

Impact of Physical Education Lesson on Adaptation of Syrian Refugee School Age Children in Turkey

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Abstract

The article mainly focuses on the relationship between the physical education (PE) lesson and Syrian refugee students (SRS), who have been enrolled in public schools in Adiyaman/Turkey. The study investigates how PE contributes to the adaptation of SRS and which parameters are more effective on reducing the traumas which come with immigration. The data collected from public schools where the SRS are highly enrolled. 20 closed ended questions were asked to 50 PE teachers and it has been concluded that the PE has a considerable effect on the adaptation processes of SRS.

Keywords: physical education lesson, Syrian refugee children, adaptation

1. Introduction

Refugees are usually a disadvantaged minority who is faced with lots of disparities. They have many problems like education, health, employment, foreign language and exclusion in society (Saleh, Aydın, & Kocak, 2018). Due to the rapid increase at the number of refugee students who find themselves to be an ethnic and cultural minority in their classrooms is one of the most important problem of our time (Hachfeld et al., 2015; PISA in focus 33. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013).

The Syrian civil war has caused one of the biggest humanitarian crises of the world (Culbertson & Constant, 2015; Nebhay, 2015, Saleh, Aydın, & Kocak, 2018). The education section of this crisis does not suffer for only the Middle East but also for the refugee host countries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that less than 40 % of Syrian refugee children are enrolled in educational systems. This is not only an education problem, but also the future of Syrian and the stability of host countries are under threat (Culbertson & Constant, 2015; Nebhay, 2015; UNICEF, 2014a). After the start of the civil war in 2011, half of Syrian people have been moved to another country (UNHCR, 2015a; UNHCR, 2015d). That is why the Syrian refugees are the second-largest refugee population in the world, after Palestinians (Nebhay, 2015).

Since civil war in March 2011, more than 3 million refugees have come across the border to Turkey from Syria. Although the number increases day to day it is indicated that half of this population is under the age of 18 (Ozer, Sirin & Oppedal, 2015, AFAD, 2013, Alpaydin, 2017). Around 30 percent of Syrian refugees are primary and middle-school aged (6–18) (AFAD, 2013). It has been reported by international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that school age Syrians' enrollment in formal and informal educational activities in host countries is quite low. However, many acknowledged that the level of participation among school age Syrians varies from settlement to settlement (Dorman, 2014).

Refugees have to cope with various challenges and traumas, such as not knowing the legal system of the host country, status problems, being unfamiliar with the local language, being separated from family members and losing family members in conflicts. All these issues create an uncertainty about the future and causes severe psychological damages (Ozdogru, 2009; Alpaydin, 2017). One of the most significant problems experienced by the refugees is the education problem. The low quality of education or deprivation of refugee students from the education process during the experienced challenge for life is an important issue (Basar & Akan, 2014). Although the quality of education in distant resettlement countries differs, it is generally higher in developed countries but for only a limited

number of refugees. A report released by AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority) indicates that there are large disparities in access to basic needs between Syrians. Currently, about 80 percent of school age Syrians are attending school in Turkey, while only 27 percent of their peers in host communities are attending. (Dorman, 2014). However, they face problems such as prejudice and difficult integration with children from different educational backgrounds, personal and material deficiencies, language barrier, or problems trying to learn in a multi-cultural environment while still traumatized (Bourgonje, 2010; Nonchev & Tagarov, 2012; Dryden & Peterson, 2016). All these problems cause a lower academic performance for refugee students when compared to non-immigrant majority students in most countries (Hachfeld et al., 2015).

It has been reported that multicultural education cannot be considered as only curriculum update, but always tries to change attitudes and beliefs of all actors involved in the educational process (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2002). Teachers are the main actors of refugee education because they determine how and what children learn (Ferguson, 2003). In multicultural classrooms teachers need to ignore differences between ethnic and cultural groups and this approach is supposed to produce a better equality and inclusion (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). According to a reported study on teachers who have refugee students, the most important issues were the lack of teacher training (generally seeking for work outside of camp due to the insufficient salary), incompetent management, a lack of programs directed towards students' needs and expectations, insufficient educational equipment in schools and absenteeism. In addition, the negative impacts of war on children, teachers and parents significantly reduce the efficiency of education (Arabaci et al., 2014; Basar & Akan, 2014). One of the problems reported by Turkish and Syrian teachers was the regionalism issue due to the fact that students come from different regions. Students in same class (refugee and local students) who have different cultural background may experience problems in adopting to each other. (Basar & Akan, 2014). It has been observed that refugee students who live in the camps are better educated than those who live out of the camps because they have less adaptation problems in the classroom. (AFAD, 2013). So, it can be concluded that successful adaptation may fix some problems of refugee children, especially educational ones.

Adapting to the living (social, cultural and economic) conditions in the host country is a very challenging process (Alpaydin, 2017). Education can have an important role in compensating for all these social, economic and cultural adaptation problems that refugees have experienced by reducing uncertainty and rebuilding the confidence. Research in various disciplines has shown the benefits of education for meeting the social needs of refugees (Kakkar, 2000; Beste, 2015).

Physical Education (PE) and sport has increasingly become a cultural contact zone which may help to decrease the social problems for students with different cultural background. (Pratt 1992; Tarc & Tarc 2015). PE may be less stressful for both teachers and students which makes easier to homogenize the classroom (Sparkes, Templin, & Schempp, 1993; Thevenard, Haddock, Phillips, & Reddish, 2009; Tinning, McCuaig, & Hunter, 2006). The role of PE teachers has been questioned on various occasions, citing the subject's usefulness and appropriateness for modern day teaching (Baldwin, 2015) but today, scholars would suggest that PE use behavioral change approaches, and most of the behavior modification programs have gained recognition through their precursor efforts in schools (Nutbeam, 2000; Thomson & Robertson, 2014). Through school-based educational opportunities, PE strives to engage all students in learning how to become a wholesome and socially responsive person. It is the notion of engaging all students that becomes an important entry point to consider how race and culture are conceptualized in PE curriculum as a means of providing an inclusive approach within educational policy. (Patherick, 2017). Students' cultural background provides information that how they engage with and participate in PE and how they come to understand being healthy (Pang & Macdonald, 2016). Internationally, there is a burgeoning body of research examining issues of how racialization and racism operate in overt and covert ways in PE and school environments (Azzarito, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Flintoff et al., 2015). In an effort to highlight how race functions in PE, scholars point to the increasing recognition of cultural difference and identity; however, such recognitions often result in a homogenization of difference (Patherick, 2017). Education is generally emphasized as one of the most important field for social integration. A growing number of studies have been investigating students' PE experiences in multicultural classrooms (Azzarito, 2009; Azzarito, Simon, & Marttinen, 2017; Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Barker et al., 2014; Benn & Pfister, 2013; Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011; Bramham, 2003; Dagkas et al., 2011; Dagkas & Hunter, 2015; Farooq & Parker, 2009) but none of them has been focused on the contribution of PE on the adaptation of Syrian refugee school age children. There is not enough attention on refugees in Turkey by means of academic studies, despite its being an important host for refugees. It has been claimed that education is an important field for the integration of refugee students. Education helps refugees to develop their skills and this period is crucial for their integration to the host society (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Many scientists claimed that routine physical activity facilitates physical and mental health as well life itself (Raskin, 2002). This is supported by studies which indicate that participation in sport activities improves not only physically but also daily functioning, contributes to a healthy life style (British Health and Education Authority, 1998; Laker, 2000; Arar, 2004). For around 12 years, PE classes routinely introduce children to organize sports. Research has demonstrated beneficial outcomes of these activities, such as health benefits, group co-operation, leisure-time education and the establishment of future physical activity habits (Almond, 1989; Haywood, 1991; Capel & Piotrowski, 2000; Chung & Phillips, 2002; Arar, 2004; Koca et al., 2005). That is why PE is very important for adaptation processes of refugee school age children.

This study aims to investigate that how PE contributes to the integration of Syrian school age children in Turkey who are living in cities and enrolled to Turkish Education System.

2. Method

The primary source of data for this study was a survey conducted with the PE teachers who have Syrian refugee students (SRS) in their classroom. All PE teachers have been chosen from the public schools in Adiyaman / Turkey which is one of the host cities for Syrian refugees. The questions have been asked teachers to;

- 1-) get a general information about the refugee students (age, economic level, physical properties)
- 2-) understand their level of attention to PE lesson and sports.
- 3-) learn how adapted students are they to the social life and other student groups
- 4-) to identify if PE have any contribution on adaptation of refugee students

20 closed ended questions were prepared and the teachers picked the best answer between the possible three. All questions were reported as supporting information. All questions were considered both for male and female students separately by teachers to identify if there is a behavioral difference between genders.

Adiyaman is at the south-east of Turkey and relatively close to Syria but have no border line. The community consist of economically middle-class people. There was a camp for Syrian refugees but it has been moved to another city that is why all refugees are living in city now.

50 PE teachers were chosen as participants for this study who have 357 male and 331 female SRS in their classroom between ages 11-14 during the 2018-2019 school year. They taught full-time at the primary schools in Adiyaman / Turkey. The PE teachers were selected to ensure representation by gender.

3. Result

Questions have been prepared as a document and given to the teachers to answer all questions in 3 days. All documents have been collected after 3 days. Instead of considering statistical consistency, the results have been reported and discussed. Some of the teachers did not answer a few of questions because of different reasons (for example lack of male or female refugee students in their class) that is why the results have been reported as a percentage in discussion section. All questions have been asked for male and female students separately to understand if there is a gender factor.

During the survey period it has been concluded that the teachers are willing to talk and discuss about refugee students because they are one of the professionals who are witnesses of the tragedies of SRS.

4. Discussion

Turkish, which is the local and public education language, level of students reported generally poor or moderate by teachers. This is the main challenging issue for teachers because none of the PE teachers can speak local Syrian language. Another consequence of the language barrier is understanding the instructions in PE class, only ~10 % of PE teachers report that the SRS understand the instructions very well. A few of teachers (around 3 %) claimed that SRS have absenteeism problem which can be considered as a success for all educational actors. There is not any information about the absenteeism problem of Turkish students in this study but it is highly possible that the ratio should be close to the refugee students. None of the PE teachers reported that SRS are using addictive substances which is a positive factor like absenteeism. The financial level of the students has been reported as very low by nearly half of the PE teachers (around 45 %). This is another challenging issue for education world, it is clear that lots of refugee children need to work to contribute to the family for living expenses.

More than half (around 53 %) of the PE teachers stated that the interest of SRS to the PE class is very high which can be evaluated as a positive motivating factor. The low stress of PE class and need of socialization can be regarded as main reasons for this relatively high ratio. The harmony of the SRS with Turkish students in sports have been reported as very high by ~9 % and very low by ~13 % of teachers. The harmony of the students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds can be manipulated by several factors. Faction of the students is one of them. It has been concluded that if the number of SRS is relatively less, the harmony is high, vice versa. Adiyaman is at the south-east of Turkey and relatively close to Syria. The cultural difference between two society is relatively low when compared with the west part of Turkey. Because of this ~58 % of PE teachers reported that the motivation of Turkish students are moderate and ~10 % reported very well in PE activities with SRS.

The successes of SRS in team and individual sports stated as moderate by ~58 % and ~60 % respectively. Language barrier and homogenization difficulties in class may decrease the ratio of success for team sports. Only 10 % of teachers stated that refugee students have a healthy diet and 16 % reported that they have very well sport equipment. These two factors also effect the success of students for both team and individual sports.

Only around ~10 % of PE teachers reported that the SRS are physically predominant to Turkish students and this ratio is same to the financially well supported SRS which has been reported by PE teachers. Most of the Syrian refugees are financially poor but not all of them. However, the Syrian refugees, who are relatively rich, live in bigger cities (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir) some of them still resides the cities in south east of Turkey like Adiyaman.

The number of the female SRS, who have professional future plans about sports, is very low (~2 % of PE teachers reported). This ratio is relatively high (~12 %) for male students and this difference may be explained with the conservatism about the females in middle eastern societies.

~47 % of PE teachers reported that the impact of PE to the adaptation of SRS to Turkey is moderate and ~22 % reported that it is high. Only ~12 % of PE teachers reported that the contribution of PE class is low to the interaction of Syrian and Turkish students. These two results make it clear that the PE activities are helpful for the adaptation process of refugee students. Half of the PE teachers claimed that PE reduces the traumas of immigration and more than half (54 %) of them think that if the SRS can be motivated to the PE and sport activities more, they would be better adapted citizens to their host countries.

5. Conclusion

The study has been carried out in a specific region and this may be a limitation. Further studies may be carried out for different host regions and results may be compared to understand the effect of PE on SRS deeper. The current study is unique in being the first study examining PE status on the adaptation of SRS. This study not only includes the adaptation factor, but also social, economic and educational factors.

The significance of the present study lies in exploring how PE classes contributes to the adaptation of SRS despite the disadvantages of educating a refugee child. The results of this study should not be ignored by PE teachers and the school system, since SRS who need any kind of help to adapt to the host country's educational system.

According to the results if all the participants of education (government, teachers, NGOs) concentrate more on PE class, the SRS would be better adapted citizens.

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Appendix

Survey Questions for Physical Education Teachers

1. How many Syrian refugee students (SRS) are in your class between 11-14?
Male= _____ Female= _____
2. How do you describe the Turkish (speaking, writing and listening) level of SRS? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
3. How many SRS have absenteeism problem? (Much, some, a few)
Male= _____ Female= _____
4. How do you categorize the financial status of SRS in your classroom? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
5. How do you describe the attention of SRS to Physical Education (PE) lesson? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
6. How do you describe the harmony of SRS with Turkish students? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
7. How do you describe the successes of SRS in team sports? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
8. How do you describe the successes of SRS in individual sports? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
9. How do you describe the motivation of Turkish students in group activities with SRS? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
10. How do you describe physically predominancy of SRS when compared with Turkish students? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
11. How do you describe the access of SRS to the necessary sport equipment? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
12. How do you describe the ability of SRS for understanding and following instructions in PE class? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
13. How do you describe the access of SRS to the healthy and enough food? (Good, moderate, bad)
Male= _____ Female= _____
14. How many SRS are using addictive substances? (Much, some, a few)
Male= _____ Female= _____
15. How many SRS have professional future plans on sports? (Much, some, a few)

- Male= Female=
- 16.** How do you describe the access of SRS to the necessary sport equipment when you compare with Turkish students in same class? (Good, moderate, bad)
- Male= Female=
- 17.** How do you describe the impact of PE lesson to the adaptation of SRS to Turkey? (Good, moderate, bad)
- Male= Female=
- 18.** How do you describe the impact of PE lesson to the relationship of SRS with Turkish students? (Good, moderate, bad)
- Male= Female=
- 19.** How do you describe the reduction effect of PE activities on the traumas of immigration? (Good, moderate, bad)
- Male= Female=
- 20.** If the SRS would be motivated to PE more, how do you describe the positive effect on adaptation would be? (Good, moderate, bad)
- Male= Female=