



## OPEN ACCESS

## EDITED BY

Stephanie J. Nawyn,  
College of Social Science, Michigan  
State University, United States

## REVIEWED BY

Sibel Safi,  
Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey  
Julian Busch,  
Ruhr University Bochum, Germany

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Dilara Karaagac  
d.karaagac@rug.nl

## SPECIALTY SECTION

This article was submitted to  
Refugees and Conflict,  
a section of the journal  
Frontiers in Human Dynamics

RECEIVED 14 April 2022

ACCEPTED 09 August 2022

PUBLISHED 25 August 2022

## CITATION

Karaagac D, Bilecen B and Veenstra R  
(2022) Uncertainties shaping parental  
educational decisions: The case of  
Syrian refugee children in Turkey.  
*Front. Hum. Dyn.* 4:920229.  
doi: 10.3389/fhumd.2022.920229

## COPYRIGHT

© 2022 Karaagac, Bilecen and  
Veenstra. This is an open-access  
article distributed under the terms of  
the [Creative Commons Attribution  
License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution  
or reproduction in other forums is  
permitted, provided the original  
author(s) and the copyright owner(s)  
are credited and that the original  
publication in this journal is cited, in  
accordance with accepted academic  
practice. No use, distribution or  
reproduction is permitted which does  
not comply with these terms.

# Uncertainties shaping parental educational decisions: The case of Syrian refugee children in Turkey

Dilara Karaagac\*, Basak Bilecen and René Veenstra

Department of Sociology, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Around a million school-aged minors from Syria have been living in Turkey with temporary protection status over an unanticipated extended period. This prolonged temporariness leads to uncertainties and unpredictabilities for Syrian families regarding how long they will be staying in Turkey. Drawing on 17 interviews with Syrian mothers and 3 couples, this study examined the ways in which uncertainties shaped parental decisions on minors' education. The findings indicated that uncertainties played a key role in shaping the educational decisions of Syrian parents, particularly in their children's Turkish language acquisition and educational performance. This study not only fills the gap in understanding the effects of uncertainties in parental educational decisions emanated from a prolonged temporariness, but also argues that living in an uncertain context causes hurdles in language acquisition which has major educational and social consequences for children.

## KEYWORDS

temporary protection status, temporariness, primary education, language, Turkey, Syrian refugee children

## Introduction

Hasefe<sup>1</sup> arrived with her one-year old daughter and new-born-son in Turkey in 2013. She only took one bag, some money, and none of her university enrolment documents because she expected to return to Syria in a couple of months, as soon as the conflict was over. They stayed in a city near the border to ease their return. In the first 2 years, Hasefe did not consider sending her children to school in Turkey because she expected to return soon to her home country. Six years later, her son started his education and her daughter repeated the first grade. This is an example that depicts the main issues of this paper: how prolonged insecurities of legal residency and the idea of return among Syrian refugees in Turkey create a context of uncertainties, which affects parents' educational decisions and children's school career.

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

Around 3.6 million Syrian refugees<sup>2</sup> have been living in Turkey under a temporary protection status (TPS) for around 8 years (DGMM, 2021). TPS has not an official definition internationally and it is not universally regulated like refugee status in the UN Refugee Convention. In this regard, the scope and inclusion criteria are left to states' discretion. TPS was introduced for those Syrians escaping from the recent political turmoil and has no predetermined time limit in Turkey. As per to Article 91 of Foreigners and International Protection Law numbered 6348 in Turkey temporary protection is defined as "Temporary protection may be provided for foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return to the country that they have left, and have arrived at or crossed the borders of Turkey in a mass influx situation seeking immediate and temporary protection." The content and scope of TPS was determined in Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) numbered 6203. TPR does not regulate any provision regarding a period or residential rights for TPS holders.

The common global best practices set a maximum time limit for TPS around 3–5 years after which TPS holders can apply for a permanent residency permit, citizenship, or return to the country of origin (Ciger-Ineli, 2016). In this regard, providing TPS without any time limit is a unique situation compared to other countries applying TPS. Furthermore, upon the request of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), the Ministry of Interior is authorized to terminate the status of Temporary Protection (TPS). However, the TPS Regulation does not indicate any specific criteria on how the DGMM or the Ministry should use their authorities to end the TPS. Thus, the legal residency of Syrians is left at the sole discretion of the DGMM and the Ministry. These prolonged irregularities and unpredictabilities in policy and regulations put Syrian refugees in Turkey in uncertainty. In other words, they have been living in Turkey knowing that there is a possibility of returning to Syria at any moment. Therefore, their plans become rather uncertain and in constant transformation when compared with refugees in Turkey or with TPS holders in other countries. The future of next generations who live in such a temporariness is even more uncertain. They not only face the risk of deportation at anytime, but also experience disruptions and other challenges caused by uncertainties in their education, which has greater long-term consequences. This paper addresses how parents with TPS shape their children's education and language acquisition.

Migration scholars have widely studied how different types of migrants including workers and students experience temporariness during their protracted status trajectories (Khoo et al., 2008; Axelsson, 2017; Robertson, 2019). These studies emphasized how "living in limbo" or "staggered migration process" affect migrants' imagination about their

future (Khoo et al., 2008; Axelsson, 2017; Robertson, 2019). Previous research focusing on solely refugees' experience of temporality also stated the negative effects of uncertainties on refugees' future plans, decisions, mental and general well-being (Mansouiri and Cauchi, 2007; Biehl, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015; Icduygu and Sert, 2019). However, the effects of uncertainties on their children's education were largely missing. On the one hand, prior studies indicate that refugee parents put a high value and expectation on their children's education for a secure future (McBrien, 2011; Isik-Ercan, 2012). Earlier studies either investigated refugee minors education during their pre-settlement in first asylum countries (Qumri, 2012; Dryden-Peterson, 2015, 2016), or in the countries of post-settlement (Grieshaber and Miller, 2010; Perumal, 2015). Experiences of Syrians in Turkey, therefore, represent a unique case where their prolonged waiting is regulated ad hoc with temporary rights and access to education.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to understand parents' decisions regarding minor's education in such an uncertain context in-depth. We investigate how uncertainties shape parental decisions on minors' education and their evaluations of such decisions. After all, school careers have long-term consequences for children's personal and professional lives at the micro-level and also at the macro level, consequences result in how societies are stratified through marginalization of specific groups.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we show how uncertainties affect Syrian parents' experiences as well as Syrian children's educational careers. Second, we present how an uncertain environment can be considered as a prominent cause of a language barrier for Syrian children. The paper is organized as follows. The first section contextualizes the educational situation of Syrian children in Turkey. The second section is devoted to the conceptual framework about how refugees experience uncertainty and how an uncertain environment affects Syrian parents' perspectives for their children's education. The third section is devoted to the research design and methodology. The fourth contains the findings of the empirical study indicating that an uncertain environment shapes Syrian parents' decisions about their children's primary education and their Turkish language acquisition. It further contains how lack of Turkish language can become a barrier for Syrian children not only for their progress in education, but also socially in their relations with teachers and peers. The conclusion briefly summarizes the main findings while discussing them in the light of the literature and current debates.

## Situation of Syrian children in Turkey

In 2020, 17% of 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey were of primary school age (UNHCR, 2021) and the enrolment rate was 79.5% in primary school (UNHCR, 2020). Many of these

<sup>2</sup> The term refugee is used for the sake of convenience in this paper in its broadest sense to refer to Syrians as defined by the UN Refugee Convention.

children were either born in Turkey or arrived in Turkey as toddlers. The public schools in Turkey provide education for free and are the only option for Syrian parents except private schools. Their curriculum is focused on Turkish history and the language of education is Turkish. Just as Turkish citizens, Syrian refugees have to send their children to the closest public school, unless they prefer to send their children to a private school which rarely happens. Before starting primary school, no Turkish language classes are offered in public or private schools.

While there is an alternative for Turkish schools, Temporary Education Centers (TECs), many Syrian parents preferred to send their children to TECs. In 2015, approximately 76% of Syrian children at primary school age were enrolled in TECs (Emin, 2016). TECs were established with the permission of the Ministry of Education (MoNE) in several cities and refugee camps after the TPS granted for Syrian refugees in 2014. The TECs provided a Syrian curriculum, taught in Arabic by Syrian teachers (Akcadag Celik and Icduygu, 2018). In 2016, TECs started to be closed down to adapt the policy for full accession of Syrian children into Turkish schools by leaving the Turkish schools as the only option for first graders. The aim was to include all Syrian children into Turkish schools. No children will remain in the TECs as of 2020.

Syrian refugees have been raising their children in the context of legal and educational uncertainties since they arrived because of the temporary legal status and changing education policies in Turkey. Turkish authorities have changed their primary education policies over the years specifically targeting Syrian children in parallel with the domestic migration policy while following the UN recommendations on inclusion of refugee children into the national education systems. Even though adapting the policy for full accession to national schools seems to aim a long-term integration of Syrian children, continuing to provide temporary protection status implies temporariness. Continuing temporary protection status resembles what we call a permanent temporariness.

## Conceptual framework

### Uncertainty in refugee experiences

Uncertainty is a state caused by general unpredictability in life and about what the future holds. It indicates an acknowledgment and awareness that changes can occur, and situations may get better or worse both for individuals' and their children's future (Boholm, 2003). It is also defined as "a sense of not knowing what will happen" (Afifi et al., 2013, p. 498). There is a vast literature on how migrants experience and cope with uncertainties in different situations. According to a study on undocumented Latin American migrants in London (Garza, 2018), being undocumented and living in anxiety affected their physical and mental health as well as their daily lives. Similarly,

a study on migrants under the risk of deportation due to a criminal conviction in the UK (Hasselberg, 2016), found that these migrants experienced mental health problems and their plans were suspended as they lived with long-term uncertainties. However, asylum seekers or refugees specifically differ from other forms of migratory streams in terms of the uncertainties they experience. Uncertainty for refugees is connected with conflict, flight and exile, unlike other types of mobilities (Horst and Grabska, 2015). Furthermore, living in uncertainty is often considered as an inevitable part of the refugee situation (Williams and Balaz, 2012; Afifi et al., 2013). Regardless of how refugees experience uncertainty, their situation is often described as being in "limbo" as they are in-between either receiving, or being rejected from having a legal status, or waiting to settle in a third country (El-Shaarawi, 2015; Loyd et al., 2017).

When asylum seekers' or refugees' displacement is prolonged longer than anticipated, it further affects their imagination and plans for the future because of the permanent insecurity (Mansouiri and Cauchi, 2007; Biehl, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015). A study on Iraqi refugees in Egypt examined how "living in transit" and uncertainty affected their experiences and found that unpredictability often causes anxiety, fear, and concern (El-Shaarawi, 2015). Another study conducted with asylum seekers in Australia stated that the participants' inability to become a part of the new society and to build new lives was mainly related to the temporal aspect of uncertainties (Mansouiri and Cauchi, 2007). Another study on asylum seekers, who were waiting to be resettled for many years, explored their experiences during that protracted uncertainty in Turkey and indicated that such a situation causes them to live a "temporarily frozen or paused" life like "a sense of paralysis" (Biehl, 2015, p. 69).

Temporary protection status holders experience more uncertainty than other migrants. It is suggested in studies focusing on the experiences of TPS holders living in the US that TPS creates "indefinite state of temporariness" (Hallett, 2014, p. 622) and "legalizes the ambiguity through which asylum applicants are positioned outside the nation-state" (Mountz et al., 2002, p. 340). Experiences of Syrian refugees under TPS differ from those living in the US to some extent. The Syrian crisis was an enormous refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2021). TPS holders in the U.S. correspond to 0.001% of total population, while this number is 0.5% in Turkey (American Immigration Council, 2022). Due to the mass influx of refugees, the policies relating to Syrians have been changing much more frequently in Turkey over the years with a view to find the best practice. Furthermore, unlike TPS implementations in the US, as mentioned above, TPS is unlimited in Turkey, which leads to a permanent temporariness. In this regard, that ambiguity may pose the risk of what is called a "lost generation" for younger Syrian refugee generations trying to establish a future. In order to prevent this from happening, multiple stakeholders, including (inter-)national public and private organizations, launched the

No Lost Generation Initiative which is jointly led by UNICEF and World Vision to propose strategies for the key role of education (UNICEF, 2016).

Despite the national and international initiatives and policies regarding primary education of Syrian children, there are manifold parental decisions involved in children's educational careers. For example, schooling is not obligatory for Syrian children in Turkey and, for those who would like to study, there are language courses to prepare children for education in a different language. Turkish language acquisition and enrollment in primary education are left to the discretion of Syrian parents. Therefore, it is important to understand Syrian parents' perspective on their children's education.

## Refugee children's education in an uncertain environment: Language as the major barrier

Previous research identified language issues as the most prominent concern for refugee children's education (Dryden-Peterson, 2015, 2016, 2017; Crul et al., 2019). In Turkey, language also seems to be a barrier as evidenced in the studies conducted after 2016 when Temporary Education Centers started to close down and parents were left with limited educational choices for their children (Culbertson and Constant, 2015; Emin and Coskun, 2016; Kilic and Gokce, 2018; Akcadag Celik, 2019). For example, a study on the problems of Syrian students in primary education in the city of Kocaeli (Kilic and Gokce, 2018) found that the lack of Turkish language ability is a prominent factor for the failure of Syrian children in their lessons and lack of communication with their peers. Similarly, based on the qualitative research conducted with primary school teachers in Istanbul, lack of a good command of the Turkish language needs to be addressed for improving communication between Turkish teachers and Syrian children (Akkadag Celik, 2019). According to the Education Research Report for Syrian children, those who do not know Turkish are identified as the most disadvantaged group at Turkish schools (Mavi Kalem, 2019).

When refugees living under a permanent temporariness they "calculate their likely gains and losses of acting, or not acting" and, "their approaches are often tactical, allowing them to end commitments without regret and to pursue new opportunities" (Icduygu and Sert, 2019, p. 124). A study on refugee education level found that even in cases where exile is protracted and refugees are "integrated" into the national system, they usually look for an education that can help their children after leaving the host country due to an uncertain future (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Another example is that, according to a study investigating the education of Syrian children in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Culbertson

and Constant, 2015), parents preferred schools with Arabic language teaching because they perceived language as a major barrier in Turkish schools. Not only is language acknowledged as a barrier in children's education, but also the families' perceived temporariness in Turkey made them select for Arabic-language education (Emin and Coskun, 2016). In this regard, we investigate how uncertainties shape Syrian parents' educational decisions for their children.

## Research design and methods

In this study, the first author conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Syrian parents (seventeen individuals and three couples) who had primary school aged children at the time of the interview. The interviews revolved around children's experiences at schools including challenges, relationships with peers and teachers, families' perspectives and involvement in their children's primary education, and children's educational performance. The interviews were conducted between September 2019 and February in 2020 in Istanbul, the place with most Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Purposive sampling technique was used to reach the potential participants. Inclusion criteria were being a Syrian citizen and arriving to Turkey as an asylum seeker escaping from the conflict, having at least one child at primary school age, living more than one year in Turkey. The exclusion criteria were parents who did not register themselves to the authorities and did not enroll their children into primary school. There were 483,455 Syrians living in Istanbul in 2019 (DGMM, 2020). The participant recruitment started by contacting seven NGOs in Istanbul, listed in the European Legal Network on Asylum (ELENA) Index working under the European Council of Refugee Exile (ECRE). The first author reached 14 initial interviewees through the NGOs. As these NGOs were helping refugees during daytime, their beneficiaries were either single mothers or married mothers. Men were not at the NGOs during working hours because of their jobs. Therefore, gatekeepers mostly provided mothers' contact information. Thus, only three of the fourteen interviews were conducted in the fathers' presence who participated in the interviews to some extent. Six interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. Because both the first author and the translator were female, participants referred to other mothers in their networks. Fourteen participants had one child at primary school age while the others had two. The interviews revolved around these 26 children. The age range of these children was 6 to 11 years old; 14 children were boys and 12 girls. All children were enrolled in different schools. All participants had arrived in Turkey before 2015. Three female participants stated their husband's situation as "lost" because they did not know where he was and/or whether he was alive. The first author learned that 3 participants obtained Turkish citizenship later via an "exceptional citizenship application"

following living under TPS. However, as those participants also arrived in Turkey to seek asylum and experienced temporary protection status for a long time, they were not excluded from the study. The ages of children upon arrival were younger than 5 years old. Only one child was seven at the arrival. Only three families, who belong to Turkmen ethnic origin, stated that their children had a good command of Turkish language skills before starting school. The other participants specified that they speak Arabic at home regardless of their Turkish knowledge. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the sample.

The participants could choose the place of the interview. Sixteen of the interviews were conducted in their house and lasted around 2–3 h. Because the first author was always invited for a coffee or food, she got to spend more time which amounted to 3–4 h for each interview. Some participants invited her later to their houses for social gatherings such as breakfasts or dinners during which observations were done. This gave the first author the opportunity to observe their daily lives and responsibilities as well as the conditions of their house, neighborhood, and school. Many parents were comfortable with the researcher's presence and expressed their feelings and thoughts openly. Children were at school during the interviews. Ten interviews were conducted in Turkish and the other ten in Arabic. A translator was present during the interviews in Arabic. Each sentence was translated literally and transcribed simultaneously. Later, the quotes were translated into English by the first author. Thematic analysis, reading through data and identifying categories related to the research focus was the main method of data analysis (Bryman, 2012). The main categories based on participant's answers found were language knowledge, school preferences, children's educational performance, parents' educational decisions, experiences related to TPS. Atlas.ti software was used to conduct the analysis.

An ethical approval covering the research protocol, consent letter, and interview questions was obtained from the University of Groningen.

## Findings

### Parental educational decisions shaped by uncertainties

This study focuses on refugee children in primary education. A major finding is that when participants encounter uncertainties in their everyday lives or cannot think of any future in Turkey, they do not necessarily encourage their children to learn Turkish or go to school. This uncertainty affects their educational decisions. After all, learning a language is a huge investment and takes time, but is necessary to receive primary education in the host country. For example, Aya, who was a single mother with a primary level of education, wanted her children to continue their education in Arabic. For her,

temporariness and constant fear of deportation were the reasons to choose Arabic. She said:

“We live here under temporary status. We have neither citizenship nor permanent residence. Now, the news says that we will be sent to Syria to the safe zones. Their [her children's] Arabic is not good, and they can continue their education in Syria. I want my children to learn Arabic. My children do not see a purpose of going to the school [in Turkey]. I encourage them but I would encourage them more if we would have citizenship.” (Aya, 37 years old, mother of three)

In addition to the temporariness of their legal status, a possible deportation explains Aya's preference for her children's education in Syria. As TECs are closed, her children were going to Turkish schools as their only option in 2020. However, Aya prefers Arabic as the language of education. Salime expressed the same concern of a return to Syria and preference of education there. In addition, she did not motivate her children to learn Turkish, because for her such an intense investment would not yield benefits in the long-run as it is not a widely-spoken language. Salime said:

“We can leave anytime. We (me and my husband) did not want to send my children to Turkish schools. [...] We wanted our son to receive education in Arabic with a Syrian curriculum. Turkish is a language which is not used anywhere else in the world and the state can send us back anytime.” (Salime, 36 years old, mother of three)

The unknown length of their stay and the high investment to learn Turkish explains parents' reluctance to make their children learn a new language and enter the education system at all. For instance, as TPS holders, Halide was convinced that her family would return to Syria. She prepared her son for a life in Syria rather than in Turkey. She did not speak Turkish herself and could not help her son when she perceived that her son's speaking and listening skills were not sufficient to understand the Turkish lessons completely.

For the participants, a slight probability of stability, even in the form of a citizenship application, has been a great motivation for parents and children to learn or to improve their Turkish. We found that parents with long-term plans and opportunities encouraged their children to learn the language and had high expectations of their educational careers. Hasefe, who has been mentioned in the introduction, was such a mother. She had studied engineering in Syria and later graduated from a university in Turkey. Her prolonged displacement for six years led her eventually to make long-term plans. She decided to apply for Turkish citizenship. Her application was not yet decided, but the idea of a permanent stay in Turkey changed her perspective about her children's education. She said:

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Legal status	Age	Spousal situation	Number of children (gender, age)
Cemile	Female	Arab	TPS	34	Alive	2 Boys (10, 16)
Hasefe	Female	Arab	TPS/Applied for Citizenship	28	Deceased	1 Boy (6) 1 Girl (7)
Ayse	Female	Turkmen	TPS	34	Lost	2 Boys (4, 5) 5 Girls (9, 9, 12, 13,17)
Aliye	Female	Arab	TPS	27	Alive	3 Boys (0, 9, 11)
Halide	Female	Arab	TPS	37	Lost	2 Boys (10, 17) 1 Girl (12)
Fatma	Female	Arab	TPS	32	Deceased	2 Boys (10, 13) 2 Girls (5, 5, 12)
Aya	Female	Arab	TPS	36	Lost	3 Girls (9, 15, 16)
Hayriye	Female	Arab	TPS	24	Alive	2 Boys (6, 9) 1 Girl (3)
Hadil and Mahmut (father)	Female and male	Arab	Obtained Turkish Citizen	35 and 38	Alive	3 Boys (0, 2, 9) 2 Girls (12, 14)
Salime	Female	Arab	TPS	27	Alive	1 Girl (2) 2 Boys (8, 10)
Aymen and Emir (father)	Female and male	Arab	TPS	30 and 34	Alive	1 Boy (6) 1 Girl (10)
Ola	Female	Arab	TPS	32	Alive	2 Boys (9, 11) 1 Girl (4)
Karsu	Female	Arab	Obtained Turkish Citizen	36	Alive	5 Girls (6, 8, 9, 15, 18) 1 Boy (14)
Amine	Female	Arab	Obtained Turkish Citizen	51	Alive	3 Boys (0, 23, 25) 3 Girls (10, 18, 21)
Isra	Female	Arab	TPS	29	Alive	4 Girls (2, 7, 10, 14)
Rashed	Female	Arab	TPS	50	Alive	3 Boys (10, 21, 25) 2 Girls (26, 30)
Elif and Ahmed (father)	Female and male	Arab	TPS	36 and 28	Alive	3 Boys (8, 15, 18) 1 Girl (8)
Leyla	Female	Arab	TPS	29	Separated	2 Boys (10, 11)
Lutfiye	Female	Arab	TPS	33	Deceased	1 Boy (11)
Seyma	Female	Arab	TPS	27	Deceased	1 Girl (9)

“When I came to Turkey, I did not consider enrolling my children into the school because I was planning to return. When I decided that we will stay here and applied for citizenship, I decided to send my children to the school” (Hasefe, 28 years old, mother of two)

Unlike refugees with a recognized legal status, TPS holding Syrians in Turkey are exposed to a permanent temporariness. In such a long-lasting uncertain situation, participants’ educational decisions for their children were based on their knowledge of Turkish, the resources they could invest, and the idea of the language’s usefulness in the event of a return or a

relocation. When parents did not invest in the Turkish language competences of their children before starting school, language became a barrier.

### Lack of Turkish language becomes a barrier: Educational performance of Syrian children

According to the participants, the Turkish language ability of their children plays a major role in their educational performance especially in primary school. Apparently, the first

school year is the most difficult one because it is when their children learn Turkish reading and writing skills with other Turkish children. Because they used Arabic at home, Syrian children did not have previous listening and speaking skills in Turkish. For instance, Seyma was a single mother, working six days a week in a textile factory. Because of her work, her Arabic-speaking mother used to take care of her daughter. Also, when Seyma was at home, they continued to speak in Arabic as it was easier and more comfortable to do so. Her daughter's sole exposure to Arabic led to frustrations when she had to practice Turkish in school. In Seyma's own words:

"My mother, who does not speak Turkish, is taking care of my daughter. Therefore, my daughter did not know Turkish at all when she started at school. She was coming home crying as she did not understand anything at all, and she could not even ask for help from her teacher. I could not help her. There was no Arabic-language school for her. Fortunately, my child is smart and wants to be educated. She learnt Turkish well in the second grade." (Seyma, 27 years old, mother of one)

Another example of Halide, who had a full-time job as a kindergarten teacher in a private Syrian school. She was worried about her son's further educational performance because his listening skills were weak and he could only understand the lessons as long as the teacher wrote on the board. During the interview, she said about her son:

"He [my son] did not know Turkish at all as we all speak Arabic and watch Arabic TV channels at home. He had hard times learning the language. He could learn how to write and to speak but his speaking and listening skills only slightly developed in the second grade." (Halide, 37 years old, mother of three)

Syrian children's Turkish language barrier may still continue in elementary school even if they complete 4 years of primary school. Such a barrier hinders understanding of the content of other classes such as maths and science in elementary school grade. Syrian children undertake an exam introduced in 2019 as a part of a new project called "Uyum Projesi (Adaptation Project)" in the third and fourth grade. When they cannot pass the exam, they will be assigned to a Turkish language class for the whole year and do not study other subjects such as maths, science, or history. That year would then be considered a replacement of the actual school year. Although the purpose of this exam is to ensure children's language ability to understand the classes, even passing this exam does not directly indicate that children's Turkish knowledge is enough to understand the lessons. One of the participants, Cemile, has a university degree in Arab Literature and lives as a single mother with

two children. She stated that her son started in primary school in one of the TECs and later continued his education in a public school in the fourth grade. This sudden transformation due to the closure of TECs at the primary school level had consequences for her child's performance. She expressed the situation as:

"My son is in the fourth grade now and it is his first year in a Turkish school. He learnt mathematics and science in Arabic. He is very successful and can understand when he reads his lessons from the book. However, his listening skills are not good, and he does not understand his teacher in the lesson yet. I hope he will be successful as he was in the previous years." (Cemile, 34 years old, mother of two)

Furthermore, Aliye, whose husband was working in a factory, also stated that her fourth-grader son still did not understand some terms, especially in science. She was worried that he might need to repeat the fifth grade. These findings indicate that language still becomes a barrier for children's educational performance even for those who passed the language exam because they still cannot fully understand the lessons in the next grade especially the ones including technical terms such as science or maths lessons.

## Relationships with classmates and teachers

Children's language abilities have not only educational but also social consequences according to their parents. Most participants stated that their children had problems with their peers and teachers when their children could not speak the language. Halide said that her son, Cemal, received physical and verbal assaults from his peers. They also did not allow Cemal to participate in their games. She thought that the assaults continued because Cemal was not able to respond sufficiently. Some participants stated that the more their children learned Turkish the less they received verbal assaults from their peers. Karsu and her husband spoke Turkish fluently and they worked as translators for NGOs and individuals. However, their daughter did not know Turkish well when she started school. Karsu mentioned that her daughter's peer relationships got better after she improved her Turkish. In her own words:

"My daughter had some problems in the beginning of the school as she did not speak Turkish well. Her classmates were saying 'you are a coward and escaped your country'. They were hitting her and saying 'Syria bomb bomb'. She is now speaking Turkish fluently and does not have any problems. She likes all her friends. Although sometimes her

friends make jokes about her being Syrian, she can respond to it by laughing and does not feel bad.” (Karsu, 36 years old, mother of six)

While not knowing Turkish was often stressed as a challenge by the participants, a good command of the language was not perceived as an automatic advantage in their children’s peer relationships. Their ethnic background or their relationships with the teacher were other reasons for problematic peer relationships. Ayse was a Turkmen participant. Her family’s native language is Turkish. She explained that her twin daughters only spoke Turkish but nevertheless had some problems with their peers when they started primary school because they came from Syria. Their peers were neither talking to them during the breaks nor accepting them to their games. When her daughters asked to borrow something like a rubber, their peers were not giving it. Some parents reflected on such instances as discrimination of Syrian children. Meyyel, whose native language was also Turkish due to her Turkmen background, said that her son did not have any problems with other children because he speaks Turkish very well and looks like a Turkish boy. Meyyel’s case represents an exception in the sample.

Language issues also affect children’s communication with the teachers, because children may not express themselves properly. Hasefe, who came to Turkey in 2013 with her parents, had a daughter who repeated the first grade. Her daughter could not explain her problems with her peers to her teacher for the whole year as she did not know how to express herself. Similarly, Salime’s son went through such an experience due to his lack of communication with the teacher. In Salime’s words:

“The teacher called my son ‘impertinent’. He became really upset and felt degraded. I asked my son to tell me what he said to the teacher in Arabic. However, it was not a rude thing to say. We asked our Turkish neighbor. We learnt that our son said to the teacher ‘teacher, look at’ while he should have said ‘dear teacher could you please take a look at this?’ My son has just started to learn Turkish. How could he know the difference?” (Salime, 27 years old, mother of three)

Therefore, language might function as a barrier for communicating with peers and teachers. However, knowing the language well does not automatically help children to establish good peer relationships.

## When uncertainties are reduced: Role of obtaining citizenship

When the level of uncertainty in the lives of parents began to decrease, their educational decisions for their children changed. In this study, the three participants who obtained Turkish citizenship mentioned that they had intended to make their

children learn Turkish before starting school and received education in Turkish schools because as citizens they could imagine a long-term future in Turkey. While learning Turkish, these children started to express themselves better in Turkish than in Arabic. These parents did not mention any concerns or discomfort regarding their children not speaking Arabic anymore. For example, the parents, Hadil and Mahmut, were a teacher and a legal consultant respectively both in Turkey and Syria. Because of their occupation, they were aware of their legal rights and tried to plan their children’s education carefully considering different factors. While they explained their decision process, they emphasized the role of obtaining citizenship:

“In the beginning, we did not know if we continue to stay or not. We were not sure what is the point for our children to receive education and what will happen if we return to Syria and our children do not speak Arabic well. After we received citizenship, we decided that now there is a purpose of sending our children to Turkish schools so that they can work. Now, we speak Turkish all the time on the phone, outside, and at our workplace. My little son at primary school did not encounter any different treatment in the formal procedures. Turkish is like his native language. One time I had to tell him the word ‘bottle’ in Turkish, not Arabic.” (Hadil, 37 years old, mother of three)

Similarly, Amine was an Arabic teacher in high school in Syria and was working in an NGO in Turkey. Amine learned Turkish fluently herself with the idea that she could establish a future for her children and apply for citizenship.

“My daughter, Fatima, was 4 years old when she came to Turkey. She now feels like she is Turkish. She does not want me to speak Arabic with her. I wanted her to learn Turkish. She was watching Turkish TV, listening to me when I was speaking Turkish and attending Turkish class in an NGO for Syrians [...] My daughter was elected as class president by her Turkish classmates and is very successful in her lessons.” (Amine, 51 years old, mother of six)

Learning the language of the host country gives children a head-start in their educational career. Not only citizenship but also the parental socio-economic background may reduce uncertainties. Parental socio-economic background (referring to the level of education and the level of income) plays a major role in children’s lives, also in their education. Eight participants in our sample received higher education and seven of them, except Halide, did not state any financial problems. Children with a better socio-economic parental background in the sample, learned Turkish language easier and seem to be quickly adapted to the educational system. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily mean that the children of these seven participants with a stronger socio-economic background spoke Turkish fluently or



had no difficulties when they started going to school. None of these seven participants mentioned Turkish language as a barrier or a long-term difficulty in the educational performance of their children. The mechanism underlying this finding may be that knowing the importance of learning Turkish to receive a good quality of education helps to build a future for their children in their host country as well as in their country of origin. Some parents perceived the Turkish schools as the best option and a means to help their children when they leave. For example, Leyla who was a teacher and spoke Turkish fluently stated about her 4th grade son:

“My son has no problems in the school. The education here is good. He is successful and he has Turkish friends.... I wanted my son to learn Turkish well. If we stay here longer, he can get a good education and he may even go to the university. If we return, he can continue his education in Syria. However, if he does not speak Turkish well, he cannot have an education at all.” (Leyla, 29 years old, mother of two)

Similar to Leyla, Lutfiye, a single mother, reflected on how her family background influenced her decisions for her only son. She lost her husband and four children during an attack. She was studying Arab literature in Syria and wanted to become an academic. She was working full-time as a hairdresser in Turkey to support her son's education. Besides primary school, she sent her son to additional English and computer courses. She explained her perspective on her son's education:

“I am not sure if we will return or not. I do not know Turkish at all. We come from an educated family and I thought where he can get the best education. I wanted to send my son to a Turkish school so that he can continue his education in Syria. My son did not know Turkish at all when he started school. Now, he speaks like a native. I only want for my son to receive a good education and like going to school. Then, he can adapt the school and education in Syria.” (Lutfiye, 33 years old, mother of one)

Uncertainties affect parental education decisions for their children which has consequences for children's experiences at schools. Nonetheless, educational decisions are not only greatly affected by being in an uncertain environment, but parents' socio-economic background together with social norms and values they carry also influenced them.

## Discussion and conclusion

Syrians in Turkey live in a permanent temporariness, which seems to play a major role in the parental education decisions for their children. This study has three main empirical findings. First, living with uncertainties affected Syrian parents' perspectives on Turkish language improvement for their primary school aged children in this study. Our participants

mostly referred to the impact of their temporariness and possible return when explaining their decisions and opinions on the education of their children. In our sample, Syrian parents did not encourage their children to learn Turkish before starting school because they thought they may return to Syria at anytime. When Syrian children started their primary school education, their Turkish language knowledge was insufficient to understand lessons. This finding corroborates with the results of previous studies stating how uncertainties in everyday life affect parents' educational decisions especially on encouraging their children to learn the language of the host country (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Zengin and Atas-Akdemir, 2020).

Second, parents in our study prioritized their children's language abilities when they started to settle and felt more secure about their future in Turkey through gaining citizenship. This supports previous studies stating that when Syrian parents accepted the idea of living in Turkey for a long-term period, they saw public schools as a key for their children to build a future in Turkey (Akcadag Celik and Icdyugu, 2018; Icdyugu and Sert, 2019). Adding to the earlier studies, we found the investment in children's language acquisition was highly influenced by the socio-economic background of the parents.

Third, the lack of Turkish language strongly influenced Syrian children's educational performance and their relationships with classmates and teachers. As Syrian children's Turkish language improved, their educational performance and relationships with peers and teachers got better. Although, this finding concurs well with earlier studies (e.g., Emin and Coskun, 2016; Akcadag Celik and Icdyugu, 2018; Kilic and Gokce, 2018), additionally we found that there were some examples where a good knowledge of Turkish was not sufficient for good peer relationships. Thus, our findings indicate that language knowledge may not fully prevent children of refugees from discriminatory acts by their peers.

This study has two main contributions to the previous literature. First, it contributes to the knowledge gap in the existing literature by addressing specifically how temporariness and feelings of uncertainty shape refugees' decisions for their children's education. Previous research did not investigate the relation between temporariness and refugee children's educational experiences but instead they explored the effects of uncertainties on refugees in other issues such as their psychology or future plans (Mansouiri and Cauchi, 2007; Biehl, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015). In this current study, based on our empirical findings we show the ways in which uncertainties in relation to temporariness and legal status influence parental decision-making for their children.

Second, this study contributes to the literature by presenting the uncertain environment of Syrian parents as a prominent cause for a language barrier. Our study presents an underlying cause, uncertainties, for a possible lack of Turkish knowledge of Syrian children. Our findings support the existing studies stating that lack of Turkish knowledge is a barrier in educational performance and relationships with peers and teachers (e.g.,

Emin and Coskun, 2016; Kilic and Gokce, 2018; Akcadag Celik, 2019). In those studies, the lack of language proficiency is stated as a major barrier for children's integration and adaptation in schools as well as their success in the lessons. Considering the findings of the previous studies together with our study, we can conclude that permanent temporariness poses a major risk for Syrian children's further education. This situation might have larger societal consequences in the long-term if Syrian children do not continue with their education such as leading to their marginalization in the larger society.

A limitation of this study is that it is conducted in Istanbul, a metropolis with the largest population of both Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees. More studies are necessary reflecting the experiences of Syrian parents and children who live in the border cities between the two countries or in Turkish accommodation centers located at the border. In accommodation centers Syrian children receive primary education at public Turkish schools together with only other Syrian children. Cities closely located at the border have the highest number of Syrians at provincial level in proportion to their population. In that sense, we do not claim that our findings reflect unified experiences of Syrian refugees and children in Turkey. Nevertheless, our findings may help to understand the reasons underlying the educational experiences of and major barriers for Syrian children.

To conclude, our study serves as a starting point for further research and discussion, particularly about the role of uncertainties in shaping the educational experiences of temporarily protected children. While a language barrier is not a new phenomenon for asylum seekers, refugees, and temporarily protected migrants, our findings highlight how the idea of temporariness can become a permanent reality for migrants and how that affects educational decisions. Further studies may focus on how language can be taught to refugee children, even under temporary situations, in order to increase refugee children's educational performance and establish social relationships with classmates, especially with those who belong to the majority society.

## References

- Affi, W. A., Affi, T. D., Robbins, S., and Nimah, N. (2013). The relative impacts of uncertainty and mothers' communication on hopelessness among palestinian refugee youth. *Am. Orthopsychiatric Assoc.* 83, 495–504. doi: 10.1111/ajop.12051
- Akcadag Celik, C., and Icdygu, A. (2018). Schools and refugee children: the case of Syrians in Turkey. *Int. Migr.* 57, 253–267. doi: 10.1111/imig.12488
- Akcadag Celik, I. A. (2019). Syrian refugees children through the eyes of class teachers. *J. Int. Soc. Res.* 12, 662–680. doi: 10.17719/jisr.2019.3615
- American Immigration Council. (2022). *Temporary Protected Status: An Overview*. Washington, DC: AIC.
- Axelsson, L. (2017). Living within temporally thick borders: IT professionals' experiences of Swedish immigration policy and practice. *J. Ethn. Migr. Stud.* 43, 974–990. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2016.1200966
- Biehl, K. S. (2015). Governing through uncertainty experiences of being a refugee in Turkey as a Country for Temporary Asylum. *Soc. Anal.* 59, 57–75. doi: 10.3167/sa.2015.590104
- Boholm, A. (2003). The cultural nature of risk: can there be an anthropology of uncertainty?. *J. Anthropol.* 68, 159–178. doi: 10.1080/0014184032000097722
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ciger-Ineli, M. (2016). A temporary protection regime in line with international law: utopia or real possibility. *Int. Commun. Law Rev.* 18, 278–316. doi: 10.1163/18719732-12341332
- Crul, M., Lelie, F., Biner, O., Bunar, N., Keskiner, E., Kokkali, I., et al. (2019). How the different policies and school systems affect the inclusion of Syrian refugee

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article cannot be made available by the authors on the grounds of GDPR and in accordance with the Confidential Data Sharing Protocol. Queries regarding the data should be addressed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Prof. Dr. Marijtje A. J. van Duijn, the head of the Research Ethics Committee at the Department of Sociology at University of Groningen. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

DK conducted field research. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- children in Sweden, Germany, Greece, Lebanon and Turkey. *Compar. Migr. Stud.* 7, 1–20. doi: 10.1186/s40878-018-0110-6
- Culbertson, S., and Constant, L. (2015). *Education of Syrian Refugee Children*. California: RAND Corporation.
- DGMM. (2020). Temporary Protection. Available online at: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27> (accessed June 1, 2022).
- DGMM. (2021). Temporary Protection. Available online at: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27> (accessed June 1, 2022).
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2015). *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education in countries of first asylum: Breaking open the black box of pre-resettlement experiences. *Theory Res. Educ.* 14, 131–148. doi: 10.1177/1477878515622703
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). Refugee education: Education for an unknowable future. *Curricul. Inq.* 47, 14–24. doi: 10.1080/03626784.2016.1255935
- Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Bellino, M., and Chopra, V. (2019). The purposes of refugee education: policy and practice of including refugees in national education systems. *Sociol. Educ.* 92, 346–366. doi: 10.1177/0038040719863054
- El-Shaarawi, N. (2015). Living an uncertain future temporality, uncertainty, and well-being among iraqi refugees in Egypt. *Soc. Anal.* 59, 38–56. doi: 10.3167/sa.2015.590103
- Emin, M. N. (2016). *Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Çocukların Egitimi Temel Eğitim Politikaları*. Tokyo: SETA.
- Emin, M. N., and Koskun, I. (2016). *A Road Map For the Education of Syrians in Turkey: Opportunities and Challenges*. Tokyo: SETA.
- Garza, A. G. (2018). The temporality of illegality: experiences of undocumented Latin American migrants in London. *J. Glob. Hist. Anthropol.* 81, 86–98. doi: 10.3167/fcl.2018.810107
- Grieshaber, S., and Miller, M. (2010). Migrant and refugee children, their families, and early childhood education. In: *Spodek, B and Saracho, O (Eds.) Contemporary Perspectives on Language and Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, p. 167–190.
- Hallett, M. C. (2014). Temporary protection, enduring contradiction: the contested and contradictory meanings of temporary immigration status. *Law Soc. Inquiry* 39, 621–642. doi: 10.1111/lsi.12081
- Hasselberg, I. (2016). *Enduring Uncertainty: Deportation, Punishment, and Everyday Life*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Horst, C., and Grabska, K. (2015). Introduction: flight and exile—uncertainty in the context of conflict-induced displacement. *Soc. Anal.* 59, 1–18. doi: 10.3167/sa.2015.590101
- Icduygu, A., and Sert, D. S. (2019). Introduction: Syrian refugees – facing challenges, making choices. *Int. Migr.* 57, 121–125. doi: 10.1111/imig.12563
- Isik-Ercan, Z. (2012). In pursuit of a new perspective in the education of children of the refugees: advocacy for the 'family'. *Edu. Sci. Theory Pract.* 12, 3025–3038.
- Khoo, S.-E., Hugo, G., and McDonald, P. (2008). Which skilled temporary migrants become permanent residents and why?. *International Migration Review* 42, 193–226. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7379.2007.00118.x
- Kilic, V. A., and Gokce, A. T. (2018). The Problems of Syrian Children in the Basic Education in Turkey. *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research* 12, 215–227. doi: 10.26417/ejser.v12i1.p215-227
- Loyd, J. M., Ehrkamp, P., and Secor, A. J. (2017). A geopolitics of trauma: Refugee administration and protracted uncertainty in Turkey. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographer.* 43, 377–389. doi: 10.1111/tran.12234
- Mansouri, F., and Cauchi, S. (2007). A Psychological Perspective on Australia's Asylum Policies. *International Migration* 45, 123–148. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2435.2007.00398.x
- Mavi Kalem. (2019). *Suriyeli Çocukların Egitimi Arastirma Raporu*. Istanbul: Mavi Kalem.
- McBrien, J. L. (2011). The importance of context: vietnamese, somali, and iranian refugee mothers discuss their resettled lives and involvement in their children's schools. *Comp. J. Compar. Int. Edu. (1)* 75–90. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2010.523168
- Mountz, A., Wright, R., Miyares, I., and Bailey, A. J. (2002). Lives in limbo: temporary protected status and immigrant identities. *Glob. Net.* 2, 335–356. doi: 10.1111/1471-0374.00044
- Perumal, J. (2015). Responding with hospitality: Refugee children in the South African education system., *Edu. Change* 19, 65–90. doi: 10.1080/16823206.2015.1085622
- Qumri, S. (2012). Iraqi refugee children's quest for education in Jordan. *Peace Rev.* 24, 195–201. doi: 10.1080/10402659.2012.677337
- Robertson, S. (2019). Migrant, interrupted: The temporalities of 'staggered' migration from Asia to Australia. *Curr. Sociol.* 67, 169–185. doi: 10.1177/0011392118792920
- UNHCR. (2021). *Syria Regional Refugee Response Turkey*. Available online at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113> (accessed January 18, 2021).
- UNHCR. (2020). 3RP Turkey Country Chapter 2021-2022. UNHCR. Available online at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/85061> (accessed July 23, 2022).
- UNICEF. (2016). *Syria Crisis Education Strategic Paper London 2016 Conference*. UNICEF. Available online at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-education-strategic-paper-london-2016-conference> (accessed July 23, 2022).
- Williams, A. M., and Balaz, V. (2012). Migration, risk, and uncertainty: theoretical perspectives. *Popul. Space Place* 18, 167–180. doi: 10.1002/psp.663
- Zengin, M., and Atas-Akdemir, O. (2020). Teachers' views on parent involvement for refugee children's education. *J. Comput. Edu. Res.* 8, 75–85. doi: 10.18009/jcer.649547