

## Schooling gaps for Syrian refugees in Turkey

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**Turkey and the wider international community must address gaps in educational provision so that Syrian refugees can access appropriate opportunities to learn.**

When displaced Syrians began to cross Turkey's south-eastern border in 2011, Turkey had no cohesive migration or asylum framework. Since then, a number of policies have been devised to fill gaps in services for the ever-increasing number of Syrian refugees, who now number 3.6 million, but these policies have been open to misinterpretation and have also changed frequently. Turkey has been a generous host, first through an open border policy and later, from 2014 onwards, through the assigning of 'temporary protection' status to Syrians. However, Turkey's policy framework was based on the assumption that the majority of Syrians would soon return home and failed to account for the challenges of protracted displacement.

As a result, despite generous funding and concentrated attention from the Turkish government, and to a more limited extent from the international community, many of those with temporary protection status live precariously, and access to education

and employment are of particular concern. Although Turkey does not technically consider Syrians as refugees, it has clear obligations as a UN Member State and as a signatory to human rights legislation to provide accessible, high-quality schooling for those living under its protection. However, constantly shifting legislation and inconsistent implementation at the local level make accessing that provision extremely challenging in practice.

### Temporary education centres

Initially, temporary education centres (TECs) were established in the 25 refugee camps built along the Turkey-Syria border as well as in communities with large numbers of refugees. They provided schooling based on the Syrian national curriculum, taught in Arabic, which was supplemented by Turkish language and history lessons. Typically funded by non-governmental organisations, these TECs were staffed by volunteer Syrian teachers, only some of whom had professional qualifications, and who received small stipends.

A lack of teacher training, consistent funding, authority to issue diplomas and a broader lack of supervision of the TECs by any Turkish authority created concerns about the quality of education they offered and about pupils' future options. Over time the vast majority of Syrians moved into Turkish communities due to overcrowding and limited employment opportunities in the camps but there were insufficient numbers of TECs in the areas where they were



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Syrian refugee children in Turkey, doing their homework.

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most needed. These concerns, compounded by the continuing conflict in Syria and displacement of its citizens, prompted the Turkish government to announce in 2016 that TECs would gradually be closed or turned into integrated public schools, with the goal of moving all Syrian children into Turkish-medium schools by 2020.

Many Turkish schools had faced overcrowding and resource limitations even before the Syrian conflict and are now struggling to absorb the additional numbers of students. Only 60% of Syrian children in Turkey are currently enrolled in school – a significant improvement on previous years but dismal compared to the near-universal schooling rates of this generation in pre-war Syria and the rate among native-born Turkish children.<sup>1</sup> Many refugee families report school administrators refusing to enrol their children or demanding payment of enrolment fees. If children are successfully enrolled, parents typically must pay for transportation and must purchase uniforms and supplies including notebooks, stationery and even textbooks – an enormous hardship for families surviving on limited cash assistance and informal labour.

Adolescent students, many of whom have missed several years of school, face particular challenges and just 20% of pupils at upper secondary level are in school. Distinctly gendered coping mechanisms – the result of long-term displacement – drive down both boys' and girls' attendance. Many adolescent boys are compelled to work to help support their families, often in exploitative conditions with very low wages. Girls are either kept at home due to fears of gender-based violence or, to ease the family's financial burden, married off well below the legal minimum age of 18, often as additional wives through illegal religious marriage ceremonies that leave them vulnerable to abuse and devoid of legal spousal rights.

### **Accommodating diversity in the school system**

Until 2014, Turkey lacked a comprehensive immigration policy that clearly defined asylum eligibility and procedures;

determination and administration of asylum status were largely delegated to provincial governments, leaving room for inconsistent interpretation and implementation. In addition, historically repressive approaches towards minority groups have contributed to a schooling system that emphasises a national culture and language and generally takes a 'sink or swim' approach to absorbing newcomers. The system is also highly centralised, and schools and districts are not permitted to alter the curriculum. With the support of funding from UNICEF and assistance from Turkish language centres TÖMER and Yunus Emre Institute, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is developing curricula for students learning Turkish as a second language, and designing related teacher training. However, these initiatives will take time to reach all classrooms, and in the meantime children are not given the support they need. Even with appropriate instruction, immigrant children need several years to build up the social and academic language required to keep pace with their native-speaking peers.

Disconcertingly, MoNE's teacher competency framework and strategy report fail to even mention the presence of those learning Turkish as a second language in the school system or the need to foster their inclusion. In addition, my informal survey of teacher education curricula at several large universities in Turkey suggests that trainee teachers receive very limited instruction in second language pedagogy. Those Syrian students who do attend school receive very little support in acquiring Turkish, in catching up on missed material, and in coping with psychosocial challenges associated with conflict, displacement and cultural adjustment.<sup>2</sup> As a result, social integration and academic achievement are limited and dropout rates high. For example, one primary school principal told me that of the school's approximately 700 Syrian students, just 40 are receiving Turkish as a second language instruction. Seven Syrian 'translators' offer in-class support to the remaining children but four of them speak no Turkish.

According to the principal, the situation is similar in most schools in the region.

Many public school teachers openly express frustration at the challenges of teaching Syrian students. For example, large Facebook groups – designed for sharing pedagogical tools and job vacancies and to foster social interaction – are rife with complaints about refugee students' abilities and behaviour. Although many group members do defend Syrian students, there is clearly a concerning lack of understanding among teachers about the challenges faced by the students, indicating insufficient administrative support and knowledge about working with refugee children. A large-scale study examining what professional development, official guidance, curricular modifications or other support teachers have received and what challenges they encounter would be helpful in evaluating the current approach and drawing attention to needed improvements.

Addressing gaps in educational provision will require continued national efforts to design and implement comprehensive policies, including those relating to teachers' professional development and to curriculum design. This massive undertaking will require increased financial support and the sharing of expertise in multicultural and multilingual

education by the international community. Many common instructional models used elsewhere could be considered. For example, in Australia refugee children attend separate Intensive English Centres for up to four terms before transitioning to public schools, while in many parts of the US English language learners attend separate, designated lessons within public schools, supported by teachers trained to address their needs. Other options include an accelerated education model or a bridging programme, like those established in Sudan and Afghanistan, to help displaced children prepare for the linguistic, cognitive and psychosocial challenges of school. To prevent a 'lost generation' of Syrian youth and the persistence of social cohesion difficulties, Turkey must carefully choose and consistently implement an appropriate approach.

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1. UN Women (2018) *Needs Assessment of Syrian Women and Girls Under Temporary Protection Status in Turkey*  
[bit.ly/UNWomen-Syrian-women-girls-Turkey-2018](http://bit.ly/UNWomen-Syrian-women-girls-Turkey-2018)
2. See Aydin H and Kaya Y (2017) 'The Educational Needs of and Barriers Faced by Syrian Refugee Students in Turkey: A Qualitative Case Study', *Intercultural Education* 1–18  
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