acquiring the Turkish language. It mainly affects their academic achievement. I believe few can handle the matter in a short time. The majority of them cannot adapt well neither to our national schools nor to our community that hosts them. Because they lack language skills, they don't integrate easily. They simply isolate themselves, making friends only with each other." Contrary to this testimony, a male teacher noted: "They're watching the host life-style and language. They work hard to learn the new language. Then, they gradually start to socialize. They just need encouragement, especially at the beginning. One of my students was always alone in the first semester, but in the second semester she became very sociable." Similarly, another principal remarked: "Syrian students usually have problems at the beginning because national education is in Turkish, but then they can handle it." A young female teacher believed in the abilities of the Syrian students: "Arabian students are talented when learning languages, especially the Syrian students. They learn and adapt fast. ... They're really intelligent; when I teach them something, they learn fast. They're very smart." Although Syrian students exerted more effort in their classes, due to the disadvantages stemming from their different culture and language, some of them were able to improve their language skills and thus excel in academic performance. Most teachers noted that the majority of Syrian students were smart and hardworking and that they excelled in math, physics, foreign languages, and science.

3.2.2 Trauma and well-being

As with this theme, all of the eight educators reflected a deep concern about the traumatic experience of the Syrian students because of the ongoing war in their country and the difficulty of displacement, leaving behind relatives, memories, and belongings. A few teachers were rather pessimistic about the possibilities of overcoming this problem while teaching refugees. Most of them, however, felt that such a traumatic experience would gradually decrease because Syrian kids were young, smart, and creative. A male history teacher observed: "Trauma is related to age. As young people, their traumatic

experiences can be forgotten. They tend to look ahead to the future. For example, a student in the 8th grade had a severe traumatic situation, but we saw that he recovered. You know, life offers an alternative pleasure-oriented second chance for them now, here in Turkey.” Our findings also show that these traumatic experiences might distract refugees from learning. A male teacher observed: “Some Syrian kids were easily distracted from learning. We come to know that they lost friends or relatives in this war. They passed away.” Syrian youth experienced the tragedy of leaving a war zone and losing some of their beloved family members, neighbors, and friends as well as being away from their country and living in a foreign land. Teachers’ support and encouragement is, therefore, is crucial, particularly in this phase of children’s life. Refugee students need all the support of their educators, peers and families to overcome such traumatic difficulties and adapt to the new environment. This is highly significant for their well-being and educational achievement (Obradović-Ratković, et al., 2020).

3.2.3. *Social integration vs discrimination and bullying*

Our data shows that only five out of the ten educators thought that psychosocial support of educators was crucial, being directly related to the good well-being and academic achievement of refugee students. Lack of support from educators, Turkish classmates, the Turkish or Syrian community (including the refugee students’ families) contributed to the isolation of some of these displaced students. The other five educators did not believe that educators failed to support students or that discrimination and bullying was a major reason for some refugees’ educational failure and withdrawal from schools. They pointed to other reasons, such as lack of language skills, communication, and discipline problems, which some refugees suffered because of their personal circumstances and that teachers had absolutely nothing to do with. The following quotations reflect the attitudes of two different groups of educators. An example of the first group of educators blaming Syrian students for failing to integrate socially is a middle-aged male principal who said: “Because they lack language skills, they don’t integrate easily. They simply isolate themselves, making friends only with each other.” Similarly, a young Turkish Literature male teacher claimed: “One main reason behind the failure of many Syrian students is the lack of attendance. Discipline is another reason. When there is a discipline case, students want to escape. They say we don’t know enough Turkish. We know that they speak Turkish very well.” The following are examples of teachers who had opposite points of view concerning the integration of the Syrian students. A male history teacher noted: “Syrian students rarely made close friends with their Turkish classmates. I used to feel that there was tension between them. ... They may have felt that they are excluded. ... Some hard-working Syrian students who came to school years ago did not stay for a long time. I saw very smart ones. They were naturally intelligent. ... But we, the host students, educators, and community were not culturally-informed enough to understand them. For that reason, they lost interest in many subjects”. Another young male teacher remarked: “Syrians feel they are not easily accepted as friends by their native peers. They sometimes come to us as their educators and consult us about this problem. They feel victimized when it comes to relationships and communication.” A female math teacher said: “We make them feel bad as a society when we tag them as foreigners and don’t give these youth full access to our community. They’re smart, they know they don’t have the same rights for jobs and other opportunities in Turkey.” Another female teacher, a school counselor, commented about Syrian youth: “They feel excluded from our system. They think about that most of the time. I believe that is the most difficult thing for them.” She noticed a gender difference in attitude: “Syrian male teenagers have more self-confidence than females. Sometimes, they drop out of school if they face discriminated against or bullied or if they don’t receive the necessary psychological support. I cannot say that for female students. It is easier to force them to attend school in a patriarchal culture. Mostly, they are sent to school

compulsorily by their parents. But then, if they face discrimination, they sit at the back of the class and never paying attention. These are serious problems that need to be addressed.” Similarly, a male teacher noted: “Some Syrian male youth started forming radical groups in school to demand their rights. You know, all kinds of movements. I even started to warn them to be careful not to react aggressively anymore because they could be kicked out of all Turkish schools. ... Some dropped out of school when they were not given their rights. That was different from the girls. They learned to be more submissive.” As demonstrated in the above quotations, our findings point to a postcolonial difference between the discourse of the dominated (the displaced) and that of the dominating (the host community. Sometimes, Syrian students and parents set different priorities and reasons for successful integration and education for refugee children stemming from their own experience of refugeehood and displacement. Most of the Turkish educators gave explanations stemming from their own national experience. Despite such cultural disparities, all participants, students, parents, teachers and administrators, unanimously agreed with the urgency of meeting the needs of the large number of newly-arriving displaced Syrian students to Gaziantep public high schools to ensure they attain quality education. Good will dominated.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to reveal how Syrian students in Gaziantep public high schools face psychosocial challenges such as the need to gain full acceptance and integration and to receive a warm welcome and equal treatment from their Turkish school educators and classmates to feel that they truly belong to the host school and community. They also need to be treated not as foreigners but as part of the school, equal to native students in both reward and punishment. They need to be understood by culturally well-informed educators. The existence of such psychosocial problems is causing some Syrian students to drop out of school and education, especially male teenagers, despite having a great deal of ambition and ability to study and excel when given a comfortable and encouraging school environment. Those students who felt that their participation in class and school activities, including football matches, were valued and appreciated were able to gain a sense of belonging and advance in learning. Those who had no such opportunities and experienced a lot of bullying, however, felt marginalized and some of them left school. Young refugees usually feel that it is important that their educators understand the hard circumstances facing refugees in the host community and encourage them to overcome such obstacles. They confirm that educators’ support is crucial, especially during the first one or two years of arrival. Most young refugees confessed that starting school in the host country was a difficult experience and said that at first they felt isolated and scared (Candappa, 2003; Hek & Sales, 2002; Hek, 2005).

Seven out of the eight students reported episodes of racism and bullying at school by Turkish classmates, probably reflecting their families’ attitudes toward Syrians and refugees in general. Students also declared that a few educators were somehow racist, but luckily the majority were not. They expressed how that affected them negatively and led some of their friends to leave school. All of the eight students either personally experienced or knew someone else who experienced some level of bullying for being refugees. They claimed that there was rarely any serious punishment meted out to discourage bullying. This sometimes led to serious fights, violence, and aggression between Syrian and Turkish male students in some schools; in some cases, the police were summoned to deal with fights. That, of course, seriously affected the learning/teaching process. Refugees are usually disadvantaged people who are vulnerable to many disparities (Saleh et al., 2018). Many of the young people are not only worried about the undermining and threatening experiences they experienced,

but they also fear that racism and bullying will damage their educational chances. This is particularly when young people identify indifference and lack of protection from their own teachers (Hek, 2005).

Some parents and educators acknowledged that refugee students had already suffered enough trauma and displacement and that schools should create a positive learning environment. As has been suggested by Yahsi and Kirkic (2020) and Polat, Yahşi and Hopcan (2020) that professional development programs for educational leaders should be designed in line with the changing needs of students, parents, and educational settings. In this way we may make a positive change in the lives of students and families. Children and adolescent refugees who settle in host countries often undergo major physical and mental issues before and during displacement, and also suffer continuing difficulties after arrival (Demir & Aliyev, 2019; Findik et al., 2021). Due to the traumatic nature of the refugee experience and the exile-related stressors faced upon resettlement, the developmental challenges of adolescence are more complex (Berman, 2001). “The developmental and psychosocial transitions unaccompanied adolescents experience not only bring about mental growth and psychosocial adjustment but also increased vulnerability and risk for maladjustment” (Niesel & Griebel, 2005). The findings of our interviews with ten educators, two administrators, and eight teachers showed that, despite their good intentions and willingness to help Syrian students to improve their educational and well-being to enable them to succeed in the future, there are disparate levels of diversity-culture awareness. Only half of these educators seemed to be relatively culturally well-informed and thus understand the refugees’ limits. This could heavily impact the learning outcomes of refugee students. Education is a cornerstone for the true integration of refugee youth into the host community; educated youth will contribute to more sustainable developments in the receiving country. Without equal access to quality education during this critical developmental stage and lacking full opportunities for employment later increases the risk of these youth becoming victims of crime (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019). Inclusive and quality education for life-long learning is the only option for a good future. Most Turkish educator participants reflected a sense of sympathy toward the displaced Syrian students. However, they felt there was a lack of preparation and training for teachers and all school staff. Their conversations highlighted their awareness of the important role of academics in shaping the youths’ future. Their responsibility toward helping all the students to attain a good education cannot be easily achieved, unless they receive external help and training. Another relevant aspect identified by the teachers during the interviews was their sense of responsibility in terms of moral and civic values and their willingness to be prepared to address the psychosocial needs of refugee children. From the teachers’ perspective, psychologists and training for community workers should be a priority in complex environments in order to provide support and identify psychological needs (Aydin & Kaya, 2019). When educators fail to practice culture-sensitive leadership, they are likely to perpetuate the disadvantaged students’ marginalization and discrimination, which might be the case for refugees (Arar et al, 2019; Fraise & Brooks, 2015). Schools acting as socially just environments should help individuals to reflect on their role in society, remedy unequal opportunities, and help students and staff to acquire skills to challenge any racist attitudes. Education is empowerment. Social justice can only exist when all have the same opportunities enabling them to control their lives and participate as responsible, independent members of society. It is therefore important to examine how educational leaders function in contexts of conflict and vulnerability, in difficult situations of socioeconomic and cultural complexity, utilizing their social and educational skills for context-relevant teaching and learning (Arar et al, 2019). Educators are often required to act as agents of change. Such a mission is crucial, especially when the students’ environment is immersed in social turmoil, war or natural disasters (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Waite, 2016; Arar et al., 2019). They mediate the gap between government policies and their

implementation in practice (Seashore, 2010; Arar et al., 2019). During humanitarian crises when refugee children live in a state of uncertainty for their future, not knowing whether they will stay in the asylum country or whether they will return to their native country, educators play a crucial role in helping children and adolescents in the absence of clear policy (Brooks et al., 2017; Arar et al., 2019). They may have to operate precariously in a state of tension between the different forces. External pressures can constrain the leaders' influence and direction and conflict with the established norms, values and beliefs of the school or host community. They have to work out how to continuously reshape the educational process so it is suitable for both native and refugee students in their integrated classrooms, while their ethical values provide a compass and meaning for their work (Evans, 2001; Fullan, 2007; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Arar et al., 2019). Educators, thus, play a major role in ensuring refugees' continued education, helping to bridge periods where they have missed days or even levels of school because of displacement. They can assist them to achieve academic success and social integration (Andron & Gruber, 2020). Though they are regarded as instructional subjects, they can play roles in the sociocultural dimension. With encouragement, they can reverse the socially disadvantaged position of refugee students caused by discrimination. In fact, they can be inspirational role models for inclusive education if they are willing to do so. Not only natives of the host country but also educators in school settings have responsibilities toward including refugees and asylum seekers. An environment in which diversity is respected, that is safe and tolerant, where learning takes place and culturally responsive teaching practices are achieved can motivate all learners to learn (Kaysılı et al., 2019). Empowering underprivileged refugee students contributes to empowering their families as well. Such educators' leadership is crucial for identifying and challenging inequities inherent in broader society (Arar et al., 2019).

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