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The Role of Values Education in Addressing Peer Bullying Among Refugee Students: Challenges and Educational Strategies in Primary School

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges primary school teachers face working with refugee children, focusing on peer bullying and the broader context of refugee students' integration into educational settings. The research highlights significant adaptation difficulties, communication barriers, and developmental disadvantages among refugee children. Nearly half of the refugee children reported communication issues, and many exhibited deficits in social-emotional and language development. The study also reveals a high prevalence of peer bullying, with 38.5% of refugee children engaging in bullying behavior and 48.7% being victims. Teachers emphasized the need for values education programs to address peer bullying, with 94.9% of participants supporting such initiatives. Love, respect, fairness, and friendship were identified as key values to be imparted. The study underscores the importance of comprehensive educational interventions, including teacher training, family involvement, and community awareness, to promote refugee children's social integration and well-being in primary schools.

Keywords: Peer Bullying, Primary School Teacher, Values Education Program, Refugee, Student

Introduction

The phenomenon of refugees has persisted throughout human history, reflecting the movement of individuals forced to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, or disaster. The ongoing conflict in Syria has led to one of the most significant refugee crises in modern history, displacing millions of Syrians across the globe. As of December 26, 2024, Turkey hosts 2,911,525 Syrian refugees under temporary protection, making it the country with the highest number of refugees globally.¹ Notably, nearly half (54%) of these refugees are children aged 0-18, many of whom are of school age and face unique challenges as they integrate into new educational systems.²

According to Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, one of the most fundamental humanitarian agreements, migrant children are entitled to basic rights such as survival, safety, and development; non-discrimination; the right to freely express their views and participate; and protection from all forms of abuse, violence, neglect, and exploitation.³ Turkey has implemented numerous policies to provide access to education for Syrian refugee children as part of its commitment to these rights.

Despite these efforts, refugee children are among the most vulnerable groups affected by migration. They face significant barriers, including language differences, cultural adjustment, socioeconomic disadvantages, peer bullying, lack of education, child labor, and early marriage.^{3,4} Transitioning to a completely unfamiliar culture from the environment they were born into can be an immense challenge, requiring adaptation and acceptance from both the child and the host community. Peer bullying is one of the most prevalent issues during this period. Refugee children undergoing adaptation processes and embodying risk factors for bullying are particularly vulnerable to such behaviors. Consequently, refugee children must be recognized as a disadvantaged group requiring targeted interventions.^{4,5}

One of the critical challenges faced by Syrian refugee children in Turkish primary schools is peer bullying. Peer bullying, a widespread issue in educational settings globally, is amplified for refugee children due to their perceived “otherness” and heightened vulnerability. Research has consistently shown that refugee children are at greater risk of being bullied compared to their native peers, enduring verbal, physical, and social forms of aggression. These experiences can profoundly impact their psychological well-being, academic performance, and social integration.^{5,6}

Peer bullying is defined as intentional, systematic, and sustained harm or distress inflicted by a dominant individual or group on a less powerful individual or group.⁷ Unlike general aggression, bullying involves intentionality, repetition, and a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim.⁵ Educational systems play a critical role in fostering inclusive environments, particularly when students from diverse backgrounds, such as refugee children, are integrated into mainstream schooling. The influx of Syrian refugees into various countries has significantly

affected educational structures, raising challenges related to curriculum adaptation and teacher preparedness.^{6,7}

Schools allow children to interact with peers and acquire essential social experiences. Positive peer interactions during the school years contribute significantly to children's socio-emotional development.⁸ Schools offer children crucial opportunities for social interaction and the development of essential social skills. Positive peer interactions during the primary school years play a fundamental role in fostering socio-emotional development.^{7,8} According to Salmivalli (2010), peer relationships in childhood are a critical aspect of emotional growth as they allow children to develop empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills.⁹ Supportive peer relationships enable children to build self-esteem and emotional resilience, which are vital for navigating social challenges.¹⁰ Additionally, peer interactions provide children with the opportunity to practice communication skills and learn social norms, which are essential for successful integration into larger social contexts.⁸ Therefore, positive peer experiences within schools are essential not only for the immediate socialization of children but also for their long-term psychological and academic success. Conversely, negative experiences, such as peer bullying, can have detrimental effects. Peer bullying behaviors often emerge during the early school period as peer relationships develop.^{11,12} Such behaviors not only affect individual victims but can also influence entire classroom dynamics, with children potentially reinforcing each other's bullying behaviors.^{12,13} Research indicates that peer bullying becomes normalized in children's lives during this period, assigning them roles as bullies, victims, or bystanders. Given the lasting impact of primary school bullying on children's future behaviors, it is essential to investigate and address these issues at this developmental stage.^{9, 13, 14}

Peer bullying during the primary school years has been shown to have significant negative effects on children's emotional, social, and academic development. Research indicates that children who are victims of bullying often experience increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, which can impair their overall psychological well-being.⁹ The emotional distress caused by bullying can lead to lower self-esteem and hinder the development of positive peer relationships, as victims may withdraw from social interactions in an effort to avoid further harm.¹⁰ Moreover, children who experience bullying are at higher risk for academic underachievement, as the psychological toll can interfere with concentration, school attendance, and engagement in learning activities.¹⁵ Furthermore, children who engage in bullying behavior often face long-term behavioral and social difficulties, including an increased likelihood of aggression and relationship problems in adolescence. Thus, addressing peer bullying is crucial to ensuring the healthy development of children during this formative period.¹⁶

The experiences of bullying among refugee children extend beyond mere social concerns and are fundamentally connected to the design and implementation of educational programs. Effective curricula must not only address academic requirements but also incorporate strategies that promote social cohesion and emotional resilience. The cultivation of self-resiliency skills—including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal domains—is a critical foundation for

healthy child development. Values education plays a pivotal role in nurturing these competencies by equipping children with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors, foster empathy, and develop positive social attitudes, thereby enhancing social cohesion within the broader community. Particularly for refugee children experiencing the challenges of conflict and displacement, supporting emotional well-being and self-regulation through values education is imperative. Values-based programs can facilitate the internalization of core principles such as empathy, respect, solidarity, patience, and tolerance, thereby promoting positive emotional and behavioral regulation even within complex and adverse social environments.^{17, 18} It is believed values education serves as an essential tool in enhancing children's multidimensional self-regulatory capacities, supporting their psychosocial well-being, and fostering social adaptation under challenging circumstances. Educational programs should adopt a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal development to effectively nurture these competencies.^{36,37,38}

For Syrian refugee children, whose education has often been disrupted by displacement and trauma, schools serve as a crucial platform for rebuilding a sense of normalcy and belonging. However, the presence of peer bullying undermines these efforts, exacerbating feelings of isolation and negatively affecting their educational outcomes.^{17,19,20}

The issue addressed in this study reflects a pressing global challenge: the educational inclusion and well-being of refugee children in host countries. With forced displacement reaching record levels worldwide due to conflict, persecution, and natural disasters, millions of refugee children face significant barriers to accessing quality education. Beyond the immediate challenges of enrollment and academic adaptation, these children are particularly vulnerable to peer bullying, discrimination, and social exclusion—factors that severely hinder their psychosocial development and long-term integration. This study focuses on Syrian refugee children in Türkiye, yet the problem resonates globally, as many host nations struggle to design educational systems that are both inclusive and responsive to the complex needs of refugee populations. By investigating peer bullying through the lens of teacher perspectives and curriculum design, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how education systems can become agents of healing, resilience, and social cohesion for one of the world's most vulnerable student populations.^{34, 35}

Teachers, as central figures in the educational process, play a pivotal role in identifying and mitigating bullying behaviors. Their perspectives and strategies are critical to understanding peer dynamics and developing interventions aligned with curriculum goals. However, the extent to which teacher training programs prepare educators to address the specific needs of refugee students and manage bullying effectively remains underexplored.^{6, 7, 11, 13}

Research indicates that intervention programs aimed at preventing peer bullying are particularly effective during childhood.^{17, 20, 21} However, their effectiveness diminishes with age. These findings underscore the critical importance of

implementing and expanding bullying prevention programs at the primary school level.^{18, 22} Comprehensive national peer bullying prevention programs can only be achieved through the education and active engagement of all educational system components.²³ While countries like the United States and much of Europe have implemented national-level anti-bullying programs, Turkey lacks a nationwide prevention initiative or an effective action plan targeting primary school students.^{6, 11, 13}

Teachers, as key stakeholders in the educational environment, significantly influence the success of anti-bullying efforts. Their perceptions and responses to bullying incidents involving refugee children shape the overall classroom climate and the efficacy of intervention strategies. Yet, there is limited research exploring the relationship between refugee children's experiences of peer bullying and teachers' perspectives on this issue, particularly within the context of Turkish primary schools.^{2, 8, 18}

This study seeks to examine the peer bullying experiences of primary school Syrian refugee children and the perspectives of primary school teachers on this issue. Situating the discussion within the broader curriculum and instruction framework, the research aims to contribute to developing educational practices that promote inclusivity, equity, and resilience in diverse classroom settings. It is posited that children's ability to regulate their emotions in response to bullying behaviors and to cope with adverse circumstances can be nurtured through the integration of a values education program.

This study aims to investigate the peer bullying experiences of Syrian refugee children enrolled in Turkish primary schools and to examine the perspectives of primary school teachers regarding this phenomenon. By illuminating the dynamics of bullying involving refugee children, the research seeks to inform strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive educational environments within the context of a values education program for primary schools.

Material and Method

Method

Study Design

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It was conducted in an urban center in the Mediterranean region of Turkey, and the research population comprises educators employed in primary school programs in both the public and private sectors.

Participants

The study aimed to include all primary school teachers without a specific sample selection. The total population of primary school teachers in the city center is 318, and 195 teachers who volunteered to participate were included in the research.

In Turkey, primary school teachers working in private and public sectors graduate from primary school teaching programs after completing a 4-year

undergraduate education. Primary education programs cater to children in the 7-11 age group within public and private institutions.

Until the 1970s, a university degree was not required to become a primary school teacher in Turkey. During that period, teachers graduated from various faculties of varying durations and standards and were appointed primary school teachers. Generally, Child Development and Education vocational school graduates were assigned as primary school teachers. In 1973, the responsibility for training primary school teachers was transferred to Higher Education Institutions. In 1980, two-year primary school teacher education programs were established, which were later converted into four-year programs in 1991.²⁴ In 1998, all teacher education programs were restructured by the Turkish Higher Education Council (HEC).²⁵

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a questionnaire developed by the researchers based on a comprehensive literature review. The questionnaire includes items related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the teachers (such as age, gender, years of service, work group, and employment status with refugees), as well as 13 questions assessing peer bullying encountered by refugee children and the teachers' opinions on this issue. A pilot test of the questionnaire was administered to 20 teachers who were not part of the study sample in the district center. Based on the feedback from the pilot test, the final version of the questionnaire was prepared and distributed. The administration of each questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0, and the results were presented as frequencies and percentages. For the comparison of categorical data, chi-square analysis was employed. Statistical significance was determined at a 95% confidence interval with a 5% margin of error ($p < 0.05$). Open-ended questions were qualitatively analyzed through thematic analysis.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Kahramanmaraş Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Date/Number: 24.12.2022/9). Additionally, written consent was secured from the teachers, confirming their voluntary participation in the study in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and were required to complete and submit the Informed Consent Form prior to their involvement in the research.

Results

The mean age of the teachers included in the study is 22.82 ± 1.12 years. Among the participants, 89.7% are female, and 10.3% are male.

Table 1. Some characteristics of the teachers included in the study and comparison of their working situations with refugee students

Data	Teachers' working Status with Refugee Students			X ² /p***
	Yes n(%)*	No n(%)*	Total n(%)**	
Gender				
Women	135(77.1)	40(22.9)	175(89.7)	1.447/0.175
Men	13(65.0)	7(35.0)	20(10.3)	
Age				
25-30 age	37(29.1)	90(70.9)	127(65.1)	5.942/0.113
31-40 age	31(88.6)	4(11.4)	35(17.9)	
41-50 age	9(75.0)	3(25.0)	12(6.2)	
51 age and above	18(85.7)	3(14.3)	21(10.8)	
Education Status				
Bachelor Degree	140(75.3)	46(24.7)	65(95.4)	0.871/0.316
Master's Degree	8(88.9)	1(11.1)	9(4.6)	
Age Group Served				
6	7(77.8)	2(22.2)	9(4.6)	2.526/0.480
7	32(68.1)	15(31.9)	47(24.1)	
8	55(80.9)	13(19.1)	68(34.9)	
9	54(76.1)	17(23.9)	71(36.4)	
Class size				
Less than 30	109(21.2)	35(78.8)	144(73.8)	0.600/1.004
31-40	25(5.6)	8(94.4)	33(16.9)	
41 and above	14(77.8)	4(22.2)	18(9.2)	
Type of Bullying Witnessed				
Psychological (Indirect)	28(82.4)	6(17.6)	34(17.4)	3.106/0.138
Verbal	92(71.9)	36(28.1)	128(65.6)	
Physically	28(84.8)	5(15.2)	33(16.9)	
Total	148(75.9)	47(24.1)	195(100.0)	

More than half of the primary school teachers have worked with refugee students. As the number of years spent working in the profession increased, the likelihood of working with refugee students also rose. Refugee students are primarily found in regions with larger class sizes. Regarding the types of bullying observed by teachers, 82.4% reported witnessing psychological bullying, 71.9% observed verbal bullying, and 84.8% noted instances of physical violence.

Table 2. Opinions of teachers working with migrant children

Variables	n	%
Status of having adaptation problems		
Yes	92	47.2
No	103	52.8
Can the migrant child communicate with their peers?		
No communication	12	6.2
Very little	75	38.1
Medium level	84	43.1
Mostly	18	9.2
There is contact	6	3.1
Development areas where refugees are disadvantaged		
Social Emotional Development	101	51.8
Language development	66	33.8
Psycho-Motor Development	28	14.4
Problems with Refugee children		
Inability to communicate	36	18.5
Lack of family involvement	107	54.9
Cultural differences	52	26.7
The bullying of Refugee children		
Yes	75	38.5
No	120	61.5
Gender of the bullied refugee child (n=75)		
Girl	61	81.3
Boy	14	18.7
Refugee children's exposure to bullying		
Yes	95	48.7
No	100	51.3
Parents' attitudes towards refugees		
Not against refugee children in their children's classrooms	92	47.2
Against refugee children in their children's classrooms	100	51.3
Indecisive	3	1.5
Total	195	100.0

It was reported that nearly half of the refugee students experience adjustment problems and have limited or no ability to communicate. More than half of the refugee children were found to be disadvantaged in terms of social and emotional development, with one-third exhibiting insufficient language development. A common issue observed during the primary school period is the lack of family involvement for refugee children. While 38.5% of the refugee children exhibited bullying behavior, 48.7% were victims of bullying. When evaluating parents' attitudes toward refugee children, it was reported that more than half of the parents expressed to the primary school teacher that they did not want refugee children in their classrooms.

Table 3. Teachers' attempts to prevent bullying in refugee children Initiatives to prevent bullying

Variables	n	%
The need for values education program about peer bullying		
There is need	185	94.9
There is no need	10	5.1
Initial values to be given to refugee children		
Love	143	73.3
Respect	30	15.4
Being fair	13	6.7
Friendship-Sharing-Optimism-Sincerity	9	4.6
Initiatives to prevent bullying		
Family Education	41	21.0
Out-of-school inclusive activities	98	50.3
Being a translator in the classroom	56	28.7
The need for In-Service training about bullying		
Yes	162	83.1
No	33	16.9
Total	195	100.0

The majority of teachers participating in the study (94.9%) expressed the necessity of a values education program addressing peer bullying. This high percentage indicates that a large proportion of teachers emphasize the importance of values education in combating peer bullying. In contrast, only 5.1% of the respondents stated that such a program was unnecessary. This finding highlights that teachers widely recognize the negative impact of peer bullying in the educational environment, and it underscores the importance of educational interventions aimed at addressing this issue.

Regarding the initial values to be given to unaccompanied refugee children, the majority of teachers (73.3%) selected "love" as the most important value. This reflects teachers' belief in the significance of emotional bonds and love as fundamental tools for supporting the social integration of refugee children. Additionally, 15.4% of teachers emphasized the value of "respect." Other values were cited less frequently: "justice" (6.7%) and "friendship, sharing, optimism, and sincerity" (4.6%). These data suggest that teachers prefer an empathetic and tolerant approach when interacting with refugee children, although there is also a need for a broader range of values to be considered.

Teachers proposed several key initiatives to prevent bullying. First, family education: 21% of teachers indicated that measures aimed at educating families should be implemented. This suggests that increasing awareness of the influence families have on children's behavior is considered crucial. Second, out-of-school inclusive activities: 50.3% of teachers highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities. This finding suggests that teachers recognize the critical role of such activities in enhancing students' social skills and societal integration. Third, having

a translator in the classroom: 28.7% of teachers recommended the inclusion of a translator, particularly to help refugee children overcome language barriers. This indicates that language barriers are a significant issue for refugee students, and addressing these barriers could help prevent peer bullying.

83.1% of teachers emphasized the need for in-service training on bullying. This indicates that teachers need more knowledge and skills to address bullying effectively. On the other hand, 16.9% of teachers felt such training was unnecessary. This suggests that while most teachers recognize the need for further education on bullying, a smaller group does not perceive any gaps in their expertise.

These findings demonstrate that teachers know the various values and strategies required to educate refugee children. In particular, education is strongly emphasized to combat bullying and to encourage collaboration between families and schools. Furthermore, the teachers' recommendations to support the social integration of refugee children, mainly through out-of-school activities, suggest that educators aim to strengthen students' social integration through academic success and enhancing their social skills.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of primary school teachers working with refugee children. They focus on the challenges posed by peer bullying and the broader context of refugee students' integration into educational settings. The results highlight significant issues regarding adaptation difficulties, communication barriers, and developmental disadvantages among refugee children, as well as teachers' efforts and perspectives on addressing these challenges and the need for values education programs.

Discussion

Most teachers reported that refugee children face significant adaptation challenges, with nearly half indicating problems in adjusting to the school environment. Moreover, communication barriers were prominent, as most refugee children could only engage in minimal or moderate interactions with their peers. These findings align with prior research indicating that language barriers and cultural differences are key obstacles to the social integration of refugee children in host countries.²⁶ Addressing these barriers requires targeted language support programs and culturally responsive teaching strategies that facilitate peer interaction and foster a sense of belonging, as well as initiatives to foster empathy and tolerance through the teaching of core values.^{11, 27}

The findings indicate that refugee children are significantly disadvantaged in their social and emotional development, coupled with deficiencies in language acquisition. Social-emotional development is directly linked to challenges in peer relationships.⁹ Teachers can promote resilience and healthier peer relationships in refugee children through approaches rooted in values education. Also, the results corroborate previous studies that emphasize the importance of addressing refugee children's emotional and linguistic needs to support their holistic development.^{2, 16,}

²⁴ Teachers' observations regarding psycho-motor development, though less frequently noted, indicate the need for a comprehensive approach to refugee children's education that considers all aspects of their growth and well-being.^{16, 26, 28, 30}

The study also revealed significant issues related to parental involvement, with over half of the teachers reporting inadequate family participation as a significant problem.^{5, 7, 14} This finding echoes earlier research suggesting that socioeconomic challenges, language barriers, and cultural differences often hinder the engagement of refugee families in their children's education. Strengthening family-school partnerships is essential for improving refugee children's educational outcomes and overall well-being.^{7, 15, 30, 31}

One of the most critical findings pertains to the prevalence of peer bullying. While 38.5% of refugee children exhibited bullying behaviors, 48.7% were victims of bullying. These figures underscore the vulnerability of refugee children to peer aggression, likely exacerbated by their perceived "otherness" and the challenges of integration.³² Notably, girls were more frequently identified as victims than boys, suggesting potential gender-based differences in bullying dynamics. This finding aligns with literature that highlights the distinct ways in which bullying affects boys and girls, necessitating gender-sensitive intervention strategies.

Furthermore, the study identified negative attitudes among parents of native students, with over half expressing reluctance to have refugee children in their children's classrooms. The findings revealed that 51.3% of parents expressed resistance to having refugee children in their children's classrooms. Such attitudes not only contribute to the exclusion of refugee children but also exacerbate challenges in peer acceptance and hinder the social integration of refugee students.^{16, 31, 33} Efforts to combat such biases must include awareness campaigns and inclusive educational policies that promote empathy and understanding among the wider school community. This underscores the need for values education programs that include initiatives to raise awareness among parents and foster inclusive attitudes.^{4, 8, 21}

Teachers overwhelmingly expressed the need for values education programs, with 94.9% indicating that these programs could address issues related to peer bullying.⁹ Love, respect, fairness, and friendship were highlighted as critical values to impart to refugee children, reflecting the essential role of values education in fostering inclusive and harmonious school environments. Teachers also emphasized the importance of family education and inclusive extracurricular activities as effective strategies for preventing bullying. These findings resonate with studies emphasizing the role of values education and community engagement in creating supportive learning environments.^{11, 15, 21}

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the complex and intertwined challenges faced by refugee children in primary schools, emphasizing the critical role of values education and the indispensable position of teachers in addressing these multifaceted issues. Refugee students often endure peer bullying, developmental delays, and emotional difficulties, all of which are exacerbated by language barriers, cultural disparities, and limited parental engagement. These findings confirm that the problem is not merely one of educational achievement, but also of social inclusion and psychological well-being. The study's main propositions highlight the importance of adopting a holistic and values-based approach to refugee education. Teachers' insights reveal that values education—centered on empathy, respect, cooperation, and resilience—can serve as a foundational tool in supporting refugee students' academic performance and socio-emotional integration. Scientifically, the research demonstrates how values education can act as a preventive and transformative force in countering bullying and promoting school belonging.

From these findings, several key implications emerge for policy and practice:

1. **Development of Comprehensive Programs:** It is crucial to design and implement nationwide values education and anti-bullying frameworks tailored specifically to the lived realities of refugee children. These programs must emphasize emotional literacy, social cohesion, and resilience-building.
2. **Teacher Training:** There is an urgent need for systematic teacher training that equips educators with cultural competence, inclusive pedagogical skills, and effective intervention strategies to manage multicultural and trauma-sensitive classrooms.
3. **Parental Engagement:** Family involvement must be strengthened through language support services, culturally responsive outreach efforts, and collaborative school-family partnerships.
4. **Community Awareness:** Public campaigns and school-based initiatives should aim to dismantle prevailing stereotypes, reduce social prejudice, and foster an inclusive mindset toward refugee populations.
5. **Policy Implementation:** Educational policies must be inclusive, enforceable, and grounded in human rights, ensuring equitable access to quality education regardless of students' backgrounds or legal status.

Ultimately, this study underscores that addressing the educational and psychosocial needs of refugee students requires a coordinated and sustained effort from teachers, school leaders, families, policymakers, and the broader community. Only through such collaboration can educational systems be transformed into safe, inclusive, and empowering spaces for all children. Therefore, both educational programs and instructional practices should be redesigned to holistically support the social, emotional, and academic development of refugee students, laying the groundwork for a more just and compassionate society.

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