

Intersection of Migration And Education Policies: Access to Education for Syrian Children in Turkey

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(Received: 28 May 2025, Accepted: 04 June 2025)

(5th International Conference on Contemporary Academic Research ICCAR 2025, May 30-31, 2025)

ATIF/REFERENCE: Büyükboyacı, Ş. (2025). Intersection of Migration And Education Policies: Access to Education for Syrian Children in Turkey. *International Journal of Advanced Natural Sciences and Engineering Researches*, 9(6), 9-19.

Abstract-This study explores the access of Syrian children to education in Turkey within the context of migration and education policies. Following the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, Turkey has become host to over 3.6 million Syrian refugees, with children making up a significant portion. The research focuses on the integration of these children into the Turkish education system, the obstacles they encounter, and the national and international policy responses addressing these challenges.

Using qualitative document analysis, the study reviews legal regulations, policy documents, academic literature, and international reports. Key barriers identified include language difficulties, curriculum incompatibility, socioeconomic disadvantages, psychosocial issues, and experiences of discrimination.

The study emphasizes the need for sustainable and inclusive education policies. Recommendations include enhancing Turkish language support, developing adaptable curricula, offering targeted teacher training, expanding financial support, and increasing access to psychosocial services.

Ensuring education for Syrian children is vital not only for their personal development but also for Turkey's broader social cohesion and long-term policy goals. Therefore, the formulation of inclusive and responsive education policies is imperative in addressing both humanitarian needs and integration efforts.

Keywords: Migration, Refugee Education, Syrian Children, Education in Turkey.

I. INTRODUCTION

Forced migration movements around the world create profound impacts not only in demographic terms but also through their social, economic, and political dimensions (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2013). The civil war that began in Syria in 2011 has led to a major humanitarian crisis, forcing millions of people to flee their homes. Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, Turkey has become one of the countries hosting the largest refugee populations in the world. As of today, more than 3.6 million Syrians reside in Turkey under "temporary protection" status, with a significant portion of this population comprising children (Directorate

General of Migration Management, 2023). The access of Syrian children to education has become a critical issue that not only represents a humanitarian and legal concern but also significantly influences Turkey's long-term social and economic structure. The lack of equal educational opportunities directly affects both the future social integration of Syrian children and the broader landscape of Turkey's educational policies (UNICEF, 2021).

The education of Syrian children has become one of the most debated issues in countries receiving refugees. Education is not only vital for individual development but also plays a key role in the integration and social cohesion of refugee children (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Initially, Turkey adopted a separate educational model by establishing Temporary Education Centers (TECs) for Syrian children. However, over time, these centers were closed, and a transition was made toward integrating Syrian students into public schools (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2019). While this transition facilitated the inclusion of refugee children in the national education system, it also brought several structural challenges. In particular, language barriers, curriculum incompatibility, teachers' pedagogical preparedness, economic difficulties, discrimination, and psychosocial trauma have emerged as significant obstacles to accessing education (Emin, 2020).

At this point, Turkey's policies toward the education of Syrian refugee children are of critical importance both in national and international contexts. Institutions such as the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), UNICEF, the European Union (EU), and the Directorate General of Migration Management have implemented various projects to facilitate the integration of refugee children into the education system. However, the effectiveness of these policies remains debatable, especially in terms of field implementation and the capacity of the existing educational infrastructure (Aras & Yasun, 2021). The situation of Syrian children's access to education in Turkey should also be analyzed within the framework of international human rights treaties and refugee education policies (Cerna, 2019).

Furthermore, in order to assess the impact of educational policies, it is essential to consider the international literature on refugee education. For instance, integration programs for refugee children in Germany and multicultural education policies in Canada offer comparative models for Turkey (Crul, Schneider & Lelie, 2019). Considering global policy initiatives aimed at improving refugee children's access to education, it is clear that Turkey needs to invest more in sustainable and inclusive educational models.

This study comprehensively examines the process of educational access for Syrian children in Turkey, evaluates the major challenges encountered in this process, and assesses the effectiveness of the policies currently being implemented. The primary aim of this research is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing educational policies and to offer sustainable policy recommendations to improve refugee children's access to quality education.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to analyze the process of access to education for Syrian children in Turkey at the intersection of migration and education policies. In particular, it examines the legal, institutional, and pedagogical frameworks facilitating the integration of Syrian students into the Turkish education system and evaluates the effectiveness of existing practices. The primary objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify the main barriers faced by Syrian children in accessing education in Turkey,
- To assess the impacts of language barriers, curriculum alignment, teacher competency, socioeconomic factors, and psychosocial issues on education,
- To examine the effectiveness of refugee education policies implemented in Turkey and support programs initiated by international organizations,
- To develop recommendations for ensuring equity and inclusivity in education.

In this context, the study aims to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the current system by analyzing policy documents, official reports, and academic sources regulating the educational participation of Syrian students in Turkey through the method of document analysis. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the development of sustainable policies to enhance refugee children's access to education.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on document analysis, a qualitative research method. Document analysis is a technique that involves the systematic review of written materials to identify and analyze themes. Within this study, a comprehensive evaluation was conducted through the examination of policy documents, legal regulations, international reports, and academic studies related to Syrian children's access to education in Turkey.

The following types of documents were analyzed as data sources:

- **Official Documents and Legislation:** Policy documents and legal regulations published by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), and other relevant public institutions,
- **Reports by International Organizations:** Reports on refugee education published by UNICEF, UNESCO, the European Union, and other international institutions,
- **Academic Studies:** Scientific research related to the education of Syrian children published in national and international academic literature.

During the research process, the documents were examined using thematic analysis, and the findings were classified under specific categories. These categories include access to education policies, language barriers, curriculum alignment, socioeconomic obstacles, and psychosocial support mechanisms.

The rationale for choosing this method is its ability to provide a comprehensive perspective on Syrian children's access to education in Turkey through the systematic analysis of existing documents, rather than conducting field research. The research findings aim to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of current policies and to inform the development of future educational strategies.

IV. MIGRATION PHENOMENON AND EDUCATION IN TURKEY

Migration is defined as the movement of individuals or communities from their place of residence to another region or country due to economic, political, environmental, or social reasons (Castles & Miller, 2013). Throughout history, migration has been a significant phenomenon that has influenced the cultural and economic structures of societies. Migration is typically categorized into two main types:

- **Internal Migration:** This refers to population movements within the borders of a country, such as from rural to urban areas or between different regions. In Turkey, large-scale rural-to-urban migration began in the 1950s with accelerated industrialization, turning major cities into primary migration destinations.
- **International Migration:** This involves movements from one country to another. Such migrations may be voluntary or forced. Forced migration often occurs due to war, natural disasters, or political oppression, while voluntary migration is usually motivated by the pursuit of economic opportunities or improved living conditions.

In recent years, forced migration has increased significantly on a global scale. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 2023, more than 100 million people

worldwide have been forcibly displaced. In this context, Turkey has become one of the countries hosting the largest refugee populations.

Turkey has historically experienced various migration waves, which have shaped its social, economic, and cultural landscape. During the Ottoman Empire, especially from the 19th century onwards, large-scale migration flows occurred from the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Asia to Anatolia following the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878). In response to these migrations, the Ottoman state expanded madrasas and local schools and, during the Tanzimat period, established new schools specifically for the education of immigrant children.

During the Republican era, particularly between 1923 and 1950, the Turkish government established boarding schools and supported the education of immigrant children as part of its integration policies for migrants arriving from Bulgaria, Greece, and Yugoslavia. From the 1980s onwards, Turkey transitioned from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration, receiving people from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey experienced its largest migration wave and became host to millions of Syrian refugees.

Migration in Turkey is not limited to Syrian refugees but also includes migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and various African countries (İçduygu, 2015). One of the areas most impacted by migration is the field of education.

Turkey's long history of migration has continually reshaped its societal, economic, and cultural structures. The international migration waves that intensified from the 1980s, particularly after the Syrian conflict began in 2011, have positioned Turkey as a major host country. Migration in Turkey, encompassing not only Syrians but also migrants from other regions such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Africa, has led to significant challenges and transformations—most notably in education (İçduygu, 2015).

The access of migrant and refugee children to education is addressed both through international human rights frameworks and Turkey's domestic legal regulations. The 2014 Temporary Protection Regulation granted Syrian children the right to free education in public schools. In this context, the Ministry of National Education has implemented various projects and reforms to increase Syrian refugee children's participation in the education system. However, significant challenges remain in areas such as language barriers, socioeconomic disadvantages, curriculum adaptation, and discrimination (Kirişçi, 2017).

The relationship between migration and education policies in Turkey directly affects both integration processes and broader societal cohesion.

V. REFUGEE EDUCATION POLICIES IN TURKEY AND OTHER COUNTRIES

Refugee education policies vary depending on each country's socioeconomic structure, migrant population, and integration strategies. Comparing Turkey's refugee education policies with those of other countries can help evaluate the effectiveness of current practices and identify new strategies for improvement.

Germany

Germany has prioritized language acquisition as a fundamental element in the integration of refugees into the education system. Temporary classes called *Willkommensklassen* ("Welcome Classes") have been established for Syrian refugee children, providing them with intensive language instruction. This system enables students to transition to mainstream schools once they reach a certain proficiency level. Germany also implements individual support programs for refugee students and offers psychosocial services to enhance their academic success (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2022). Furthermore, training programs have been developed to equip teachers with the skills to work effectively with refugee students.

Canada

Canada has expanded its “English as a Second Language” (ESL) programs to support the integration of refugee children into the education system. These programs offer additional classes and individualized learning plans to help students improve their language skills. The Canadian government supports the educational process by providing local schools with resources tailored to the needs of migrant students (Government of Canada, 2021). In addition, various community-based support programs have been implemented to facilitate cultural adaptation for refugee students.

France

In France, special education units known as *UPE2A* (Pedagogical Units for Non-French Speaking Students) have been established to provide individualized pedagogical support. Under this system, refugee students first receive language training before being integrated into the general education system. The French government collaborates with local authorities and non-governmental organizations to facilitate access to education for refugee children (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2022). Personalized educational plans are implemented to accelerate the integration process, and teachers are supported with specialized educational methodologies.

Comparison with Turkey

Compared to European countries, Turkey's education policies address a significantly larger refugee population. While countries such as Germany, Canada, and France have created transitional educational classes for refugee students, Turkey has adopted a model of direct integration into public schools. The advantage of this model lies in the immediate inclusion of refugee students in the general education system; however, language barriers, curriculum discrepancies, and socioeconomic challenges present significant obstacles to successful integration.

Turkey has implemented projects such as PICTES (Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System) to enhance access to education for refugee children. As part of this project, Turkish language teachers have been appointed, language support has been provided, and educational materials have been developed (Ministry of National Education, 2022). Nevertheless, factors such as language barriers, economic hardship, and discrimination continue to hinder the full participation of refugee students in education. Although social cohesion programs are being carried out in Turkey, individual support and guidance services appear to be insufficient when compared with international practices.

Overall, while countries like Germany, Canada, and France implement a phased approach to integrating refugee students into the education system, Turkey employs a model of direct enrollment into public schools. It is evident that refugee education policies in Turkey should draw on international best practices to become more sustainable. Expanding language support, increasing access to psychosocial services, and training teachers to work with refugee students could significantly enhance the effectiveness of Turkey's refugee education policy.

VI. ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR SYRIAN CHILDREN IN TURKEY: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Turkey is one of the countries hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees globally, with a significant portion of this population consisting of children. Although education is regarded as one of the most critical tools for the social integration of Syrian children, the challenges encountered in this process raise questions about the effectiveness of current education policies. The access of Syrian students to education in Turkey has evolved over time through different models and policy shifts.

Initially, Temporary Education Centers (TECs) were established for Syrian children, providing an alternative model that allowed them to receive education in their native language. However, with the closure of these centers, Syrian students were directed to public schools, thereby accelerating their integration into the Turkish education system (Ministry of National Education, 2019). Although this transition increased

access to education, it also brought about various challenges in terms of students' academic and social adaptation.

Current statistics on Syrian children's access to education in Turkey indicate that a large proportion of school-aged children are enrolled in the education system. However, enrollment rates are significantly lower at the secondary education level (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2023). According to 2021 data, the overall enrollment rate for Syrian children stands at 76%. In early childhood education, the rate is 34.34%; at the primary level, 75.13%; at the lower secondary level, 80%; and at the upper secondary (high school) level, only 42.65% (Bianet, 2021). These figures reveal a clear decline in enrollment as the level of education increases. The main reasons for this include economic hardships, language barriers, psychosocial issues, and curriculum incompatibilities.

Moreover, regional disparities play a significant role in the access of Syrian children to education in Turkey. In metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Hatay, where the Syrian population is concentrated, the education infrastructure is relatively more developed, and school attendance rates are higher. In contrast, educational opportunities are more limited for Syrian children residing in rural areas and smaller settlements. Particularly in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions, factors such as inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teachers, and transportation difficulties contribute to lower enrollment rates (UNICEF, 2021). This situation complicates the equitable implementation of education policies across regions and exacerbates regional inequalities.

In conclusion, access to education for Syrian children in Turkey is shaped by a combination of state policies, international support programs, and field-level implementation. However, an evaluation of the current system reveals the need for more sustainable and inclusive solutions. The next section will address the primary barriers faced by Syrian children in accessing education.

VII. CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING EDUCATION AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Syrian children in Turkey face several key challenges in accessing education, and various initiatives have been implemented to address these issues: Language Barrier

The language barrier is one of the most significant obstacles hindering Syrian children's integration into the Turkish education system. A large proportion of Syrian students come from Arabic-speaking families and thus lack sufficient proficiency in Turkish. This creates a substantial disadvantage in terms of understanding lessons, communicating with teachers and peers, and achieving academic success (Emin, 2020). According to a report in *Yeni Akit* newspaper, some Syrian students in public schools struggle to participate in lessons due to language difficulties and experience challenges in classroom communication despite teachers' support (Yeni Akit, 2023).

Initiatives to Overcome the Language Barrier:

- **Turkish Language Support Programs:** The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has implemented Turkish language education programs targeting Syrian students. As part of the PICTES (Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System) project, more than 5,000 Turkish language teachers have been appointed to provide language support to refugee students (MoNE, 2022). A report published by *Milliyet* highlighted that students attending Turkish support classes in some Istanbul schools significantly improved their basic language skills and academic performance within a year (Milliyet, 2023).
- **Preparatory Classes and Supplementary Lessons:** In provinces with high refugee populations such as Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa, preparatory classes have been established to help Syrian students better adapt to the curriculum (UNICEF, 2021). According to data from Dergipark, these practices have been observed to enhance both academic achievement and social integration among

students (Dergipark, 2022). These preparatory classes aim to develop students' basic language skills before they join mainstream classrooms alongside Turkish peers.

Curriculum Adaptation and Pedagogical Challenges

Syrian students' prior educational experiences differ significantly from the Turkish curriculum. These differences hinder students' understanding of course content and negatively affect their academic performance (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Measures Addressing This Issue:

- **Teacher Training Programs:** Teachers are being trained to work effectively with Syrian students and to develop sensitivity toward cultural differences. For instance, over 25,000 teachers have received training in effective communication and pedagogical approaches for refugee students through a program jointly implemented by MoNE and UNICEF (MoNE, 2023). In Ankara, this program enabled teachers to learn innovative techniques for classroom integration of Syrian students.
- **Adapted Educational Materials:** Bilingual Arabic-Turkish educational resources have been developed to facilitate Syrian students' adaptation to the curriculum and have been piloted in provinces such as Hatay and Kilis (SETA, 2021).

Socioeconomic Barriers

A significant proportion of Syrian families in Turkey are struggling with economic hardships. This situation directly affects children's educational lives and hinders regular school attendance (Bianet, 2021). According to a report published by Media4Democracy, a substantial number of Syrian children are forced to drop out of school due to financial difficulties and are drawn into child labor (Media4Democracy, 2023).

Efforts to Address This Problem:

- **Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) Program:** Supported by the European Union, this program provides financial aid to Syrian children to help them continue their education. As of 2022, more than 800,000 refugee children have benefited from this initiative (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2023). However, a report in *Evrensel* newspaper highlights that irregular distribution of these payments causes difficulties for some families in sending their children to school (Evrensel, 2023).
- **Combating Child Labor:** Various projects have been implemented in Turkey to prevent child labor. Within the framework of joint projects conducted by the Ministry of National Education and the ILO, children are encouraged to stay in school, thereby preventing them from working in industrial areas (ILO, 2022). In an interview published by *Evrensel*, it was noted that some Syrian children are employed in industrial workshops instead of attending school (Evrensel, 2023).

Psychosocial Challenges

The traumatic effects of war and forced migration negatively influence the psychological and social adjustment of Syrian children. Many students require psychological support due to war-related trauma, social exclusion, and adaptation difficulties (Emin, 2020). According to a report in *Evrensel* newspaper, some Syrian students have stated that they experience discrimination and exclusion in schools (Evrensel, 2023).

Psychosocial Support Efforts:

- **School-Based Psychosocial Support Programs:** In collaboration with UNICEF, the Ministry of National Education offers psychological counseling services for Syrian students. Guidance counselors have received specialized training regarding the unique circumstances of refugee students (UNICEF, 2022). According to media reports, projects conducted in Istanbul and Mersin have established psychosocial support centers for Syrian children and provided individual counseling services (Milliyet, 2023).

- **Social Cohesion Activities:** To facilitate the social integration of Turkish and Syrian students, social cohesion projects have been implemented in provinces such as Gaziantep and Hatay. These projects have initiated intercultural exchange programs between schools (SETA, 2021). As reported by *Evrensel*, some schools have organized activities that bring Turkish and Syrian students together, thereby promoting cultural awareness (Evrensel, 2023).

Discrimination in Education and Social Integration

Syrian students may encounter discrimination and exclusion during their educational experiences. Such circumstances negatively affect their motivation to continue schooling and their academic performance (Aras & Yasun, 2021).

Efforts to Address This Problem:

- **Social Cohesion Programs:** Various projects have been implemented under the support of UNICEF and the Ministry of National Education to strengthen social relationships between Syrian and Turkish students. As of 2022, approximately 1.2 million refugee students have participated in these programs (UNICEF, 2022).
- **Student Clubs and Cultural Activities:** Social events have been organized in schools in Istanbul and Mersin, creating opportunities for Turkish and Syrian students to spend time together. Awareness campaigns aimed at reducing discrimination have also been conducted (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2023).

VIII. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study has examined the access of Syrian children to education in Turkey and discussed the main challenges they face. The findings indicate that language barriers, curriculum adaptation, socioeconomic difficulties, psychosocial challenges, and discrimination significantly impact the educational experiences of Syrian students. Despite being one of the countries demonstrating the largest humanitarian effort in refugee education globally, Turkey's existing policies need to become more sustainable and inclusive.

Current educational practices—particularly support mechanisms such as the PICTES project and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE)—have taken important steps toward increasing refugee students' participation in the educational process. However, persistent issues remain in areas such as language acquisition, curriculum adaptation, and social integration. Elements such as teachers' competencies in working with refugee students and the capacity of school administrators and local communities to include refugee students in the education system are among the areas requiring further improvement.

In particular, enhancing refugee students' academic achievement necessitates a comprehensive approach that goes beyond mere integration into the education system, encompassing broader processes of social cohesion. Research shows that disruptions in education hinder the integration of refugees into society and may lead to long-term economic and social instability. In this context, new strategies must be developed to ensure the sustainable access of Syrian children to education in Turkey.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

To make refugee education in Turkey more sustainable and inclusive, the following recommendations are presented:

- **Language Education and Academic Integration:** Turkish language support programs for Syrian children should be made more systematic and long-term. Language education practices within the PICTES project should be expanded, and pedagogical support should be provided to teachers on how to work with refugee children.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Flexible curriculum practices should be developed to facilitate the transition process for Syrian students, in line with their educational backgrounds. Increasing the use of Arabic-Turkish bilingual materials will support academic achievement.
- **Economic Support:** Scholarship and financial aid programs should be expanded to overcome the economic barriers to education. More refugee children should be able to continue their education under the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) program.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Guidance and counseling services should be increased in schools for students in need of psychological support due to migration and war-related trauma. School-based social cohesion projects should be widespread to encourage social integration between Syrian and Turkish students.
- **Social Integration and Combatting Discrimination:** Cultural exchange programs and joint projects that encourage integration between Syrian and Turkish students should be supported. Measures should be taken to prevent discrimination in education, and school administrations should take a more active role in this regard.

In conclusion, comprehensive and multidimensional policies should be developed to improve Syrian children's access to education in Turkey. Developing sustainable solutions in this area is of great importance not only for the future of refugee children but also for supporting Turkey's social integration process.

The access of Syrian children to education in Turkey is considered a critical issue with long-term social and economic implications, going beyond a humanitarian concern. The findings of the study indicate that the primary challenges Syrian students face in the educational process are language barriers, curriculum incompatibility, socioeconomic deficiencies, psychosocial difficulties, and discrimination. In this context, the following recommendations are presented to make refugee education in Turkey more sustainable and inclusive:

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