

## Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Their Future Refugee Students

Görsev Sönmez<sup>1</sup> and Serkan Gürkan<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Present study aimed at investigating the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the refugee students who are possibly the participants' future students when they start their career. In order to examine the issue in depth, a mixed methods design was adopted. Numerical data were gathered through "Refugee Student Attitude Scale" from 168 pre-service teachers, and the written responses of the same participants for the open ended questions constitute the qualitative data. During the analysis procedure, mean scores and standard deviation for the variables were estimated, and the content analysis was performed. Results of the study showed that most of the participants do not approve the idea of involving refugee students in classes for the fear of possible problems. The participants also stated not being ready to teach refugee students in their future careers. In light of these findings, implications for different groups such as teacher education programs, policy makers, and ministry of education were also suggested in the end of the paper.*

**Keywords:** *Refugee Students; preservice teachers; teacher education; attitude; teaching*

### Introduction

People have struggled with the decision to relocate throughout history, either out of their own will or in an effort to improve their prospects. As defined in literally terms, immigration is "the practice of becoming a part of another country" (Parry, 2019). Various reasons such as economic, conflict with governments, civil wars, have been listed for the relocation of people throughout centuries. Despite being a long-standing issue, the refugee crisis has steadily gained attention due to the crises and wars raging in the Middle East, particularly since 2000.

Turkey has historically served as a major crossing point for immigrants due to its location between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Current situation of our country has pursued its gatekeeper position in the worldwide migratory movements despite being situated in the epicenter of Middle Eastern hostilities since 2000, including the battles in Iraq, Afghanistan, Russian-Georgian, Syrian civil, and Russian-Ukrainian crisis more recently. As tensions grew and millions of people fled the war, the displacement from Syria to Turkey, which began on April 29, 2011, with a group of 252 refugees, evolved into a major immigration movement (Akşit, Bozok & Bozok, 2015). In Turkey, there are about 4 million refugees, mostly Syrians (3.6 million), who were compelled to flee their countries as a result of the Syrian civil war starting

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Görsev Sönmez, Vice Dean and Head of Translation and Interpreting Studies, Faculty of Applied Sciences, İstanbul Gelişim University, Türkiye. E-mail: [gsonmez@gelisim.edu.tr](mailto:gsonmez@gelisim.edu.tr)

<sup>2</sup> Serkan Gürkan, Kocaeli University, Türkiye. E-mail: [gurkanser@gmail.com](mailto:gurkanser@gmail.com)



in 2011 (UN refugee agency report, 2019). The number of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey has reportedly surpassed 3.6 million, with nearly half of them being children between the ages of 0 and 18 (UNICEF, 2019a), based on the UNICEF Turkey Humanitarian Report #34 (January-June 2019) (1.6 million). Thus, the position of refugee children in Turkey continues to be a significant concern. A total of 648,592 Syrian children are enrolled in formal education in Turkish state schools, according to the UNICEF report, despite the fact that nearly 400,000 Syrian children are still not in school and 9,715 are enrolled in non-formal education institutions (pre-primary - grade 12).

The challenge of resettling in a new country is one that refugees, both adults and youngsters must overcome (Burnett 1998; Watts et al. 2001). First and foremost, these refugees have received basic necessities like food and security thanks to state-level policy. After that, it became crucial to include people of school age in the education system (Aydın, Gündoğdu, & Akgül, 2019). The majority of refugees arriving through migration are younger than 18, or "school age." Access to education is thus one of the fundamental issues that the school-age refugees who had to flee to Turkey face. According to Article #26 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, every person has a right to education (United Nations, 2019). In accordance with this human right to education, all pupils in schools must have access to opportunities for equality and intercultural education (Banks, 2013). As a result, several administrative and pedagogical measures were implemented, and many refugee pupils were given access to study facilities. To provide the essential orientation, immigrant students were immediately enrolled in public schools.

In other words, the policies established by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) to prepare refugee preschool and primary school first graders who had previously attended Temporary Education Centers (TECs) in public schools to ease their integration into society and education can be viewed as an outstanding effort to address the issues in the field of education.

However, since these children were taught in Turkey, it has caused a number of hassles (Boylu and Işık, 2019). This is especially true for the Syrian refugee children who are receiving education at schools. Although the relevant government agencies in Turkey take the required measures to ensure that Syrian children benefit from the educational institutions (Demirağ, 2018), a number of issues emerged in the schools where refugee pupils were enrolled. Financial difficulties lead to issues including forcing kids to labor or beg from an early age, communication issues with Syrian immigrants due to instructors' lack of Arabic language proficiency, and fears that kids who don't speak Turkish would face bullying, racism, violence, and disengagement in class (Gencer, 2017). Due to a lack of a shared understanding of the language between the students and their teachers, the language difficulties of these kids also affect their ability to learn (Başar et al., 2018). The requirement to learn a new language frequently makes it more difficult for immigrants to adjust to life in a foreign nation. However, one indicator of how well refugees have overall adapted to their new environment is how good they are in learning the local language of their host nation. Of course, language is not the only worry that refugees have in their new environment (Schumann, 1986).

In addition, refugees change the country's heterogeneous structure by bringing their own languages, religions, ethnic origins, races, genders, ages, disabilities, and socioeconomic background (APA, 2002) which cause multiculturalism as well as multilingualism.



It is well known that the role of schools in fostering a culture of coexistence in communities made up of people from many ethnic origins is significant. In order to develop their social and cognitive abilities, children really spend the majority of their time at school alone (Chiu, Pong, Mori, & Chow, 2012). However, according to Vedder, Horenczyk, Liebkind, and Nickmans (2006), one of the main issues with today's education is that schools are unable to adequately address the social, cultural, and intellectual demands of refugee children. In addition to their professional competencies, teachers' attitudes and behaviors are thought to have a significant part in the resolution of this issue. To achieve this, teachers needed to adapt their knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the challenges that might arise in various contexts and to foster a supportive learning environment for all students as a result of the growing diversity of students in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wubbels, Den Brok, Veldman, & Van Tartwijk, 2006).

Studies on teachers' cultural sensitivity for helping refugee students adjust to school (Soylu, Kaysılı, & Sever, 2020) and studies on teachers' experiences in the educational process with Syrian students in their class (Agcada Çelik, 2019; Başar et al., 2018; Erdem, 2017; Gencer, 2017; Taşkın & Erdemli, 2018) are available in the literature. However, there aren't many research (Akman, 2020) that looked into pre-service teachers' perceptions of multicultural/lingual refugee children.

Therefore, this process contains some aspects and challenges that should be explored to get insights for varied settings. The current study attempted to understand the pre-service teacher perceptions regarding these children. In accordance with the study's principal goal, the following questions were sought;

- (1) What are the preservice teachers' general attitudes about the refugee students in Turkey?
  - (a) What are their attitudes about communicating with refugee students?
  - (b) What are their attitudes about adaptation with refugee students?
  - (c) What are their attitudes about being efficient to educate refugee students?

## **Methodology**

The present study examined the attitudes of preservice teachers about refugee students in Turkey with a mixed method research design in which quantitative data triangulated with qualitative data. After the participants' attitudes were explored with statistical analysis, their written responses were used to support the numerical findings.

## **Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in the education faculty of a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. Istanbul, being one of the cities that has great majority of the refugees in Turkey, is an important setting because of the fact that the graduates of education faculties will most probably face the challenge of working at schools where there are considerable number of refugee students.

In the faculty, there were five different teacher education departments namely; English language teaching, mathematics teaching, special education, psychological counselling and

preschool teaching. Volunteered 168 senior students among 254 students took part in the study who were all in their final semesters and completed all the pedagogical courses in their programs.

The distribution of the participants according to their genders and departments is as follows; 48 male (29%), 120 female (71%); 22 (13%) participants were majoring in ELT, 40 (24%) were in mathematics education, 38 (23%) were in preschool teaching, 32 (19%) were in psychological counselling and 36 were majoring in the special education department.

### Data Collection Tools and Analysis

In order to display the preservice teachers' attitudes towards refugee students, two different instruments were used. As for the quantitative data, "Refugee Student Attitude Scale (RSAS)" consisting of three sub-scales and 24 items was used as the data collection tool (Sağlam & Kanbur, 2017). The scale is a 4-point Likert type tool with "1- Don't agree at all", "2- Moderately agree", "3- Mostly agree" and "4- Totally agree". The sub-categories of the scale were "communication" (items 1-11), "adaptation" (items 12-20), "efficiency" (items 21-24). Internal consistency coefficient of the scale (Alpha) was found to be .91; It also appeared as .88 for the communication section, .88 for the adaptation, and .80 for the efficiency section.

With the purpose of strengthening statistical data, all participants were required to respond to some open-ended questions such as; Do you feel efficient enough to instruct refugee students? and explain their reasons.

Both instruments were given at the same time and participating preservice teachers were asked to respond to each instrument in the same session. Data gathered from the scale were analysed through descriptive statistics, whereas verbal data were summarized and coded with pattern coding strategy. Afterwards, content analysis was applied to find out the frequency of the recurring codes.

### Results

The descriptive analysis of the data gathered through attitude scale revealed that participating preservice teachers' general attitudes independent of subscales towards their future refugee students is around 2,88 which depicts their moderate attitude (Table 1). In other words, it is possible to state that they do not have either positive or negative attitude towards refugee students, having them in their classrooms in future and instructing them.

**Table 1.** Preservice Teachers' overall attitudes about refugee students

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Overall Attitude	168	2,8866	,07481
Valid N (listwise)	168		,61692

In order to better understand the general attitudes of the participants, presenting the most and the least highly rated items is important (Table 2). In this way, a better and detailed understanding of participants' attitudes regarding specific topics would be possible.



**Table 2.** The most and the least highly rated items

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item 2	168	3,33	,90785
Item 8	168	3,32	,80002
Item 17	168	2,36	,91267
Item 24	168	2,16	1,08738
Valid N (listwise)	168		

More specifically, participants believed that they can be tolerant towards refugee students who experience difficulty in adaptation (Item 2), and make other students behave positively against refugee students (item 8). However, they do not think that refugee students are very well adaptive to school (item 17), and they think that language can be a problem (item 24). Specifically speaking, in terms of humanistic issues such as being tolerant, creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom are the strong perceptions that appear. On the other hand, they do not have positive attitude regarding the students' adaptation and communication skills.

Apart from their overall attitudes, the statistical analysis presented their attitudes towards refugee students according to their communication, rapport and efficiency (Table 3). It is obvious that they have more positive attitude regarding communication ( $M=3,18$ ) with these students compared to their adaptation ( $M=2,67$ ) and efficiency ( $M=2,53$ ). In other words, despite they perceive that they can communicate with them, they also consider language difference can cause problems in communication. Additionally, they have decreased attitude about their adaptation and being efficient to teach refugee students after their graduation. More specifically, they consider that helping refugee students to adapt to the school environment may not be that easy for the teachers due to language and cultural differences.

**Table 3.** Preservice Teachers' attitudes of refugee students in terms of subscales

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Communication	168	3,1872	,08866
Adaptation	168	2,6765	,09111
Efficiency	168	2,5331	,09756
Valid N (listwise)	168		

Overall, statistical results presented that the general attitude of the participating preservice teachers is moderate and they feel better especially in communication with refugee students. Their lack of perception is mostly related to their efficiency in giving instruction and instruction related areas.

In addition to numerical results, findings revealed from the written responses of the participating preservice teachers resulted in in-depth understanding of their attitudes towards refugee students.

To begin with, out of 168 participants, 112 (67%) stated that they have never communicated with refugees. The ones who have communicated noted that they have interacted in public transportation ( $N=38$ ), at school where they practice teach ( $N=28$ ), in their neighborhood ( $N=22$ ), social places like café, hospital ( $N=14$ ), dormitory ( $N=10$ ).

Additionally, their responses to the question whether refugee students should be educated in the same classroom with Turkish students showed that more than half of the participants (N=97) are against the idea. The reasons of both groups stating their support and resistance for the idea of refugee students' being in the same classroom with Turkish students are depicted in the following table.

**Table 4.** Reasons stated by the participants about refugee students being in the same class with Turkish students

Supporting Reasons		Opposing Reasons	
	N / %		N / %
1. Equal rights	36 / 21%	1. Negative effect on Turkish students' attitude	38/23%
2. Turkey is the melting pot of different cultures	22 / 13%	2. Language difference causes adaptation problems	26/ 15%
3. Enriches Turkish students interculturality.	13 / 8%	3. Cultural difference affects Turkish students negatively.	18/11%
		4. They need different instruction.	8 / 5%
		5. Their materials, and teachers should be from their own culture.	7 / 4%
Total	71 / 42%		97/ 58%

The reasons stated in table 4 can be better understood in the following quotations:

There are some topics that every person should benefit from without any discrimination. Education is one of them (Participant 98).

For centuries a lot of different cultures have been hosted by Turkey as the melting pot (Participant 76).

I totally agree that sharing the same classroom with students of other cultures enriches Turkish students' interculturality (Participant 45).

The traditions and norms of our country are way different from other cultures. I believe our students' are affected negatively (Participant 24).

Neither group knows the language of the other. This is the reason for adaptation problems (Participant 3).

These findings support the statistical findings related to communication. They explain the exact reason of their moderate perception. It is clear that most of the participants did not have any opportunity to communicate with refugees. Therefore, it is possible and very normal to have moderate level of perception regarding the communication issue. In the quotations, it is also clear that students from different cultures are believed to cause adaptation problems and cultural deficiency.

The participants were also asked to state their opinions about their readiness to teach refugee children. 128 (76%) of the participants indicated that they do not feel ready and confident to teach in a classroom where there are some refugee students. However, 40 (24%) participants explained their being ready. The reasons both groups indicated were listed in table 5.



**Table 5.** Reasons of not/being ready to teach refugee children

Reasons of not being ready		Reasons of being ready	
		N / %	N / %
1.	Communication problems with students and parents because of different languages	48/ 29%	1. Teaching is the same for every student. 13 / 8%
2.	Communication problems with students and parents because of different cultures	32/ 19%	2. Teaching should not be prejudiced. 10 / 6%
1.	Different background knowledge can cause difficulty in instruction	18/ 11%	3. Students should not be discriminated. 9 / 5%
3.	Requires different materials and syllabus	16/ 10%	4. Being a professional requires development. 8 / 5%
2.	Requires distinctive pedagogical knowledge	14 / 8%	5.
Total		128/76%	40/ 24%

The reasons of not/being ready to teach refugee students stated in table 5 are obvious in the following vignettes.

I agree for the idea that students coming from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds should be educated through different material, syllabi and methods (Participant 98).

If we are teachers, we have to know how to develop professionally and meet the needs of different groups of students (Participant 17).

The analysis of the written responses in this topic is also very much parallel to the statistical results. Efficiency appeared to be perceived as the least component. The reasons why pre-service teachers have low perception levels in terms of teaching efficiency are explained by the participants themselves. 128 of them stated that they do not feel ready to teach refugee students.

As a final question, participating pre-service teachers were asked to state whether they have learned any techniques or approaches to teach refugee students in their teacher education program. Only 22 of the participants who were majoring in the ELT department explained that despite not having a specific course, especially in sociolinguistics class they have discussed some probable problems that might be encountered and ways to overcome them.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study of which aim is to investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers about their future refugee students revealed very significant and striking results. To begin with, in the statistical analysis it appeared that preservice teachers are tolerant against the problems that may result from the refugee students' adaptation problems and they stated that they can create a positive atmosphere in the class. However, in the qualitative data 67 % of the participants explained that they have not communicated to any refugee people yet. Therefore, it can be concluded that since they have had no relation with refugees, they might

also not be aware of the problems that may occur. And their perceptions about being tolerant can be the result of being unfamiliar to the reality.

Secondly, the participants perceived that refugee students are not very well-adaptive to the Turkish classrooms. This statistical finding was also supported by the written responses of the participants. They explained that not knowing the Turkish language and having a totally different cultural background, being in need of a distinctive instruction are the reasons of their having adaptation problems. Participants also stated that, these differences can also be the reason of negative effect of refugees on Turkish students' attitudes and culture. This finding is parallel to the result of the studies conducted by Vedder et al. (2006) and Demirağ (2018).

On the other hand, there is also a group of participants who claimed that despite having above mentioned differences, refugee students should not be separated and isolated because they believed that this difference enriches Turkish students' intercultural and interlanguage skills, and they also become tolerant for the others. Additionally, because of the equal rights for education, they are believed to receive the same education as Turkish students do. On the contrary to the findings of studies by Gencer (2017) and Başar et al. (2018) linguistic differences were accepted as a resource to add students' intercultural/language skills.

As another finding, most of the participating pre-service teachers stated that they are not ready to teach refugee students since they do not know anything about special teaching methods and techniques to instruct in such a mixed group of students full of both Turkish and refugee students. Only a small number of participants explained that they have discussed related issues in their sociolinguistics course for a few weeks. However, this does not mean that they learned how to teach and get ready for the instruction in such a classroom. This finding is also supported with the written responses. Most of the participants noted that teaching refugee students requires different materials and a special syllabus. Moreover, pedagogically they have to be well-educated to be ready to teach efficiently. As another concern, the participants claimed that not knowing the language of the students can be a problem not only while communicating with them but also with their parents about anything related to personal and educational issues about refugee students. As stated by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Wubbles et al. (2006) teachers are responsible for the adjustment of the students and this requires in-service and pre-service training about this specific issue. Otherwise, teachers who are not well-educated and well-equipped with the necessary knowledge to prevent the possible problems about refugee students that may occur in their classes, cannot manage the classroom. This hassle most possibly results in worse problems and the education process can be negatively affected.

As a result of all these findings some implications can be offered to policy makers, teacher education programs, teacher educators and teachers.

To begin with, with the inclusion of refugee students in national education system, policy makers should take necessary precautions in order to prevent any problems that may occur in the teaching and learning process. In other words, national education curriculum, materials to be used and all necessary documents should be redesigned according to this recent situation. Additionally, some specific courses to train pre-service teachers regarding the needs of refugee students should be designed and added to the teacher education programs. Needless to say, the faculty members in these programs should be involved in research and improve themselves professionally about this specific issue.





As a final suggestion, teachers who work at schools where both Turkish and refugee students are educated together, should improve themselves and try to learn the appropriate techniques, methods and approaches either by the help of in-service teacher education or voluntary professional development events. However, all these implications should start from the teacher education programs. Higher Education Council should take this issue as a big concern and make necessary changes in the teacher education curriculum. Especially courses such as 'International Communication', 'Teaching multicultural/lingual students' with the inclusion of methodology and materials design as subtopics should be definitely added to all pre-service and in-service teacher education programs.

As the limitations of the study, the sample group can be listed at the top of the list. Pre-service teachers who receive training at the border cities might help better understand the attitude because of their regional features. As the second limitation, the number of students from different departments is not the same. This might affect the results and cause bias in terms of some departments with more participants. Therefore, following all these limitations further research is suggested to strengthen the results and to see a more general picture regarding this issue.

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