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# Struggles of Refugee-Receiving Schools in Turkey

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**Abstract:** A total of 82.4 million persons had emigrated from their countries by the end of 2020 because of global conflicts. A total of 3.6 million settled in Turkey, which became the most refugee-receiving country. Among those resettled in Turkey, the majority were school-aged children, and schools became an inseparable instrument in the adaptation process. Thus, schools play a vital role in creating a safe space for healing; through students, schools also contribute to building solidarity and collective responsibility for the social inclusion of refugees. Schools' guidance services are key in working with the school's stakeholders. This study aims to analyze the needs and issues of schools with high refugee density in different parts of Turkey from the school counselors' perspectives. Using a semistructured interview protocol, we interviewed fifteen school counselors from seven different cities, and three main themes emerged: (a) student-related issues, (b) contextual issues, and (c) response strategies. Findings indicate that refugee-receiving schools need to attend to students and families, as well as deal with conflicts among Syrians and conflicts between Syrians and locals, with limited resources.

**Keywords:** refugee-receiving school; Syrian refugees; school counselors; needs assessment; local students



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## 1. Introduction

The world is currently dealing with unprecedented levels of immigration. According to [UNHCR \(2020a\)](#), there are 82.4 million displaced persons, including 26.4 million refugees, and the number keeps increasing; UNHCR reported in 2017 that one person was forcibly displaced every two seconds. [UNHCR \(2019a\)](#) reported that 3.9 million people were stateless, with no access to education or healthcare, no freedom of movement, and little chance of returning to their homeland ([Aleinikoff 2015](#)). The scale of global immigration now requires all sectors to provide services for traumatized multicultural populations with different languages. Since the majority of refugees are of school age, education becomes a prominent sector, providing hope for a better future for young refugees and their families. Research reports that schools are places where children and adolescents can feel safe again. With positive conditions, they may recover from their past trauma and achieve better acculturation and adaptation ([Peterson et al. 2017](#)). Schools may also sustain the local society's culture and ensure socialization within it ([Saldana 2013](#)).

However, although education is a fundamental human right, most displaced children and youth lack access to quality schooling from preschool to college. [UNHCR \(2020a\)](#) reports that, of 3.5 million refugee children of primary school age, only 50% are pupils. Out-of-school and dropout rates are substantially higher among refugee students. Difficulty achieving inclusive education policies, inadequate resources at refugee-receiving schools, and lack of well-trained teachers are among the many reasons for this unfortunate development ([Aydın and Kaya 2019](#); [Crul et al. 2019](#); [Demir Başaran 2020](#); [Ereş 2016](#); [Erden 2020](#); [Taşkın and Erdemli 2018](#)). Furthermore, the demands of refugee-receiving schools are wider than those of refugee students. These schools and the surrounding neighborhoods undergo an adaptation process as their daily routines change and their already limited resources are used ([Bajaj and Bartlett 2017](#); [Banks and Banks 2009](#); [REACH 2014](#)). Therefore,

constantly monitoring and evaluating the needs and struggles of refugee-receiving schools is vital in Turkey, with its massive refugee influx.

The sociocultural context of society impacts schools. Authorities must also consider the possible responses of local populations, particularly if the country receives large numbers of refugees in a short time span. Studies reveal that although some locals consider refugees a source of cultural wealth and economic resources (İçduygu and Şimşek 2016), most fear for their own jobs and culture, often considering refugees the source of problems—such as an increase in rental prices and the number of beggars (Çelik and İçduygu 2019). Furthermore, xenophobic attitudes among the locals are more likely to increase as they face undesirable events involving refugees in their daily lives (e.g., Stephan et al. 2005). In addition to the necessity of sharing limited resources, such as employment, housing, and education, social conflicts between the local population and refugees are more likely to emerge, partly due to prejudices on both sides, different lifestyles, and different worldviews. Unfortunately, systematic research has seldom addressed the effect of such issues on schools.

Nevertheless, previous studies have reported that refugee-receiving schools need to address issues that stem from refugee students' challenges (e.g., Fortuna et al. 2009; Yakushko et al. 2008). These issues can arise during the pre-migration phase (i.e., violence, political conflict, torture, and fear associated with flight from their country), post-migration (i.e., acculturation stress, tiring legal procedures, loss of social status and contact, discrimination), as well as stressors during immigration (i.e., missing family members, lack of food and shelter, physical and sexual assault during the immigration and asylum-seeking process).

Refugee students do not even gain recognition as a unique group: some countries conflate them with, for example, international students. Arnot and Pinson (2005) further claimed that although refugee students' needs belong to the main categories of learning, social, and emotional issues, schools are more likely to concentrate on their language and learning issues alone. Our research concentrates on contextualizing the struggles of refugee-receiving schools so that researchers and policymakers can better operationalize the resources to support these schools.

#### *Refugees in the Turkish Education System*

Currently, Turkey is hosting the largest number of refugees worldwide, with 3.9 million refugees (Council on Foreign Relations 2020; UNHCR 2020a). Half of the world's currently registered refugees are under 18 (UNHCR 2020b). Approximately 1.4 million refugees in Turkey are under 15, and over 800,000 are between 15 and 24 (UNHCR 2019a). In addition, 500,000 Syrian children have been born in Turkey since the mass immigration started in 2011. Many have already reached school age or are about to reach it. Considering the large numbers of school-aged children with traumatic experiences (including traumatic parental background), education and mental health appear to be vital issues.

Turkish schools currently confront a web of issues despite the many national efforts and programs focusing on refugee students' adaptation and needs (UNHCR 2016). However, there seems to be little research on the schools' struggles to meet refugees' needs or the refugee students' struggle to cope with the difficulties in their new lives. Although limited in number, existing research studies substantiate that Turkish schools have been struggling with immense language barriers (especially those with limited resources) due to lack of Arabic-speaking teachers (Alpaydın 2017; Arar et al. 2019; Aydın and Kaya 2019; Çelik and İçduygu 2019; Erden 2020; Eryaman and Evran 2019; Taşkın and Erdemli 2018; Tümen 2019).

Many schools also lack teachers who can address behavioral problems stemming from traumatic histories (Sarmini et al. 2020). Moreover, inadequate school facilities and low levels of peer acceptance have an impact on refugee students' educational process as well (Aydın et al. 2019; Çelik and İçduygu 2019; Kaya and Kırac 2016; Şeker and Sirkeci 2015). Therefore, we expect that profiling refugee-receiving schools will contribute to more effective school-based psychosocial prevention and intervention models and

provide adequate national and international policy development. Since schools play a vital role in creating a safe space for healing (Catubay and Patton 2020), they can also contribute to building solidarity and collective responsibility among students to integrate refugees by building trauma-informed practices in schools (Castrellón et al. 2017; Duncan-Andrade 2009; Maynard et al. 2018; Wiest-Stevenson and Lee 2016). Likewise, identifying, monitoring, and contextualizing the needs and struggles of refugee-receiving schools appear to be vital for the efforts not only to increase schooling among refugees but also to prevent unforeseen consequences of the educational system, including unreciprocated or misguided investments (Erdur-Baker et al. 2020).

Therefore, this study contributes to filling the identified gaps “from the bottom up”, that is, through documenting the needs and challenges of refugee-receiving schools. Unlike existing studies, this study discusses the experiences of both refugee and local students to provide more contextualized information about the challenges of refugee-receiving schools. Existing research identifies needs and issues from refugee students’ perspectives, which is crucial. This study complements the literature by providing a different vantage point: school counselors who observe students’ academic and psychosocial issues in close collaboration with teachers and school administration and who work closely with students’ families. In addition, school counselors can have critical insight into what happens, how things progress, what works, and what does not, and they can reflect the perspectives of all parties involved. With school counselors’ support, this study’s results should provide contextualized data to set bases for comprehensive prevention, intervention, and inclusive education programs for refugee-receiving schools. Thus, schools can be transformed into resource centers for collective healing, with a shift from a trauma-informed to a healing-centered approach (Castrellón et al. 2017) Such research is essential if we are to develop and maintain a more inclusive, nurturing, and collective-healing school atmosphere for refugee students.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Design and Procedure

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to profile refugee-receiving schools’ needs and issues by exploring in-depth school counselors’ views and observations about the adaptation process of refugee students. A semistructured interview protocol with open-ended questions was developed based on the relevant literature and expert opinions prior to the data collection. The interview protocol was designed to understand the overall experiences of the school since they started to receive Syrian students. The school counselors were asked what had changed, what needs and issues had emerged, and how they addressed those needs and issues related to students, teachers, school guidance services, and school administrations. The prepared interview protocol was reviewed and piloted.

School counselors who were working at schools that receive the most refugees in the selected cities were interviewed. The researcher was flexible about deciding on the location, the Internet tool, and the time for the interviews. Nine interviews were conducted using Internet tools, and face-to-face interviews were conducted with six participants living in İstanbul. The selection of the participants was finalized when the same patterns emerged from the data. The interviews lasted 45 to 90 min, with a mean of 70 min and a median of 60 min. During the interviews, prompts (reminders) and probes (further inspections) were used to obtain information about the nature of the phenomena. The participants whom other participants had referred to were considered according to the determined criteria. Audio recordings of the interviews were made with permission from the participants.

### 2.2. Participants

The criterion-sampling technique was used to identify schools and school counselors. Since there are Syrian refugees in almost every city in Turkey, the population density was considered a parameter. According to the Ministry of Interior Directorate General of

Migration' Report (2017), cities with the most Syrian refugees were selected. Considering this report and the aim of the study, 7 cities and 15 school counselors were selected for the interview.

School counselors from Gaziantep, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, İstanbul, Diyarbakır, İzmir, and Mardin were selected for the interview. Schools from different regions in Turkey were selected since the needs of the schools may vary in different regions. Most of the schools were located in the economically disadvantaged parts of the selected cities. Therefore, school counselors from low-SES schools were interviewed unintentionally. All the school counselors were working at public primary schools in different parts of Turkey. Since İstanbul has the highest number of refugees (half a million) in Turkey, according to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management (2017), more participants from İstanbul than other cities were selected for the interviews to examine the adaptation process in depth.

Out of 15 participants, 13 of them were female, and 2 of them were male. In addition, 12 of them had bachelor's degrees from different universities. Only 3 of them had their master's degrees in the same field. The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 34 years, and their years of experience ranged from 7 to 2 years (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants.

Participants	City	Gender	Age	Highest Level of Education
P1	Mardin	Female	28	Bachelor's
P2	Şanlıurfa	Female	24	Bachelor's
P3	Gaziantep	Female	28	Bachelor's
P4	İstanbul	Female	26	Bachelor's
P5	İstanbul	Male	26	Bachelor's
P6	İstanbul	Female	27	Bachelor's
P7	İstanbul	Female	26	Bachelor's
P8	İstanbul	Female	25	Bachelor's
P9	İstanbul	Female	25	Bachelor's
P10	Şanlıurfa	Female	23	Bachelor's
P11	Diyarbakır	Female	25	Bachelor's
P12	İzmir	Female	29	Bachelor's
P13	İzmir	Female	34	Master's
P14	Hatay	Male	32	Bachelor's
P15	Hatay	Female	35	Master's

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Pre-established themes and codes were not used to provide rich qualifications and clarification for the current situation (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Richards 2005). As Mayring (2014) suggested, the pure verbatim protocol was used to transcribe the data, and inductive content analysis was conducted to obtain reliable results. Inductive content analysis was chosen in this research in order to make reliable results. Transcribed forms were defined considering major themes and related codes depending on the obtained data from the participants. The analyst triangulation method was used with four academics familiar with the refugee issues, and qualitative research was conducted to find blind spots during the interpretation of the data and to eliminate selective perception (Denzin 1978; Patton 1990). Transcribed raw data were shared with the members, and the themes and codes were compared with the researchers' findings. Suggested comments and perspectives were taken into consideration. However, this method is used to understand different perspectives rather than reaching a consensus (Creswell 1998). Periodical help from experts was obtained to ensure trustworthiness issues. Brief explanations of the themes and codes with related quotations from the participants are given in the Results section to verify transferability.

### 3. Results

The data analysis revealed many problem areas and classified them under the main themes of (a) student-related issues, (b) contextual issues, and (c) response strategies of refugee-receiving schools. It should be noted that all these issues appear to be interwoven and to impact one another.

#### 3.1. Student-Related Issues

All the participants described a variety of refugee and local students' needs and issues. The issues under this theme were categorized as (1) issues of refugee students and (2) issues of local students. The issues of refugee students include four codes: (a) multi-way exclusion, (b) post-traumatic histories, (c) familial factors, and (d) sense of belongingness. Several subthemes were also identified. The multi-way exclusion category includes "among refugees", "teacher–student", "local–refugee", and "among families". Post-traumatic histories consist of "war and trauma". Familial problems are "poverty" and "broken families". The issues of local students consist of two codes: (a) behavioral issues and (b) academic issues.

##### 3.1.1. Issues of Refugee Students

a. Multi-way exclusion appears to be the main problem for Syrian students during the adaptation process, according to 13 participants out of 15 who mentioned the exclusion issue at their schools. The exclusion was reported to be happening in different ways. Since the participants mentioned the discriminative behaviors from different components, such as families, students, and teachers, this theme was called "multi-way exclusion" to explain the dismissive behaviors of all parties toward refugee students and families. There were four types of exclusion reported: "exclusion among refugee students and families", "exclusion of refugee students by teachers", "exclusion of refugee students by local students", and "exclusion of refugee students by local families". Refugee students and families exclude other refugee students and their families depending on their SES, as stated in the quotation of P5 below. Families who have high economic incomes tend to feel superior to families with low economic incomes. Furthermore, Syrian families with an only child define themselves as "different" from Syrian families with extended families.

*"For instance, some families assert that they [Syrian families] come from prominent wealthy families. They claim that other [Syrian] families play second fiddle. That is why they have some conflicts among themselves."* P5

Another code is the exclusion of refugee students by local students and their families. All the participants stated that their local families' SES level was low, just like refugee families. Since there is financial aid for refugee families and students, this situation creates adverse reactions and a sense of injustice among locals. Local students learn discriminative behaviors from their families, according to the participants. Local students and their families tend to hold refugee students and their families responsible for current problems and even for inherent ones, as stated in the quotation of P12 below.

*"Parents started to complain about the violence issue. They are coming to my office and saying Syrians beat their children and whatnot. This has never happened before . . . The most crucial factor that affects marginalization is the family. Children are like dough. They lean towards what their families talk about at home or what they direct their children towards."* P12

Furthermore, teachers might have prejudices and display discriminative behaviors against the refugee children in their classes. Participating school counselors stated that teachers who were prejudiced against Syrian children faced more disruptive classroom behaviors.

*"Some teachers don't want a refugee student in their classroom. In addition to this, some teachers think that it is so wrong for them [Syrian refugees] to be here, in Turkey."* P5

*“I have observed that teachers, and parents alike, perceive foreign students as special education students.” P8*

However, teachers who are more inclusive and willing to ease the adaptation process for refugee children have more harmony in their classroom, as participant 9 stated. Therefore, teacher behavior can be effective in terms of the adaptation process.

*“I have never seen a teacher with a negative attitude toward refugees. They do not discriminate between students as locals and refugees . . . We have not come across any problems since classroom teachers are trying to integrate them and create an atmosphere of solidarity starting from the very first day of school.” P9*

b. Post-traumatic histories were another subtheme of the problem faced by refugee students mentioned by six participants, “war and trauma”. Their past trauma is haunting refugee students and parents. As stated in the quotation below, even if the children were not born in Syria, they are still indirectly exposed to the traumatic events in Turkey since all their relatives talk about the war and follow the news about it. Therefore, although they were born in Turkey, secondary trauma might be an issue for refugee children.

*“I once asked them [refugee students] to tell me about their most prominent dream. They all told me that war would be over and they would go back home. The other day, I asked them to draw pictures in class, and everybody drew about the war. There were tanks, rockets, or Turkish flags in all their drawings.” P4*

*“What they experienced are heavy burdens. Since it has been 6–7 years, they may have been born and raised here in Turkey, not in Syria. However, they are growing up hearing these war memories from the adults around them; everybody is talking about it [war] in their surroundings. They lost their fathers, sisters, and brothers.” P2*

c. There were also familial factors that affected the refugee adaptation process. These familial factors consist of two subcategories that are very much interwoven: “common child labor” appears to be a reflection of “poverty” and “broken families”. Since many refugee families have low financial resources, some consider their children to be a source of income. The language barrier appears to lead to child labor because the families do not know the language, unlike their children, whom they may force to learn the language at school or from their local friends. Thus, students may need to take care of their families and not go to school because of their work outside the school.

*“Their SES is very low, and as far as we understand, most of them come from small villages in Syria. They have very crowded families, with lots of children and even lots of wives. Most of them do not have their fathers with them; we do not know where they are.” P13*

All the participants indicated that most of the refugee students came to Turkey with their extended families. There seemed to be many students who did not have fathers, but none of the participants reported a student without a mother. These data show that broken families are a widespread issue among refugee families. Thus, students had to work outside school since they mostly did not have their fathers working. This situation put a burden on refugee children’s shoulders.

*“Most of my Syrian students that graduated last year were selling things on the street. They have no regular eating habits. I always see them around day and night, eating street-food wraps. We tried to reach their families but couldn’t. Parents who are busy trying to find ways to make ends meet may sometimes forget about their children.” P4*

Especially the participants from Şanlıurfa (a city in the eastern part of Turkey) mentioned co-wife issues in their region, as indicated in the quotation of P3. Since many women came to Turkey without their husbands or families, they are perceived as potential co-wives, and many women are forced to marry for economic reasons. This pressure makes them vulnerable to exploitation. The local families lash out at Syrian families, especially Syrian women, about these co-wife issues. Local students are certainly affected by these reactions and have started to denigrate Syrian children inside the school.

*“Having a Syrian co-wife has become an extensive practice with the arrival of Syrian families. This is a massive problem as locals refuse to accept such arrangements [polygamy].” P3*

In other words, since local women were not comfortable with Syrian women due to co-wife issues, their prejudices against refugee students were further perpetuated.

d. Sense of belongingness. Psychosocial problems of the refugee students were mentioned by more than 70% (11) of the participants, who mainly discussed the “belongingness” and “alienation” issues of the refugee students.

*“They feel the need to be accepted [by their friends], and they need to belong first place . . . Perhaps the most important thing is the feeling of being accepted, the environment of trust which their teachers create. [Syrian] children need to feel that their teachers and peers accept them.” P2*

Sociocultural differences along with the different educational systems appear to be perpetuating these issues. Different views regarding school rules, environment, and perception impact their behaviors negatively.

### 3.1.2. Issues of Local Students

a. Behavioral issues. More than 50% (8) of the participants mentioned increased behavioral problems at their schools, and violence was at the center of these problems since the Syrian students arrived:

*“Violence has increased significantly. Of course, we used to have violence at our school and region earlier. However, this issue has increased by fifty percent. I’ve observed that our students resort to violence when they are hurt. Since the school started to receive refugee students, students have been fighting without any reason. Violence has turned into a form of communication.” P2*

The participants reported a lack of understanding and confusion about the sudden arrival of refugee students in their schools, which may quickly turn into tension between locals and refugee students. There was no orientation process for the local students, and many of them were exposed to the anger and prejudice of their close social network against refugees. Several participants asserted that local students need cultural recognition and understanding of the adaptation process of refugee students. They also added that it could be difficult for local students to understand refugee students’ life, culture, and what they have been through. Moreover, the participating school counselors pointed out the role of culture and language in impacting local students’ meaning-making. Significantly, in the neighboring provinces to Syria, where most of the refugees are hosted, some locals can speak Arabic and are relatively more familiar with Syrian culture, so they can relate better with refugee students, which facilitates local students’ understanding and acceptance of refugee students.

Teacher characteristics are another facilitative factor for local students. Four participants stated that classroom teachers’ attitudes and manners toward refugee students are highly effective for local students. Their positive manner toward refugee students created a more inclusive and positive classroom climate for refugee and local students.

b. Academic issues. Almost all the participants who mentioned the academic problems of local students discussed the same points during the interviews. Since teachers need to deal with refugee students’ problems in the classroom, they cannot keep up with the curriculum most of the time. Because teachers cannot follow their curriculum, students fall behind their peers. Thus, students may have a difficult time since the teachers cannot keep up with the curriculum when they proceed to higher grades. Having a refugee peer may create a disadvantage for local peers academically since they are behind their peers in the same grade.

*“As the teachers told me, the overall success of the students has decreased. Since teachers are trying to integrate them [refugee students] and help them with the language at the*

*same time, they are neglecting other [local] students. This may cause a reduction in the success rate.” P1*

*“A third-grade classroom teacher is supposed to teach third-grade subjects, but they have started to turn back to first graders’ curriculum. This affected their [local students’] order and rapport in the classroom. This affected our students.” P12*

*“Three parents came and asked me, ‘What is our children’s fault?’ And they said, ‘They are falling behind with the schoolwork, and even though you talked to Syrian students to solve problems, nothing has changed.’ Parents come and ask me to separate the classes.” P3*

In Turkey, national entrance exams at every level of education determine the future of most local students; thus, these exams put enormous pressure on teachers and families. Being unable to follow the national curriculum puts local students in a disadvantaged situation. This, in turn, creates psychological discomfort for both students and their parents, which feeds locals’ anger against refugee students.

### 3.2. Contextual Issues

The other theme is contextual issues mentioned by all 15 participants discussed under five codes as (1) language barrier, (2) expectations, (3) crowded schools and insufficient human resources, (4) inadequate in-service training and frustration of school personnel, and (5) ambiguity about the adaptation process. These issues are interwoven with local and refugee students’ issues, complicating schools’ efforts to find solutions.

#### 3.2.1. Language Barrier

Language issues are embedded in almost all problems. School counselors predominantly reported a wide range of communication issues with both the students and their parents. Since most of the refugees were newcomers, they could not speak and/or understand Turkish. Children tend to learn the language faster than their parents do. In that case, counselors indicated that they might ask refugee students to interpret for their parents occasionally. However, this situation can create problems since school counselors cannot know what the student translates to parents and what parents talk about. Since refugee students did not speak the Turkish language well enough, they had difficulties communicating with local students and teachers, and they started to be excluded. The participants mentioned the language barrier issue from the refugee perspective:

*“We certainly will be linking everything to language, but language matters. Children feel left out. They cannot adapt in any way. This prevents communication with peers and teachers, and they fail in classes.” P1*

Fourteen school counselors mentioned the language barrier issue at their school, since one school counselor could speak Arabic. There are two types of problems related to this: school counselors’ language problems with refugee students and language problems with those students’ families, as indicated in the quotations below:

*“A student may have a severe psychological problem. In that case, the counselor and the student should be alone while discussing the problem. When we have another student translate the conversation, that student knows that someone else will hear about the problem, so s/he may not disclose all their feelings or thoughts. This is very dangerous. For example, this student may attempt suicide or have other serious problems, but I cannot help them.” P3*

*“One of the teachers told me that one kid had lost his father during the war and that s/he was mourning. The teacher asked me if I could arrange a meeting with the student. I told her that I could do that. She told me that the child was very quiet in the classroom. I wanted to speak with the child, but I could not do that due to the language barrier.” P11*



### 3.2.2. Expectations from School Counselors

Five participants stated a massive expectation from the school counseling services to end all behavioral and academic issues before adaptation. Later, during the refugee adaptation process, behavioral problems escalated the expectations of families, teachers, and school administration from school counselors to prevent behavioral and academic problems.

### 3.2.3. Crowded Schools and Insufficient Human Resources

All 10 school counselors indicated that their schools were crowded and that the student-to-school counselor ratio was not fulfilling their needs. There were approximately 1500 students at each school, and 8 of the participants were working without any fellow school counselor. Thus, school counselors asserted that they could not attend to every problem that students and teachers had. In addition, some of the problems could not be noticed, and it created more significant adverse outcomes for students' psychological and physiological health.

### 3.2.4. Inadequate In-Service Training and Frustration of School Personnel

This issue is very much integrated with the language barrier. Lack of training in dealing with refugee-related issues in school settings and language issues makes school counselors and teachers feel stuck, helpless, inadequate, and thus frustrated. More than 45% (7) of the participants mentioned inadequate in-service training to help the adaptation process of refugees, as P4 stated:

*"I do not know how I can work with children exposed to war and trauma. If I had professional competence in this subject, I might follow the right path. But I don't even know where to start and how to go about it. It is easy to work with normal Turkish children or traumatized children. However, it requires much more effort to work with the refugees due to the language barrier. Thus, courses may be given a bachelor's degree, or in-service training may be provided for us. The number of Syrian students is increasing, and we need to be trained about how we can communicate and interact with them and learn about their problems deeply." P4*

### 3.2.5. Ambiguity about the Adaptation Process

As indicated in the quotation above, school counselors stated that school personnel perceive the process of adapting refugee students to schools as ambiguous. It is uncertain whether these refugees will be at the same school after a year. In other words, when the training is over, there may be no refugee students to apply for the training that was arranged for school counselors. Thus, training may turn out to be a futile effort. Ambiguities of refugees' futures in Turkey were mentioned frequently by the participants. In total, 40% (6) of the participants mentioned that not knowing how long the Syrians will stay in the country prevents sound adaptation/integration strategies. Planning can be irrelevant due to the ambiguous situation of refugees, whose number is enormous.

*"If they are going to stay here, we should receive training about the adaptation process of refugees in school settings. Why are they here if they will not stay, and why are we trying to educate them? For example, if the war continued for just one year, would we be supposed to offer education to them in that case as well? Alternatively, if these students go back to their country next year, what is the use of all that education? Will everything be wasted, all the investments, support, and services?" P5*

All the participants regarded the policy issues/lack of regulations as both consequences and causes of ambiguity in the adaptation process of refugee students. As stated in the quotation above, school counselors have not received any training that would help them guide the integration process of refugee children. Some school counselors stated that they did not even know that they had a refugee student until they encountered one in the school. Since the regulations and school enrollment processes may be changed from day

to day, and these regulations about school enrollment may vary from city to city, school counselors may not obtain any information about their students. Thus, there is a lack of organization in schools in terms of refugee reception. All the participants addressed the lack of refugee policies and inconsistent practices at schools repeatedly during the interviews. They also mentioned improper practices regarding the delivery and the implications of the limited training they were offered. These practices and lack of knowledge prevented school counselors from making referrals early enough to help children with different needs.

*“There was a student who needed special education, and we could not refer him. Since he was not a Turkish citizen, he could not be given the necessary services. We have had some problems when referring such students to the relevant official agencies.” P12*

### 3.3. Facilitative Factors of Refugee-Receiving Schools

Coping strategies of refugee-receiving schools are easing the refugee adaptation process. More than 85% (13) of the participants addressed the different coping strategies as (1) teacher characteristics, (2) motivation, and (3) sociocultural factors.

#### 3.3.1. Teacher Characteristics

Four participants discussed teacher characteristics as a facilitative factor in the process of refugee adaptation. As participant 9 mentioned below, classroom teachers' attitudes toward refugee students directly influence local students' thinking about refugee students. Their positive attitude toward refugee students sets a good role model for the rest of the class.

*“I have never seen a teacher act prejudiced toward refugees. They do not discriminate between students as locals and refugees . . . We have not encountered any problems since classroom teachers try to integrate them and create class awareness from the first day of school.” P9*

Since there are Arabic-speaking local people in the southern part of Turkey, in Şanlıurfa, for example, and since the cultures of Şanlıurfa and Syria are similar, school counselors asserted that these factors created a protective environment for refugee students and also their families. School counselors stated that there was at least one local student who could speak Arabic in every classroom. The refugee students may feel as if they were in their home country. Thus, the school counselors emphasized that a similar sociocultural environment helped the adaptation of refugee people.

#### 3.3.2. Motivation

Twelve participants highlighted motivation and sociocultural factors. The motivation of the school counselors to improve themselves and learn more about refugees, for example, their culture and way of living, was considered a facilitative factor. Since those school counselors were eager to learn more about the refugees' culture, it made the adaptation process of the refugee students easier.

*“I don't know what they are feeling, what they need, how we can meet these needs, or which problems they face at home. I mean, I have no idea about their family environment. Parents do not come to school anyway. Even if we ask them to come to school when there is a problem, they do not. To help them it would be helpful for me to know what they are experiencing in the family and what they are doing on the street or out of school.” P7*

#### 3.3.3. Sociocultural Familiarity

Being familiar with the culture is another facilitative factor for refugee-receiving schools. One participant from İzmir indicated that since she could speak Arabic, she could communicate with the refugee students. Therefore, she could maintain her counseling services with them, which made the adaptation process of refugee students easier. Furthermore, the demographic background of the school counselors demonstrated culture as a coping strategy. Two school counselors, one from Şanlıurfa and one from Hatay,

asserted that since they were familiar with the culture of refugee students, their cultural awareness was high enough to reduce cultural conflicts at school. Those school counselors asserted that since refugee families were not comfortable with one female and one male student sharing the same desk, they did not let them sit together, respecting the parents' preferences.

#### 4. Discussion

This phenomenological study aims to reveal contextualized information about the challenges of refugee-receiving schools. Unlike other studies, this study profiles issues of refugee-receiving schools (located in different regions) in a country where a huge number of refugees are located in a short period of time. The findings from the semistructured interviews with 15 school counselors suggested that language problems, teacher characteristics, policy issues, and psychosocial issues were the main challenges of refugee-receiving schools. All the identified issues in the study are interwoven and appear to perpetuate one another.

This study unveils that the language issue is the overarching issue in refugee-receiving schools. The language barrier appears to be the underlying source of behavioral, psychosocial, personal adjustment, and sociocultural issues and the obstacle to implementing solutions. This result is in line with earlier similar studies conducted in Turkey (Ereş 2016; Kaya and Kiraç 2016; Kaysılı et al. 2019) and suggests that any school-based intervention has to tackle the language barrier first to obtain a successful outcome regardless of the nature of the issue and the solution process.

Along with the language barrier, sociocultural differences appear to be preventing the efforts to address the issues adequately. The findings demonstrated that sociocultural differences could be a source of tension between locals and refugees, which impacts schools' climate and schools' ability to respond to the issues. The findings regarding familial issues are clear examples of the differences in traditions. The second wife (co-wife) practices among Syrians created an uproar among locals, reflecting itself as a reason for belittling Syrian students in school settings.

This result brings to mind the Integrated Threat Theory, which maintains that differences in values, worldviews, or lifestyles may accelerate the perception of symbolic threat among local people (Stephan and Stephan 2000), which exacerbates the xenophobic attitudes in refugee-receiving societies (Deardorff Miller 2018). As Stephan et al. (1999) stated, such threats may even trigger powerful negative emotions such as anger, fear, outrage, and hatred toward the outgroup. Therefore, increasing schools' abilities to respond to refugee-related issues cannot be possible without considering the relationship between schools and the local community. A sense of community, trust, and safety are perhaps a few of the most critical assets for refugee students to cope with their past traumatic histories as well as post-immigration difficulties. The same is true for the local people who are fearful of losing their already scarce resources. Duncan-Andrade (2009) asserted that schools should transform the individual challenges such as trauma, hate, and healing into collective responsibility to create collective healing cultures in schools. Therefore, fostering solidarity and humanizing the different groups' experiences can create a collective capacity for healing (Duncan-Andrade 2009).

As Bronfenbrenner (1981) stated, a person cannot be separated from their environment and cannot be analyzed without considering the relations in their settings. Since the development of a person is a process that takes place from younger ages to death, not only children but also their teachers and families should be considered. Thus, analyzing the refugee adaptation process in schools cannot be isolated from their social, economic, and psychological environment. The study participants revealed that refugee students' adaptation programs through the ecological system lens would be helpful for refugee-receiving schools to formulate solutions. The regulations regarding school enrollment for refugees, the neighborhood of the school, national policies regarding migration (Crul et al. 2019), and even international discourses impact refugee-receiving schools. National policies

determine the language learning process of refugee children. This process also affects the relationship with local people and the school neighborhood indirectly. Therefore, there should be whole-school programs, considering the policies, neighborhood, and ecological system as lenses for the adaptation process of refugee children. The refugee-receiving schools have a prime role and responsibility to build a sense of community and empathic understanding between the two communities. The related literature offers suggestions on how to increase the sense of community. This facilitates the adjustment process of the refugee students (e.g., [Tran and Birman 2017](#); [Li and Grineva 2016](#); [McBrien et al. 2017](#)), but the majority of these studies report from countries that receive refugees in much smaller numbers; thus, these suggestions remain inadequate or irrelevant in Turkey's case. Unlike many other refugee-receiving countries, Turkey received a very significant number of refugees in a short period of time. Many provinces now have more Syrians than local people. There have been some efforts to help these Syrians adapt to their surroundings. Still, any existing adaptation program remains short of implementation for many reasons, including the ongoing and uncertain nature of the Syrian unrest. As the study results show, teachers, guidance services, local students, and their parents are unable to orient themselves to the sudden numerous and considerable challenges that occur in their schools.

Receiving many refugee students with already stretched resources and insufficient educational policies results in a less than adequate inclusive environment for students as well. Less-than-adequate school facilities for crowded student populations are both causes and consequences of the unstable implementation of governmental policies to respond to refugee students' needs, especially those with special needs ([Alpaydm 2017](#)). Refugee children are indicated as "homogenized" without specifying context, culture, gender, and disability ([Bešić et al. 2020](#); [Pisani and Grech 2015](#)). For example, there is not any official figure indicating the number of refugee children with disabilities in Turkey or worldwide ([Bešić and Hochgatterer 2020](#)). Thus, the degree to which particular services are offered is unknown, and information is lacking about the difficulties refugee children with disabilities and their families face, as the study participants pointed out. Turkey started taking short-run measures in 2011, hoping that the situation was temporary and that Syrians were "guests". Those short-term precautions further exacerbated the challenges of refugee-receiving schools ([UNHCR 2020b](#)) as the war continued for a more extended period of time than expected. It was then challenging to develop appropriate and effective solutions for refugee-receiving schools. For example, refugee students were distributed into Turkish schools without considering the existing schools' facilities or counseling services, forcing schools to transform counseling rooms and libraries into classrooms. Since government policy for refugee education keeps changing rapidly, even administrators may not know how many refugee students they have in their schools at a given time ([Kaysılı et al. 2019](#); [Tezel McCarthy 2018](#)). This situation creates a barrier for both teachers and school counselors, who must make necessary arrangements to respond to the requirements of new conditions. The results are neglected students with special needs and burned-out teachers with low or no job satisfaction.

Yet, the results of the study reveal that teacher characteristics matter a lot for refugee children. Supportive teachers help refugee students to be integrated into the classroom environment ([Ortun and Şenyücel Gündoğar 2015](#); [Şeker and Sirkeci 2015](#)). Thus, refugee students adapt better when the teacher has a positive attitude toward refugee children. In line with these findings ([Ortun and Şenyücel Gündoğar 2015](#); [Şeker and Sirkeci 2015](#)), the participants of the study mentioned teachers' positive attitudes and motivation as coping strategies for refugee-receiving schools to create harmonious classrooms. Lack of understanding and training about addressing refugee students' needs and issues appears to be a significant source of stress for school personnel. The participating school counselors asserted that training about trauma and refugees held by MoNE was an eye-opener for them about the refugee issue. This finding aligns with the [Rousseau et al. \(2005\)](#) study with school counselors. However, this training is not sufficient in terms of its quality to work with refugee children. In the current situation, insufficient knowledge of school

counselors leads to insufficient interventions inside the school. The Results section indicates that school counselors may not understand refugee children and their trauma responses. Therefore, the problems that arise from these children's psychological needs and that begin in one classroom may spread all over the school. Behavioral issues might be given as an example of this issue. Since many teachers and school counselors do not have good enough training on how to intervene, these problems may increase and cause school-wide problems, such as the multi-way exclusion issue, revealed to be a vital issue in the study. In an ideal setting, domain experts give efficient in-service training about trauma, including war, and multicultural education, which may help teachers overcome their prejudices and develop neutral and even positive attitudes toward refugee students. In addition, school components should work on their trauma, grief, and loss by receiving training and professional help to create healing spaces and to transform schools into sites of collective healing.

The findings of this study and the related studies disclosed that refugee children might face traumatic events during and after immigration. In addition, even if refugee children are not born in war zones, they are at risk of secondary trauma, which [Moro \(2005\)](#) referred to as exposed children. Thus, school counselors and teachers should be informed about the nature of trauma responses and intervention techniques. In addition to the in-service training with domain experts, teacher training and counselor education programs should include courses about immigration, inclusive education, trauma, trauma-affected children, and multicultural education. Furthermore, school counselors can help other school components (including teachers and school administration) to build a trauma-informed school model by creating a routine inside the school, helping students to develop healthy boundaries, informing teachers about school performance and trauma, and helping teachers to arrange their classroom using a trauma-informed school model ([Maynard et al. 2018](#); [Wiest-Stevenson and Lee 2016](#)). Trauma-informed practices that integrate knowledge about trauma and trauma responses and decrease retraumatization address the impact of trauma on students, reduce the symptoms, and facilitate collective healing in schools ([Phifer and Hull 2016](#)).

The previous studies about the refugee adaptation process indicate that local students at refugee-receiving schools demonstrate more aggressive behaviors, breaking the school rules and communicating through violence, as the school counselors stated in this research study also ([Kortam 2018](#); [Ortun and Şenyücel Gündoğar 2015](#); [Salem 2021](#); [Şeker and Sirkeci 2015](#); [UNHCR 2019b](#)). The academic problems of local students mentioned in this study are in line with the literature as well. Similar educational studies at refugee-receiving schools demonstrate a decrease in the academic success of local students ([İçduygu and Şimşek 2016](#)). In addition to the studies in Turkey, research conducted in different countries, such as Lebanon ([Kortam 2018](#)) and Jordan ([Salem 2021](#)), indicates a decrease in local students' academic success when the adaptation process is not carried out effectively. This study takes the findings one step further by demonstrating the multi-way exclusion issue. While other studies focus primarily on the exclusion of refugee students by local students, this study revealed discriminative behaviors of local parents, local teachers, and refugee students from different groups toward refugee students. Therefore, the exclusion issue should not be considered a one-sided phenomenon. This multi-way exclusion situation complicates the adaptation process in schools. There seem to be major tensions and prejudiced attitudes among refugee groups, which appear to be more difficult for schools to understand and effectively meet. These results demonstrated that refugee students' studies, activities, and programs might not influence adaptation. Each school component should be considered and included in these programs. Local students, families, and teachers should be encouraged to understand better refugee students' culture and way of living to pave the way for adaptation.

Since the needs of students, teachers, and families can vary and change rapidly, counselors should be in contact with the school components and fulfill these changing needs. They should be knowledgeable about the culture of refugee students to unveil

their coping strategies as well. They might conduct home visits with their colleagues and introduce the refugee students to local students to start a healthy adaptation process. Furthermore, school counselors should include local students and families in the adaptation process as well. Therefore, they need to inform local parents about the refugee students' culture, war zones, and trauma responses. This approach may help to reduce the multi-way exclusion issue in refugee-receiving schools. In short, refugee-receiving schools have experienced many different issues, varying from insufficient international refugee policies to individual refugee students' issues.

## 5. Conclusions

This study carries the limitations of any qualitative study. Not all interviews were conducted face-to-face because of the time and economic restrictions. Therefore, some interviews were conducted online. In addition, since this study aimed to provide a contextualized data set and shed light on the school adaptation process in Turkey, all data were presented in a collapsed way. However, there are specific differences among regions and cities regarding refugee adaptation, not reflected in this study. It might be helpful to focus on just one area in Turkey to understand the nature of the adaptation process for further studies with the general framework. Despite all these limitations, the school counselors interviewed for this study provided a rich examination of refugee and local students' academic and psychosocial issues. In addition, they presented vital insight into what worked and what did not work for students. Thus, the study results provide contextualized data to set bases for comprehensive prevention and intervention programs for refugee-receiving schools. School counselors working at refugee-receiving schools should use the proper techniques to understand and integrate refugee students. Finally, this study and similar studies indicate that contextualized whole-school intervention programs involving every school component, namely teachers, administration, local and refugee students, and families, should be developed. Local teachers, students, families, and school counselors need to know more about refugee people's culture, daily lives, and immigration stories. These whole-school programs should include multicultural education, human rights, and social justice issues.

Furthermore, these programs should include ongoing activities and meetings for school counselors to meet the changing needs of the school components. In addition to these programs, school counselors and teachers should provide in-service training about trauma and intervention techniques.

To conclude, Turkey continues to be the most refugee-receiving country worldwide (UNHCR 2020a). Refugees have spread all over the country, and working with refugee students and families has become an important issue. In addition to a large number of refugees to Turkey from Afghanistan, the threat of climate change, and wars, more immigration waves are expected worldwide, creating so-called environmental refugees (Podesta 2019). This situation will affect many countries in the near future, including Turkey. Hence, more research is needed to understand both international and contextual aspects of forced immigration.

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