The Contribution of the Religious Culture and Ethics Course on the Integration of Children of Syrian Refugees—Example of City of Adana/Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study looks into the contribution of the Religious Culture and Ethics Course to the integration of children from Syria. It is a required course for grades 4 through 12 and it aims to facilitate their integration into the larger society they are currently living in by developing their literacy in religion. The research question is how much this course affected their adaptation and adjustment to the society considering the fact that their cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds are different from those around them. To this end, interviews were held with a group of teachers who teach this class in Adana, Turkey. The results showed us how this course functioned within the context of the Syrian children and their education in Turkey, identified the kinds of problems that cropped up along the way, and suggested some solutions.

Introduction

Migration is a global problem which almost every country has to deal with in 21 century. The main reasons for the migration are war, economic and social problems, famine, and so on. According to UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2016), there are 65.6 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes (22.5 million refugees, 2.8 million asylum-seekers, and 40.3 million internally displaced persons) by the end of 2016.

Turkey is one of the main countries that have done an admirable job to handle migration problem. Because it is geographically situated at such crossroads between Asia and Europe, she has hosted many immigrants and refugees throughout her history. The war in Syria that has been going on since 2011 has thus far forced about 6 million refugees to cross the border into Turkey. It started with small groups in the beginning and it reached 500 thousand people in 2013. This number increased gradually, culminating in approximately 3 million in 2016. Turkey introduced new laws and regulations to control and handle the flow of refugees trying her best to meet their basic needs. Under the international law for children’s rights, Turkey has provided refugee children with opportunities to continue their education. In 2014 the Ministry of Education issued a statement that all refugees will be legally able to attend schools either in temporary education centers/accommodation centers or in regular government public schools.

The Syrian children in the accommodation centers and temporary education were instructed in Arabic while the others at regular schools have education in Turkish. It is not hard to guess that these children are experiencing a lot of hardships throughout their educational endeavors in Turkey, the main one of which is integration and adaptation into the cultural environment they
find themselves in. The language barrier and the psychological trauma they experience are also among the conditions they need to tackle.

In this sense, our argument is that The Religious Culture and Ethics Course can be considered to be a good venue where such efforts are realized. It is possible to say that this course can function in such a way to facilitate the adjustment and adaptation of the said students within the new community they now live in, where they are faced with having to get to know the cultural values of that community.

**General information about Syrian Refugees in Turkey**

Although Turkish authorities have called them as “guests”, the protection which is provided for Syrians in Turkey is called “Temporary Protection.” This protection has three main components. While the first component of it is to accept people with open-border policy, the second one is to have the non-refoulement\(^1\) policy and the third one is to provide the basic and immediate needs of people who are under the temporary protection (Kaya& Eren, 2014:p. 32)\(^2\). Turkey organizes the said temporary protection under the Law on Foreigners and International Protection which was approved by the President on 10.04.2013 and published in the Official Gazette No. 28615 dated 11.04.2013 (GOM, 2017). Under the protection of this law, Syrian People get the Temporary Protection ID card for achieving health and educational services.

According to the ministry of interior directorate general of migration management, the population of Syrians in Turkey is more than 3 million which 1.675.331 of that population is man and 1.452.743 of that are the woman by 2017. On the other hand, almost half of the population (1.441.387) is between 0-18 years old by 2017(GOM, 2017).

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\(^1\) non-Refoulment policy means that “No Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” Note on Non-Refoulement (Submitted by the High Commissioner), http://www.unhcr.org/excom/scip/3ae68ccd10.note-non-refoulement-submitted-high-commissioner.html

\(^2\) Even though “refugee” is the most common word for people who are displaced, Syrians who are forced to leave their countries are not defined as “refugees” because of the 1951 Geneva Convention which is the first international convention that defines “the statutes of refugees.” See. Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, by UNCHR http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2a10.pdf The term which is used by Turkish authorities for Syrians is “the Syrians Under Temporary Protection.”

There are many accommodation centers (camps) for Syrian Refugees which settled by Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency. Although there are many accommodation centers (camps) for Syrians, many of them live outside of the accommodation centers. The following chart shows the number of the Syrian in and outside of the accommodation centers (GOM, 2017).

*As of 10.08.2017*
As we can see on the chart, most of the population of Syrians under the temporary protection live outside of the accommodation centers. Syrians who live outside of the accommodation centers live in almost every province of Turkey. Istanbul which had 500,084 Syrians by August 2017 is the number one city which Syrian refugees choose to live in. Adana, the city we conducted our research in, was the fifth city chosen by 166,205 Syrians by August 2017 (GOM, 2017).

**Education for Syrians under Temporary Protection**

Even though the official procedure for Syrian’s Education in Turkey started in 2012, the main work was accomplished in 2014. On 23 September 2014, The most comprehensive convention was declared for protecting the educational rights of Syrians who are under the temporary protection in Turkey (Emin, 2016:p.14). According to this convention, children who fled from their countries are accepted to public schools without residence permit except for higher (college) education and the online education system was installed for their educational data separate from Turkish student (MEB, 2014/21).

Almost half the Syrians in Turkey are children who are 0-18 years old. Although Turkey has made a tremendous effort to provide education for Syrian children, according to the Ministry of National Education, while there are 294,112 Syrian children attend the schools in temporary education centers, there are 169,010 Syrian children who continue their education in regular public schools in 2017 (ERG, 2017). It seems that enrollment rate among Syrians is increasing in parallel with the Turkish Government efforts. The reason for the high enrollment rate of Syrian Children in temporary education centers rather than Turkish government run public schools is mainly the language barrier. Families have chosen temporary education centers more because of the language of education which is Arabic. On the other hand, school enrollment rate changes according to
educational level and grades. For instance, while elementary grades have the highest enrollment rates for Syrian children, eleventh and twelve grades have the lowest ones. While girls are subject to early marriage during secondary/high school education, male students work outside of the schools to help their families financially. This reality is the main reason for decreasing the school attendance (Coskun&Emin, 2016, p.10).

There are some alternatives for Syrian children in Turkey. Those are as follows:

**Temporary Education Centers:** In total there are 425 temporary education centers in 21 cities in Turkey. While 36 of these centers are located in accommodation centers (inside the camps), 389 of them are situated outside of the camps. There are currently 10 provinces which have accommodation centers (Coskun&Emin, 2016, p.18). According to Ministry of National Education, the number of the temporary education centers is increasing in parallel with the number of school age children from Syria.

The curriculum in temporary education centers was mainly Turkish curriculum with Arabic interpretation in the 2011-2012 academic year, but in the 2012-2013 academic year, Turkey tacitly decided to adopt reviewed Syrian curriculum by Syrian Educational Commission and use it alongside the weekly Turkish Language Education.

Educational materials have been prepared and also revised by the same commission for each grade. The language of education is Arabic in these centers and the Turkish Government recruits Syrian teachers as volunteers for teaching and facilitating the process. There were 3650 volunteer teachers who work at the accommodation centers by 2015 (UNICEF, 2015, p.10-11).

The reason for providing education in Arabic to Syrian Children is declared that Turkish Government authorities accept Syrians as “guests” who will return to their countries and try to not leave any child left behind their education in the host community (Seydi, 2014:p.275).
Those centers are mainly public schools which are used for native children in the morning and for Syrian children in the afternoon. There are also some separate schools under the control of municipalities for Syrian children, especially in certain cities like Gaziantep and Kilis which have much more Syrian population because they are just across the border of Syria.

**Public Schools:** Syrian Children who have been educated in public schools have regular Turkish Education in Turkish. This Education which requires 1-12 compulsory year period is under the control of the Ministry of National Education. Although enrollment of the public school has been possible for Syrian children from onset of the war, some official requirements like residence permit, language barrier, and economic challenges remained among the main factors of the low rate of the enrollment in public schools until the Turkish Ministry of National Education lifted the residence permit requirement to attend the public schools for Syrian Children in 2014 (UNICEF, 2015:6).

**Non-Formal Education:** Non-formal education is mostly pre-school for children and vocational, life skills and literacy education for adolescents and adults. There are also some Koranic schools in accommodation centers for Syrian people in Turkey. Approximately 5,338 children participated in non-formal and informal education opportunities by 2016 (3R, 2016).

**Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. The data collection was done through interviews. Semi structured interview questions sought answers to these questions:

- What are the similarities and the differences between Syrian refugee students and their Turkish counterparts?

- How did the Religion and Ethics course contribute to the integration of refugee students into the Turkish culture and community?

- What did the students find the most and the least interesting topics within the course?

- What are the most frequently asked question by the refugee students in these classes?

- What are the most common problems encountered in terms of the refugee children’s adjustment?

**Collecting and Analyzing the Data**

Through snowball sampling, 11 teachers who taught the said course were interviewed and the data was analyzed with the help of NViVo 8 data analysis software. The study was limited within the city of Adana to 2017 and the reason for the choice of this city was because it is the one of the major cities that received many refugees from Syria.

**FINDINGS**

**DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>SEX</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EMPLOYEM</th>
<th>SCHOOL OF EMPLOYE</th>
<th>UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTION</th>
<th>GRADUATE DEGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p1</td>
<td>Femal</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Theology</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Femal</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>RAE</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Theology</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>RAE</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
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<td>Theology</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>P6</td>
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<td>Theology</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Elementary</td>
<td>RAE</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
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<td>RAE</td>
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<tr>
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<td>23</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>RAE</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in the table above, 7 out of 11 participating teachers in our research were female and 5 male. The participants were aged between 23 and 42 and their experience in teaching ranged from 1 year to 17. 4 of the these teachers were teaching at elementary schools, 6 middle school and 1 at high school. 4 participants had their bachelor’s degrees in the School of Theology and 6 completed the RAE (Religion and Ethic Studies) program at the School of Theology while only one teacher had their master’s degree in the related field.

**Similarities and Differences (I and other)**

Similarities and differences between the students from Syria, who are under temporary protection and their Turkish counterparts will play a role in their integration into the culture of the host country. It is expected that the more similarities exist, the easier the integration is going to be. Within the scope of this study, the topics emphasized under the similarities between these two groups were religious beliefs and cultural practices. Some concepts within these topics were belief system, worshipping practices, respect for the parents, the perceived importance of religious holidays and sacred nights within the Islamic belief, the use of prophet names and their companions in daily language. For instance, here is what P7 said in relation to this topic, “Since the refugee
students that I teach are Turkmens and are of Hanafi/Sunni conviction, we did not have problems in religious matters. Their religious beliefs and practices are almost the same as ours.”

On the other hand, because all the Syrians are not affiliated with same sects and denominations, it was determined that differences between the two cultures were religious practices/different schools of jurisprudence called sects, their cultural and educational readiness, the different levels of habits of asking questions. P8 commented on this topic as, “While Syrian students emphasized the worshipping practices of the religion, the Turkish counterparts deemed the dimension of belief more important. Furthermore, Syrian girls and boys will differ in their choice of clothing and religious covering.” Similarly, P2 stated, “We are having problems regarding the daily prayers and sectoral differences.”

It is possible to deduce from the teachers’ statements that although having same religion is an advantage for integration, denominational differences can define as differences.

The Contributions of the Religion and Ethics Course in the Integration (I exist with my differences and I am valuable)

The Religion and Ethics course aims, in its vision and content, to achieve the acceptance of the other while respecting their differences. Therefore, one of the objectives is to make people realize the presence of differences is not a reason for split and estrangement but on the contrary a source of richness and diversity. Most of the differences apparent in religion stem from cultural customs and schools of madhabs; therefore the religion and ethics course with its overarching themes is the perfect candidate for this purpose. Almost all participants emphasized on the accommodating nature of the RAE course and that they felt the course contributed to their efforts to better understand the differences among people.

For example, P10 said, “The Religion course has a very uniting feature. This is what we teach the kids. Our Turkish students used to exclude the Syrian children. Then we told them that our religion teaches us we were brothers and sisters in Islam. When we explained to them that we should open our doors when they are in need, their reactions changed and they became more friendly.”

Correspondingly, (P4) it was evident that the RAE course helped the students make connections to their daily lives and enabled them to better communicate with those who had different religious and cultural backgrounds as well as (P2 and P10) bringing them closer to each other with love and understanding. (P1)

P11: “I would make sure that I point it out when a Syrian student was absent. I always tell them we should respect all outsiders and lend our helping hands when they need it. I tell them that maybe they are not in a position to be understanding the circumstances they are in. I ask them to be respectful realizing that they came from a different country and that their language is different than ours. Since the course is called Ethics, the students readily understand these.” This quote shows what method the RAE course follows in making students understand the differences.

The Interest Syrian Shows in the RAE Course (I wonder)
Since the Religion and Ethics course includes the content that is already familiar to students, it is not surprising that there is much interest in it. That’s why, the RAE course can be considered to be a favorite class within the educational curriculum and in which the students feel the need to express themselves. Although the majority of the students from Syria come from the same religious background, they still have different cultural convictions and thus they are in a position having to learn the culture of the host country and the way religion is practiced within that particular culture. This can be considered from one angle to be an enriching factor in their mutual efforts in communication. We should however note that the language barrier plays an important role in asking questions. The fact that the students do not have a good grasp of the Turkish language results in failures in communication and cause the questions to be very basic in nature or it all together stops their attempts to even ask. In this concept, the questions Syrian students ask in the RAE course the most are centered around the sins versus good deeds, what is allowed and what is forbidden in religion, the vocabulary and topics that they do not understand, abstract concepts and the questions that are usually asked in the high school entrance exams. For example, while P8 says “Apart from the main content of the class, they ask about what is allowed and what is forbidden in religion.” P6, on the other hand, maintains that such questions are frequently voiced, ‘What does look like? Is God in the mosque?’

Where the Students fail or achieve in the RAE Course

While the RAE course interests the students in some areas, yet in some others, it does feel like a distant endeavor to students. This can be explained by stating the fact that the guest students come from similar religious backgrounds and yet they can be different interpretations and practices within the same area. This further causes the students to be successful in some areas and not so successful in others.

Therefore, the topics Syrian students are mostly interested in most and consequently are more successful at are memorization of Quranic chapters and prayers, narrating of prophetic stories, the madhabs/sects, learning to read Quran, hygiene practices, family and love and brotherhood. It is thus not surprising that the guest students, whose mother tongue is Arabic, are successful in learning how to read Quran, the memorization of Quranic chapters. For instance, P10 suggests that Syrian students “do participate in narrating the prophetic stories and excitedly share their own versions.” And P5 adds “Arabic prayers and stories are the most favorite topics.” The results of the research indicate that the other topics that are different form their own culture interested them for the reason that they were different than what they were used to. For instance, topics such as the differences in family structure and differences in hygiene practices turned out to be different and therefore interesting areas for them.

On the other hand, Syrian children were not very successful and therefore did not enjoy the topics that are centered around the ethics, the interpretation of some concepts, the national and native areas of interest, secularism and patriotic areas, which can be seen in what P9 says, “They are having difficulties in areas where interpretation is needed due to the lack of language skills.” Similarly P6 says “I realize that students feel bored in topics that are specifically concentrating on us as a nation since they do not quite understand them.”

Most Frequent Problems in the Class and Suggestions for Solutions
The most basic problem that we see in the RAE classes pertains to the language proficiency of the students. This also dovetails with the results from different studies in the field. The deficiency in language skills brings forward the communication problems, which furthermore leads to other problems where the students find themselves unable to contribute to the class discussions and creates obstacles in their socialization process. P8 exemplifies this by saying, “The most common problem we face is the language deficiency in our students. It causes them problems in areas where they need to be able to understand the class content and when they need to express themselves in class. They tend to be not so eager to speak up their minds during class discussions and the reason for this is that they fear the reactions they might get from their classmates.”

On the other hand, due to the humanitarian crises in their home country, Syrian students, who had to flee from their homeland, have serious psychological problems. Therefore, it is not unexpected that these kids, who escaped their own country that is torn apart with war and unrest, would have severe psychological problems especially when one realizes that many of them witnessed their family members murdered in front of their eyes. This psychological trauma causes them problems when they are to have basic human communication with friends in class, which impedes their integration process. The possibility of rejection by their classmates would further expand this already difficult situation for them. P5 says, “Their classmates normally approach Syrian students in a not so friendly manner. They sarcastically call each other Syrians when they want to belittle them.” Outside the class, it is common that they would not include Syrian students into their plays and games addressing them with mocking remarks. (P2) Still some other problems would be cited as the sectoral differences, the religious viewpoints of different interpretations, their daily life practices and cultural differences. For instance, P5 says, “In the RAE classes, Syrian students tell us that they think we are not religious enough.” We also see one of the main problems with these students is that of poor attendance, which is also confirmed by some other studies. The primary reason for this is that especially male students feel that they need to work to provide for their families as well as the fact that families sometimes just cannot afford financially to send their kids to school; also there are instances where families just keep moving from one place to another.

The solutions offered to these problems can be classified as those within school limits, off school limits and those that are both. The ones that are to be done within school boundaries are the activities that will enhance the tolerance and empathy among students and those that raise awareness about differences and equality. P11 says, “The kids had prejudices. I searched as to what I can do about it. I found a relevant movie and story. After using them in class, I saw that prejudice is lessened.

In order to overcome the language deficiency in students, it might be suggested to offer extra complimentary language classes. Some teachers also suggested that students might be engaged in some activities where students may have some time together with their classmates. One of the teachers, P10, proposed, “They should have sessions of games and play during the free range sessions.”

Counselling sessions can be arranged to deal with their psychological issues especially in their native language, which should help them recover from the traumas they suffer from resulting in healthier behavioral patterns. The most important element in this endeavor would be teacher training. Ideally all teachers, but within the scopes of this research the teachers of RAE class,
should be offered in-service training. P10 explains, “There should be an orientation session as they did to us for about two weeks, which was not enough.”

Outside the scope of the school system, there should be cooperation with the families, where they are trained in this regard, which is thought to help them become aware of the issues lessening the prejudices against the refugees. Additionally, in order to help the students with their orientation some activities both in and also out of the school can be arranged. P1 says, “In and out of the school, they should spend more time together, which should help with their orientation, as in educational, social, art and sport related contexts.” P7 adds, “I believe teachers should put more effort in order to achieve better integration by organizing activities that can be done with the whole group. Also to help the Syrian families socially mingle with their Turkish counterparts, some dinner events can be organized.”

Although it is obvious that the RAE classes do play an important role in the integration of the Syrian families helping them adapt to their new environments, it is still necessary to come up with a long term strategy. In this regard, some new topics may be added as content into the current RAE course as well as new methods can be utilized to get a better result in dealing with the psychological problems of these students and their adaptation to the culture they now live in.

It is one of the themes that came up in our research that the RAE course seems to have the potential to contribute to dealing with the current cultural crises at hand especially when the content that would lend itself to integration issues is to be increased. With its content beyond the limitations of madhabs, our research demonstrated that the RAE course would suggest the sectoral differences is nothing but a richness in itself. P11 summarizes this idea as “We should add content where respect for different cultures is valued. We already do this although it is not specified in the curriculum. We should emphasize it more. Maybe some elective classes could be offered for those groups where such students exist.”

Results and Suggestions

The RAE course is one of those classes that could contribute to the integration of the Syrian students who are under temporary protection into the Turkish culture with its content that emphasizes awareness in cultural issues, sharing, tolerance and religious literacy as well as teachings in belief systems, worshipping practices and Quranic studies. The similarities between the two cultures do prove to be helpful in this matter. The results of our study can be stated as:

- The RAE class helps enable the Syrian students integrate into the host culture.
- Syrian students have a big interest in this class since they happen to have the same religious background. The RAE classes can be thought of a good candidate in this integration since the religion shared by the two cultures provide a common ground to work on. Taking this class would hasten within the student the idea of belonging and being part of the culture they are in.
- The content that exists within the scope of this class such as the topics of helping others, respecting what is different, tolerance, responsibility taking and empathy should help the Syrian students who are prone to suffer from problems in these areas. It would
be beneficial even more if this class is enriched with various methods making it a ground for real life learning, which would result serving the integration better.

- Although many studies (Kaya and Kirac, 2016), (Emin, 2016) suggest that the main obstacle for the Syrian students seems to be the language deficiency, it is still easier to overcome this issue at the state schools where the language of instruction is in Turkish. The Syrian students have a better chance of socialization at the state schools where they receive their education rather than at the temporary assistance centers. This should be seen as an advantage for the RAE classes. It should be furthermore noted that more activities should be planned to help these students with their language skills as well as their overall success. To this end, we advise that more opportunities should be created for them to be engaged in the areas they are mostly interested in, which is expected to contribute positively to their integration.

- Some other studies conducted so far suggest that the individuals under the temporary assistance tell us that the most trusted institutions for them is of those that are religious in nature. (Kaya and Kirac, 2016) This brings along the fact that the readiness level they are at in terms of the RAE classes is already high. Since these classes have the related content of religion and ethics practices they are already familiar with, they should be seen as a venue which will reinforce the readiness they bring from their family backgrounds.

- One of the most important results of this study that is parallel to the others (Kanat and Ustun, 2015) is that Turkey needs to have long terms plans and policies developed for the Syrian students who are under temporary assistance. Although the temporary assistance centers do offer a great help in this regard, in the long run it is not clearly predictable how effective they will be in providing help in the integration process. For this reason, it should be noted that under different programs, Syrian students should be encouraged to attend the state schools.

- Another outstanding results that came out of this study is that teacher training is very essential. It is deemed very important that Syrian students should be considered a sensitive target audience in terms of the fact that teachers dealing with them should be trained with prolonged periods in creating educational opportunities for the kids both in and outside of the school system (Eres, 2015)

- In parallel to other related research, this study finds that Syrian students are in need of psychological support in regard to their experiences in the war zones where they lost family members, experienced dire financial hardships and mental toll of being away from their homeland, which necessitates the support system in schools should be improved a great deal. Within this notion of support, rehabilitation services should be enriched to the point that not only students but also the parents should be in a position to benefit from them so that there is no generation that is lost under these problems.

- The process of developing long term policies regarding this issue should involve consciousness raising activities for the hosting culture, which should help ease the prejudices against them. For instance, although 2015 data (Ozpinar and et al., 2016) suggests the crime rate in the Syrian population to be 1.3%, the common perception among the host population for it to be a lot higher. Informative and scientific reality checking should be made available to the public, which should result in better communication between the families and the school system.
Another result of the study, again that goes in parallel to other studies in the relevant literature (Coskun and Emin, 2016) is that for various reasons the attendance rate of the Syrian students is comparatively low. One possible solution that can be offered for this issue is to increase the economic and social assistance provided to them when such funds are made available either from national or international sources.

Although such international organizations as UNICEF, UNHCR and WHO do provide support for the Syrians who live under the temporary assistance in Turkey (3RP, 2015-2016), the amount of such help and also the domains they are applied to should still be increased and diversified in order for the Syrian refugees to reach a certain level of welfare.

Moreover economic and financial burdens are the other problems that Syrians have to handle in Turkey. Even though Syrians who are registered have been able to get a work permit since 15.01.2016 (CSGB, 2016), unemployment is still one of the big challenges among Syrians in Turkey. It is estimated that 95% of Syrians do not have the skills that the Turkish labor force needs (Grisgraber&Hollingsworth, 2016, p.6).

References


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