Child labour and school attendance in Turkey

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Promoting self-sufficiency for displaced populations can have the unintended consequence of undermining efforts to provide education for all Syrian children.

In Turkey, the concept of 'self-sufficiency' is an essential and widely accepted part of the country's approach to accommodating Syrian refugees. Both locals and Syrians believe that anyone can build a new life through hard work or by establishing businesses. However, this self-sufficiency approach is risky because it trivialises education in comparison with work and fosters a belief among Syrian adults and children that education will not immediately improve their quality of life and is therefore less important than gaining skills for work.

The number of Syrian child workers is vastly underestimated. As parents cannot make sufficient money to cover their daily expenses, they look for options to increase their household income and one such option is to send children in the family out to work. This situation jeopardises schooling for boys because both Syrian and local communities have patriarchal structures and believe that the breadwinners should be male members of the family. Local employees and people are supportive of child labour because of the widely held belief that Syrian children will not be unemployed in the future if they begin working at a young age and gain skills. Interestingly, however, local people do not send their own boys to work because they fear enforcement of the Turkish Child Labour Law which forbids children under the age of 13 from working. How then can Syrian children be allowed to work?

Realities and implications

I visited 15 public schools, 25 temporary education centres and a Syrian school during fieldwork in the Central Anatolian Region in the 2015–16 school year and met hundreds of Syrian children under the age of 13. Before starting my fieldwork, I obtained statistics on the number of Syrian refugees attending public schools. According to these official statistics, there were only a few Syrian students in each school. In reality, however, public schools had more students than those recorded. For example, one of the schools I visited was recorded as having 39 Syrian students but actually had 134. By the end of the school year, though, this number had dropped to 95. Among these dropouts, only three students were officially transferred to another school; of the others, some began working in local shops or other workplaces in order to help their families and others became part-time apprentices.

A local employer with two young refugee employees sums up the beliefs held by the local and Syrian communities:

"I have two Syrian apprentices. One is 11 years old, and the other is 12 years old. I liked Rahman, so I asked his family elders whether they have another boy as hardworking as Rahman. So, I got this little one... I do my best to help them by providing jobs. They do not go to school. I teach them some skills to earn a living in the future. Suppose they go to school: how many years do they need to go? Maybe, ten years. Then what? They will not have any job. These people need to know how to stand on their feet."

Syrian families make strategic decisions about which of their children should go to school and which of them should work. For example, Ahmad is a refugee student whose family has chosen that he should go to school – as his family needs a Turkish-speaking member to help them with matters such as hospital appointments and job applications – while his brother works with his father. Syrian parents make these decisions based on their children's academic abilities and their gender. In this case, Ahmad goes to school because he shows more aptitude for learning Turkish than his brother. However, it is probable that he will drop out of school once his language skills have reached the required level to help

his family in social settings. And families' and the local community's focus on self-sufficiency shapes refugee students' own perceptions of the value of school and education. Although some refugee students told me that they think education helps them integrate and offers a better future, many of them do not believe that education can improve their lives.

Refugee education policies

Teachers are strongly against child labour but do not know how to address these problems. They are aware of the underlying reasons such as poverty and local understandings of self-sufficiency and are therefore hesitant to criticise Syrian parents. One teacher discusses the dilemmas:

"Children should not work when they are studying. But they need to support their family. …Here, many of them are happy to learn Turkish. Parents are also happy because they think their children can find better jobs or help them get support when they need translators. Believe me, sometimes I feel guilty because when we teach Turkish, these children find jobs so quickly."

School teachers and administrators associate the illegal labour of Syrian children with the shortcomings in Turkey's school enrolment and attendance policy. According to the policy, Syrian students without a temporary protection card can register with a school on condition that they apply for the identity card when they begin school. However, without a card, a student's details are not officially recorded and the authorities do not know if and when a student moves to another school or drops out completely. Many teachers record the Syrian children's names on the class register by hand. Additionally, Turkey's usual strict attendance rules do not apply to Syrian students. Schools are therefore having immense difficulty in tracking the attendance of Syrian children.

The principal of a public primary school discusses the problems:

"We know that some children, particularly boys, leave school for work. Their parents enter them as apprentices in some workplaces. They need money, you know. I tried to convince parents to send their kids to school. They seem convinced when I talk to them because they fear the authorities but, in the end, they do whatever they want. Recently, I saw one of the dropout Syrian students in a barbershop. Poor kid, he is only nine years old and is working. I asked his employer to send him at least to one of the shifts of the school. He said at first that "school is unnecessary for him, he needs to have skills." After talking for a while, he agreed to send the kid to the afternoon shift. If we could track these students [through the identity card system], their parents would not have an option other than sending their kids to school."

Turkish educational authorities are working hard to reduce dropout rates by offering alternative vocational education but this approach actually serves to further legitimise the ongoing conversation about the greater importance of labour skills. And despite the occasional enforcement of the Child Labour Law, it seems that the problems will continue as long as influential people in local society support child labour in the cause of self-sufficiency.

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The Global Education Cluster Toolkit

The Global Education Cluster (GEC) is an open formal forum, established under the IASC, for coordination and collaboration on education in humanitarian crises. It brings together NGOs, UN agencies, academics and other partners under the shared goal of ensuring predictable, well-coordinated and equitable provision of education for populations affected by humanitarian crises.

The GEC Toolkit provides templates, tools and guidance for Education Cluster coordination staff in the field. Although adaptable to different contexts, the tools and documents offer a way to standardise the work of the Education Cluster and issues that are common to many contexts. The Toolkit tools, guidance and resources are not general EiE documents but focus specifically on Cluster work and coordination issues.

The Toolkit is regularly updated in line with best practices and newly developed tools. Currently available in English; French and Arabic translations will follow. The GEC depends on country coordination teams' feedback to further develop the Toolkit. For more details: http://bit.ly/GEC-Toolkit or contact: help.edcluster@humanitarianresponse.info.