



Awareness Level and Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Pre-service Primary School Teachers Regarding Syrian Students' Education in Turkey

Sevda Kubilay¹ 
Remzi Kılıç² 



(✉ Corresponding Author)

¹Nigde Omer Halisdemir University, Vocational School of Social Sciences, Turkey

Email: sevda.kubilay@gmail.com Tel: 00905534703882

²Nigde Omer Halisdemir University, Faculty of Education, Turkey

Email: remzikilic@gmail.com Tel: 00905057054280

Abstract

The aim of this study is to reveal awareness level and self-efficacy beliefs of pre-service primary school teachers about the education of Syrian students in Turkey. In the research, 20 participants were determined on a voluntary basis among the senior students attending education faculty of a state university. The research was conducted with the focus group interview. Findings indicate that the participants are not aware of the current statistics and educational policies about Syrian students. However, they are aware of the problems that may be encountered in multicultural classrooms. As for the attitudes of participants towards Syrian students, it is revealed that some participants have positive attitudes towards Syrian students and emphasize the concepts of empathy and tolerance but some have negative attitudes. The vast majority of the participants do not feel themselves capable of carrying out educational activities in a multicultural environment. Similarly, they think that the faculties of education do not prepare teacher candidates in this respect. Consequently, it is important for pre-service teachers to have positive attitudes towards Syrian students. It is necessary to provide pre-service teachers with necessary pedagogical background to make them feel professionally competent in multicultural settings.

Keywords: Multicultural education, Self-efficacy beliefs, Pre-service teachers, Syrian students in Turkey, Pedagogical education, Attitudes toward Syrian students.

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1. Introduction

Migration, which is as old as the history of humanity, has taken place due to various motives such as searching for better life conditions, escaping from the threat elements or challenging natural conditions and seeking security. Together with the twentieth century, international migration has come to the fore with the effect of globalization. Civil wars, violations of rights, political instability, ethnic conflicts, economic problems, hard geographical conditions and security threat are the reasons lie behind these migrations (Deniz, 2014). It is not appropriate to consider migration just as a population movement, but this movement has many impacts on social, economic, cultural and political fields (Levent and Çayak, 2017). Nowadays, migrations which create global effects have continued to occur more often. Similarly, beginning with the civil war in Syria, masses of people have emigrated to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Together with the mass migrations, a lot of regulations were needed in these countries. The continuation of the war environment in Syria necessitated the development of long-term policies in the migrated countries (Kızıl and Dönmez, 2017).

As a result of the intense migration movement that started in 2011 with the crisis environment in Syria, the number of Syrian individuals in our country outreached 3.5 million in 2018 according to the data provided by General Directorate of Migration Management. Turkey took Syrian refugees under protection with the status of “temporary protection” that is well accepted in international law (Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) Human Rights Review Commission, 2012).

With the act of mass immigration, Syrians' needs for health, housing, employment and education have come to the fore. However, the fact that the turmoil in Syria did not end in the short term, has caused frequent updates of the policies pursued especially in the field of education. At the beginning, the training services were provided in the camps established in the border regions of Turkey and in the Temporary Education Center, after that, considering the presence of the population outside the camps, the opportunity was provided for Syrian students to continue their education in public schools.

However, problems are faced in many aspects such as the registration process of Syrian students in public schools, the transfer of the curricula carried out in the school, in-school communication and school-family relations. It is seen that parents are reluctant to enroll their children in schools. Similarly, another important problem is that teachers do not have sufficient qualifications to combat discriminatory attitudes and behaviors in the school environment. The lack of awareness of the school administrations and teachers about the opportunities offered by the state to the Syrian individuals causes the problems to become more complex (Child Studies (ÇOÇA), 2015).

In studies on refugees, it has been revealed that a significant number of children witnessed the death of their loved ones or they are worried about their own safety (Bean *et al.*, 2007). Such bitter experiences have a negative impact on students' psychology and socialization. The refugee students differ in their mother tongue and culture from local students so they have difficulties in expressing themselves. Also their education ceased during migration, which has a follow-up adverse effect on the educational environment in the host country and on other students and educators (Erdem, 2017). Migration not only affects children who have migrated, but it can also cause problems in schools of host country. For example, with the increasing number of students, the classes get more and more crowded, the school staff experiences hardship to meet the needs, there may be in-school or in-classroom problems (Karakuş, 2006).

In the *Handbook for Teachers Having Foreign Students in their Classrooms* published by the Turkish Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Teacher Training and Development (2017) the plan of the Ministry for the educational needs of foreign students is stated as follows: “A future planning has been made by the Ministry to meet the educational needs of foreign students. This plan includes primarily language teaching, integration of students into school, school construction and dealing with teacher competencies.” In the continuation of the statement, the concept of inclusive education is addressed and the emphasis is placed on the teachers' development of knowledge and skills based on multicultural education principles.

The young population among migrants is noteworthy. According to the 2018 statistics of General Directorate of Migration Management, the number of Syrians between the ages of 0-14 is 1.352.894. The most crowded mass in this number is the ones between 0-4 years (492 000) and 5-9 years (481 000) (Turkish Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management Statistics, 2018). According to the 2017 year-end data obtained by Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Lifelong Learning, the highest schooling rate among Syrian students is in the primary school level with the rate of %98 (Turkish Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Lifelong Learning, 2017). As it is seen, the number of Syrian children who are at age of compulsory education is quite astonishing. In the same way, the highest schooling rate is in the primary education level. Taking this ratio into consideration, it is obvious that Turkey will need to provide educational opportunities for more school aged Syrian students in the future.

As the data show, the mass that should have access to education is mostly in the primary school age. As a matter of fact, the importance of education is indisputable to ensure a healthy integration and adaptation to the host country. Thus the number of regulations is getting increased day by day in our country to deal with this troubled situation. Considering the number of Syrian students who are included now and will be included in the future in our education system, it is important to train our educators about the needs of Syrian students. For this reason, candidates of primary school teachers are included in the study because they are the most probable group who will have Syrian students in the future. The study aims to determine the awareness level and self-efficacy beliefs of teacher candidates about the education of Syrian students. For this purpose, the following questions are directed to the candidates:

- Are you aware of the educational policies and current statistics about Syrian students?
- What would you think and how would you feel if you had Syrian students in your classroom ?
- What kind of difficulties can be experienced in a class including Syrian students? How can be dealt with these challenges?
- Do you feel competent to manage the teaching process in the classes involving Syrian students?

- Do you think that the pedagogical courses you have received in the education faculty prepare teacher candidates for multicultural educational environments?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research is a descriptive qualitative study which is based on phenomenology pattern. The purpose of the phenomenological study is to understand and describe a specific phenomenon through how it is perceived by the actors. Phenomenological research focuses on the facts that we are aware of but do not have in-depth and detailed understanding, in other words it is applied to investigate the facts that we cannot fully grasp (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005).

2.2. Participants

In order to determine the participants, convenience sampling was applied. Data were obtained from university students attending education faculty of a public university in the 2017-2018 academic year. Participants were 20 pre-service classroom teachers who were volunteers to participate in the research. Gender equality was taken into consideration in determining the participants.

2.3. Gathering Data

To gather the data focus group interviews were done with pre-service teachers. Before the interview, a literature review was carried out to have an in-depth grasp of the subject and then interview questions were developed in the light of it. To get the final version of the interview form, views of two academicians were taken into account.

2.4. Data Analysis

Interview questions are arranged in a semi-structured manner. The research conducted with a focus group interview and the interview was recorded after getting permission of the participants. Descriptive analysis method was used to analyze the obtained data. In the descriptive analysis, direct quotations are frequently included. In the study, the opinions of the participants were expressed with codes as K1, K2, K3 etc. in order to keep the names of the participants anonymous.

3. Findings and Comments

In this study the level of awareness and self-efficacy beliefs of teacher candidates about the education of Syrian students were examined and the responses of the participants were discussed under the following sub-titles within the framework of the research problems.

3.1. Education Policies and Current Statistics about Syrian Students

Candidates were asked whether they are familiar with the number of Syrian individuals and students who were given temporary protection status in our country. Although participants generally have heard some news about Syrian individuals from the media, it is clear that they have no idea about the number of students who continue their education in Turkey.

Participants were asked to tell what they know about the education policies and practices regulated for Syrian students. 40% of the respondents stated that they did not know anything about the education policies and practices; one of the participants explained their reason as they could not follow the agenda due to the exams they had to get prepared.

Approximately half of the participants stated that they were aware that Turkish literacy courses were organized for these students. They also stated that they were more familiar with some practices at higher education level rather than the arrangements for younger students. They think that Syrian university students granted privileges such as having opportunity to enroll in state universities without taking exams_ which is not exactly true for every Syrian student. Some of the participants' opinions are as follows: "There are practices related to teaching Turkish to Syrian students. I think they are useful. After all, if they live in our country and share common values with us, they have to learn our language" (K3). "I know the university-level practices but I feel uncomfortable about the privileges given to them" (K7). "Of course, every child has a right to get education and Syrian children have passed through very hard times. However, I think a balanced policy should be pursued without attracting the reaction of our own non-refugee students" (K1).

Responses indicate that the pre-service teachers cannot follow the agenda due to the fact that they are getting prepared for the exams. However, when they step into their profession, they are likely to meet Syrian students in their classrooms or in schools they work. In this context, it is important to be aware of the education policies and practices carried out for Syrian students. The information, which doesn't reflect the reality, acquired by the candidates through the media pushes them to be biased. Likewise, as seen in the statement of one of the participants, "our own non-refugee students" phrase implies a discriminatory approach.

3.2. Feelings and Thoughts about Multicultural Learning Environments

Teacher candidates were asked what they would think and how they would feel if they had Syrian students in their classes. With this question, it was aimed to determine attitudes of teacher candidates towards students from different cultures. 30% of the participants stated their opinions with negative expressions. Some of these statements are as follows: "I care more about my own students"(K2). "It bothers me if I have refugee students when I start my profession" (K11). "First of all, nationalism and independence are so important for my nation that we never fall into such a situation like Syrian people, of which I am proud. I help these students succeed at school but I don't think I will make an extra effort for them" (K8).

In contrast to these statements, 50% of the participants reflected a positive attitude. Participants who expressed positive views emphasized the concepts of empathy, tolerance and compassion. The majority of the participants who expressed positive opinions were female candidates. Here are some replies: “I become more merciful towards them” (K4). “Firstly I remind myself the fact that they are also human beings and children. I don’t behave in an accusive and offensive way” (K17). “We could have been in their shoes. Thus I become tolerant towards them, I don’t allow discrimination in my class” (K20). “I prevent them from being offended in the classroom and I prevent other students have negative feelings towards them” (K9).

The other participants stated that the differences would enrich the learning environment:

“Differences add color to life. It should be seen as a sign of wealth” (K5).

“We have an opportunity to meet people from different geographies, which broadens our world knowledge” (K6).

“We have an opportunity to observe different student attitudes and behaviors stemming from their ethnic origin” (K10).

As the current situation of Turkey is considered, it is important for the candidates who have negative attitudes to gain a more positive viewpoint in terms of their professional and personal development. A viewpoint like “my own students” will inadvertently lead to the alienation of students from other cultures. Perceiving differences as richness is a point of view that should be gained by all teacher candidates.

3.3. Possible Challenges and Ways of Struggle

Candidates in the study were asked what would be the possible challenges of being a teacher in a classroom where Syrian students involved. They also discussed how they could find solutions to the problems identified. Some of the candidates stated that they had a chance to observe multicultural classrooms during their internship period and identified problems as follows:

- Communication Problems
- Problems arise from cultural differences
- Social exclusion
- Adaptation and discipline problems

The most frequently encountered problem was the inability of the students to express themselves in Turkish and the lack of language skills. In this sense, the candidates emphasized the necessity of Turkish literacy courses. It was stated that the level of readiness of the students is important when enrolling in schools and the teacher may experience difficulties in terms of communication. “Communication problems may occur, that is possible. In such a situation I would try to overcome these problems with supportive courses and activities” (K12). “Communication is very important, of course. How can I teach a student who does not understand me? Language courses could be given at extracurricular times” (K15).

Participants also mentioned that there may be problems arising from different cultural backgrounds of the students and they stated the importance of promoting respect and tolerance among students. However, some participants added that they, as teachers, may have difficulty in the classes of cultural diversity. “Both students and I could have difficulties in regard to language and cultural diversity. Frankly, if I have a choice, I don’t want to work as a teacher in such a class” (K3). “Teachers should teach students to respect each other. I think if the atmosphere of tolerance is provided and the teacher becomes a model to students, the difficulties will be overcome” (K19).

Another problem raised by the participants is the exclusion of Syrian students by their peers. Communication problems and having a different cultural background can also have a negative effect on Syrian students’ relations with other students. The attitude of pre-service teachers in dealing with such a situation is very crucial. To prevent exclusion, the participants expressed the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance and empathy. “Syrian students can be excluded. In such a situation, I would warn other students not to do that again and then I would tell them the difficulties Syrian peers experienced to arouse empathy. I’d try to be a role model for students” (K20). “We are, as teachers, responsible to eliminate negativities. As long as we teach the importance of love and respect, we can hinder negative behaviors and attitudes like marginalization, fighting and dispute” (K4).

There may also be problems in adapting to school, obeying rules and exhibiting expected behaviors. It is possible that the students whose education life was disrupted in the civil war environment may experience trauma after the war, have difficulties in adapting to a new environment and cause disciplinary problems. On the other hand, there may be students who have never started their education in an environment dominated by chaos. It may take some time for these students to adapt to their educational life, or they may need support during the adaptation process. In order to facilitate the adaptation process and to avoid problems, participants’ recommendations are as follows; to increase the integration between students via social activities, to organize orientation programs for students and parents during school enrollment period, to prevent grouping among foreign students and to increase their interaction with other students. However, there are also participants who think that spending more time and making an effort for foreign students can be unfair to other students. The majority of participants agree that foreign students will cause disciplinary problems. Participants think that these students may exhibit negative behaviors due to being new in the environment and coming from a war environment. “I organize orientation programs to ensure Syrian students adapt to the school. I involve them in various club activities and social events” (K13). “Syrian students can cause disciplinary problems in the classroom and may corrupt our culture. I prevent the grouping of Syrian students in the classroom” (K7). “Syrian students may need more attention and care, but that’d be unfair for other students. My priority is to serve to citizens of my country” (K19).

3.4. Managing Teaching Process Effectively

The participants were asked whether they feel competent enough to manage the teaching process effectively in the classrooms involving Syrian students and were asked to explain the reasons for their answers. At this point,

those who feel competent constitute 40% of the participants; 60% of them think that they cannot manage the teaching process effectively.

Reasons of those who think they can carry out the teaching process effectively are listed below:

“I’d prepare teaching activities considering them as if they were mainstreamed students” (K14).

“I’d prepare speaking activities for Syrian students. I’d spend extra time with them until they have a good command of grammar” (K16).

“I’d prepare activities appropriate to students’ levels and act as if I was teaching in a classroom with mainstreamed students” (K12).

Reasons of those who think they cannot carry out the teaching process effectively are listed as follows:

“Because I don’t think I’ve had the necessary training for this” (K8).

“There would always be communication problems; I think I would have difficulty in teaching because students’ readiness level would be unsatisfactory” (K2).

“How is the assessment and evaluation process carried out? Obviously I think it’s challenging” (K7).

“They should be able to learn how to read and write in Turkish and communicate in a short time. Otherwise there would be chaos in the classroom. As a teacher, I could experience confusion about what to teach and how to teach” (K1).

The reasons of the participants who think that they cannot manage the teaching process effectively are the inadequacy of their education at this point, the concern about the students’ readiness level, the language and communication problems and the problems related to assessment and evaluation.

Considering this situation in the process of teacher training, it will be appropriate to include courses and practices that will increase the competencies of the candidates. It is highly probable that prospective teachers will encounter multicultural classroom settings especially in the regions and provinces where Syrian individuals live heavily. It is important for the candidates to gain competence in order to cope with foreseen problems.

3.5. Multiculturalism in the Content of Pedagogical Education

The participants were asked whether the education they have received at the faculty of education prepared them to work in environments including students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Only 20% of the participants think that education faculty prepares them for multicultural educational environments; 80% of the participants think the opposite.

The positive views of the participants: “I think we learned things within the scope of pedagogical formation. However, I believe that I will understand this better during the implementation process” (K5). “Our lecturers share their experiences with us and hearing such experiences prepares us to real life environments”(K9). “We witness such environments during our internship period and we discuss how teaching and learning should be in such classrooms, in this respect I believe the education we have received prepares us for multicultural learning environments” (K16). The participants stated that they developed their skills through sharing experiences and teaching practices.

On the other hand, negative views were also stated: “Courses that introduce different cultures should be included. First of all, we must recognize different cultures so that we can be effective during the teaching process” (K1). “We have received training about individual differences, but multiculturalism is something else. There can be lessons on how to behave to students from different cultures” (K8). “We receive theoretical knowledge in general. But we don’t know what awaits us when we are in the profession, so I don’t think it’s adequate. In this sense, instead of theoretical lessons, we can cultivate ourselves by teaching practices in multicultural educational environments or by observing good practices” (K11).

The candidates, who think that the education they’ve received at the faculty of education isn’t satisfactory, emphasized the importance of recognizing different cultures and learning how to approach appropriately towards students from different cultures. Some participants expressed that there should be courses to train themselves in this sense, while some of the participants stated that it would be appropriate to include more teaching practices.

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestion

The conflict in Syria deeply affected the people of Syria and the millions of Syrians had to flee to Turkey in search of security. Individuals, who came to Turkey with the hope of having a new life, quickly entered the harmonization process. Firstly, the basic needs of Syrian individuals were met and then a series of arrangements were made by the Turkish Ministry of National Education to ensure their access to education (Büyükkiz and Cangal, 2016). However, there are many and complex risks for the development of Syrian children. Because most of them witnessed armed conflict, political violence and experienced displacement from home and financial, economic deprivation. These negativities affect people of all ages, especially children. Children are in need of protection of their parents, families and other institutions because they cannot take critical decisions, so they should be at the center of our concerns (Sirin and Lawrence, 2018). Indeed, half of the Syrian population consists of children and youth in Turkey. The highest number of Syrian students is at age of primary education and it is likely that this number will increase further in the future. For this reason, in this study candidates of primary school teachers were included and it was aimed to determine how much knowledge the candidates have about the policies carried out for Syrian students and how competent they feel in the educational environments where different cultures involved.

The findings of the research displayed that the pre-service teachers were not sufficiently aware of the current statistics and educational policies. However, it is highly probable that most prospective teachers will have Syrian students when they start professional life. Similarly, in the study of Aykırı (2017) which was conducted in the province of Mardin and with 18 classroom teachers and titled as “Classroom teachers’ views on the educational status of Syrian students in their classrooms”, it was found out that most of the teachers didn’t have any idea about Syrians. The findings revealed that teachers lack of necessary knowledge and skills to teach in multicultural classrooms. In this regard, it is necessary to raise awareness of teacher candidates about responsibilities they’ll have to take in the future.

In the study it was found out that the candidates who participated in the study developed negative attitudes towards multicultural education environments and especially for Syrian students. This situation becomes more evident especially at the level of higher education because of the privileges granted to Syrian students. However, information pollution in media and social media platforms may have an impact on the development of negative attitudes. Candidates' lack of self-efficacy may also affect their attitudes. In this context, a study conducted by [Sural and Arı \(2017\)](#) revealed that teacher competencies affect their attitudes. [Sural and Arı \(2017\)](#) in their research to determine the attitudes of the teachers who give Turkish education to the immigrant children towards the in-service training they took within the scope of "Supporting the Integration of Syrian Children to the Turkish Education System (PICTES)" revealed that teachers generally exhibit negative attitudes because they have insufficient skills in teaching Turkish to foreigners. The lecturers who carried out the training stated that the participants were quite ignorant and inexperienced in teaching Turkish to foreigners. Those who develop negative attitudes should be informed that today's children will be adults of tomorrow and that teachers play an important role in the healthy integration of these students. In the process of teacher training, activities that will break the prejudices of the candidates and prevent them to develop negative attitudes and provide awareness about the education policies can be included.

In the context of the research, pre-service teachers were asked about the probable difficulties they may face and the methods to combat these challenges. The challenges candidates stated include; problems of communication, problems arising from cultural differences, social exclusion, adaptation and discipline problems. These findings are consistent with the findings of [Sarıtaş et al. \(2016\)](#) which address the problems experienced by teachers and administrators with foreign students. In this study, it has been determined that foreign students exhibit tendency towards violent and aggressive behaviors, they have problems in terms of obeying the rules and have a tendency to become a gang. To struggle against these problems participants made suggestions such as creating an educational atmosphere dominated by tolerance, empathy and understanding, organizing social activities that will facilitate the adaptation process, and opening training courses for the development of language skills.

Participants were asked whether they had the competence to teach in a multicultural environment and 60% of them stated that they did not feel competent at this point. This is a considerable ratio. Similarly, in the study conducted by [Er and Bayındır \(2015\)](#) pedagogical approaches of primary school teachers towards refugee students attending primary school were examined and 182 classroom teachers participated in the research. The majority of the participants stated that they did not undergo any in-service training that would foster their professional development regarding the education of foreign students, and nearly 85% of them said that they did not believe that refugee children could carry out their education without any problems. These results reveal that teachers do not feel themselves professionally competent in this context. Considering the current situation in teacher training, future educators should be provided with implementations that will enhance their competencies in this field.

Finally, the participants were asked whether the education they have received at the faculties of education prepared them to work and conduct educational activities in multicultural environments. 80% of the participants think that it doesn't prepare. Therefore, education faculties foster pre-service teachers' professional development in instructional strategies, alternative measurement and evaluation methods that can be applied in multicultural classes. They should be prepared for real-life conditions.

In order to adapt to changing conditions and developments, pre-service teachers should be offered opportunities to increase their experience as well as their knowledge and skills ([Gökulu, 2017](#)). Because it is observed that children and adolescents with migration background have adaptation problems and this bitter experience also adversely affects their educational experiences ([Kaştan, 2015](#)). Attitudes of teachers and school administrators are of great importance in the inclusion of these foreign students into the education system. The burden of the teachers who work in multicultural classrooms and face with the problems of traumatized children is quite severe because at this point, teachers who aren't qualified for such situations feel insecure and worried ([Ozer et al., 2016](#)). In this context, research findings may be guiding in terms of the needs of candidates in the process of teacher training.

Everyone in the society has responsibility to ease the adaptation process of Syrian individuals. To provide Syrian children with access to education, equal opportunities and facilities, especially educators, local authorities, national education directorates, universities and non-governmental organizations should cooperate and act within a common plan ([Topsakal et al., 2013](#)). In this way, a healthy integration process can be achieved.

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