

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Education in Complex Emergencies: Effects of the February 6 Earthquake on Syrian Students in Türkiye

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### Abstract

This article examines the effects of the February 6 earthquake on Syrian students in Türkiye. After experiencing forced migration and the quake in childhood, these students exhibited multiple characteristics of social vulnerability. Therefore, the study characterises their situation as a complex emergency. This study examines the impact of school access on students' vulnerability, normalisation process, and resilience. As this study focuses on multiple situations, it adheres to the qualitative research tradition and adopts a case study design. Findings from in-depth interviews with 18 Syrian middle and high school students in Gaziantep province revealed that the refugee group is socially vulnerable because of their relative deprivation compared to the residents. According to the results of the study, the adverse effects of the earthquake combined with the forced migration experience deepened the social vulnerability of refugee children. The results also show that access to school is critical for supporting children's psychological well-being and their capacity to move away from vulnerability, normalisation, and resilience. This was achieved by supporting their social capital network, which refers to the resources and support systems that they could access through their school community. This study found that proactive and long-term efforts to improve conditions for groups with multiple social vulnerabilities positively impact postdisaster recovery by supporting community resilience against devastating natural disasters.

**Keywords:** Emergency education • February 6 earthquakes • Refugee • Resilience • Social capital • Social vulnerability • Syrian students

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**To cite this article:** Yılmaz, İ. H. (2024). Education in complex emergencies: effects of the February 6 earthquake on Syrian students in Türkiye. *Istanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 44, 131-155. <https://doi.org/10.26650/SJ.2024.44.1.0014>

As I write on the anniversary of the February 6 earthquakes, millions of people in Türkiye and elsewhere continue to be affected by climate-related disasters and earthquakes that have destroyed homes, neighbourhoods, and schools (UNDRR & WMO, 2023). Although the impact of natural disasters on societies' social, economic, political, and cultural fabric cannot be directly observed, they profoundly affect children's development and later life (Williams et al., 2004). In the case of refugee children, periods of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, become more problematic and complex because these children already face difficult and long-term problems due to displacement. This complexity involves multilayered vulnerability that includes being a refugee, childhood, and exposure to earthquakes.

Education, which has been interrupted for refugee children for long periods because of natural disasters, is one of the primary and essential elements of humanitarian aid, such as food, water, shelter, and health services in such crisis periods (Kagawa, 2005). Considering studies showing that education accelerates the normalisation process (Anderson, 2004; Henderson, 2012; Masten, 2014; Sharma & Sharma, 2012), it should be underlined that education is vital for normalisation in emergencies such as earthquakes. In this context, warnings that the dramatic impact of natural disasters on education will increase exponentially in the future (Triplehorn, 2001, p. 3) gain importance.

Among the various studies on education in emergencies, Kagawa's (2005) literature review is a pioneering attempt at creating a conceptual framework. On the other hand, Sinclair's (2002) study on what can be done about education during and after emergencies serves as a guide for education planning during emergencies. In addition to these studies, it is noteworthy that international organisations such as the UN (2023), UNESCO (1999; 2000), and UNICEF (2023) have evaluated their strategies for education in emergencies with a rights-based approach. Considering the existing studies, the need for more information on educational services for refugees during natural disasters constitutes an essential gap in the literature.

Although emergency education programmes have been implemented in areas affected by violent conflicts and natural disasters, researchers and practitioners pay more attention to war-related conflict settings. Governments and local communities are also engaged in intensive activities to mitigate the impact of conflict on education, and the prevalence of conflict-related research is noteworthy (Burde et al., 2017, p. 621). In fact, not only conflicts but also harsh conditions in the country, ethno-religious and cultural characteristics, and natural disasters force millions of people to migrate to other places every year. The fact that human mobility, which has exceeded the borders of countries from past to present, continues to increase globally (UNHCR, 2023a) and especially in Türkiye (GİB, 2023) makes it necessary to examine the

phenomenon of migration with a holistic understanding that considers not only human-induced problems but also natural disasters. Therefore, this study examines the effects of the February 6 earthquakes on refugee communities in Türkiye by focusing on refugee children's access to school as an example of an emergency.

As seen in the case of Türkiye, which hosts the largest number of asylum seekers in the world (UNHCR, 2023b), the challenging conditions of asylum seekers combined with the harmful effects of the earthquake in the new settlement place make refugees more vulnerable. The fact that refugee children bear the brunt of disasters and are among the most affected groups (Gaillard & Pangilinan, 2010, p. 175) shows that they are a marginalised group that is simultaneously affected by social inequality and natural disasters. It is well known that refugee children struggle with serious problems such as language barriers, lack of access to resources, and cultural adaptation problems (Coşkun & Yılmaz, 2018). Examining the educational experiences of these children and considering the effects of the earthquake are thought to have important implications for building individual and community resilience for post-earthquake recovery. In this respect, the study's primary aim is to examine the impact of the complex situation caused by refugee and earthquake experiences on refugee students and how it reflects on their education. To achieve this primary objective, the following questions were sought to be answered:

1. What are the contexts of the February 6 earthquakes affecting refugee students in Türkiye?
2. How did the February 6 earthquakes affect the educational experiences of refugee students in Türkiye?
3. How did access to school after the February 6 earthquake affect refugee children's social vulnerability, normalisation process, and resilience capacities?

Along with many researchers in the literature (Manzoni & Rolfe, 2019; McBrien, 2005; Mendenhall et al., 2015; Pryor, 2001; Rutter & Jones, 1998), we argue that education for refugee children is a challenging and crucial area for socially sustainable development. Therefore, this study addresses the educational problems of refugee children who experienced the 6th February by focusing on the multi-layered context of vulnerability, including childhood, refugee, and natural disaster experiences. Adopting the conceptual framework of education in emergencies, this study examines the effects of the complex situation caused by migration and earthquakes on refugee students based on the literature and field data. In this study, the difficult conditions of refugee groups during the pre- and postdisaster periods are examined, and the reflections of the earthquake on refugee students and the possible effects of refugee education on overcoming this situation are discussed. The study concludes with recommendations

for providing early care, psycho-social support, and education rights to students whose daily lives were disrupted due to displacement during the pre-disaster period to increase their resilience during the post-disaster period.

### **Context of the February 6 Earthquake**

On February 6, 2023, two strong earthquakes occurred in southeastern Türkiye (epicentres in Şehitkamil-Gaziantep and Ekinözü-Kahramanmaraş) and were felt intensely in northern Syria (AFAD, 2023). These powerful (major) earthquakes had magnitudes of 7.7 ( $\pm 0.1$ ) and 7.6 ( $\pm 0.1$ ), respectively, were shallowly focused (about 5 km deep), and highly destructive. While the profound effects of these earthquakes were continuing, a strong earthquake with a magnitude of 6.3 at the epicentre of Samandağ-Hatay occurred on February 20, 2023, along with thousands of aftershocks (KRDAE, 2023).

According to available official records, 3 million people in the region migrated to different cities after the February 6 earthquake (AFAD, 2023), which caused the highest number of casualties in the history of the Republic of Türkiye (Birgün, 2023). Moreover, the fact that the earthquakes occurred when the humanitarian crisis in northwestern Syria was at its highest level since the beginning of the conflict, with 4.1 million people dependent on humanitarian aid for their livelihoods (UN, 2023), shows that the crisis is quite profound.

Although the exact number of people affected by the February 6 earthquakes is unknown, more than 7 million children, approximately 4.6 million in Türkiye, and 2.5 million in Syria have been affected (UNICEF, 2023). Because this group's right to education is at risk due to disasters, there is a need for an understanding that prioritises education services during crises. The literature discusses such intervention programmes under emergency education (INEE, 2004; Kagawa, 2005; Sinclair, 2002).

According to official data, more than one-third of the approximately 4 million Syrians living in Türkiye (GİB, 2023) are located in the southeast Anatolia region near the Türkiye-Syria border where the earthquake occurred. The number of refugee students living in the earthquake zone and the ratio of refugees to local students are consistent with these data. According to January 2022 data from the Ministry of National Education, there were 358,376 refugee students in the earthquake zone, and the highest ratio of refugees to local students was 26.4% in Kilis. This is followed by Hatay (12.5%), Gaziantep (12.3%), Şanlıurfa (8.3%), Kahramanmaraş (7.2%), Adana (7.2%), Osmaniye (6.1%), Malatya (4%), Adıyaman (3.2%) and Diyarbakır (0.9%) (ERG, 2023).

One of the most critical problems of this group, which faces multi-layered problems due to their refugee and earthquake experiences, is access to education opportunities.

In the provinces of the earthquake zone, where the refugee population is dense, the proportion of children between the ages of 5 and 17 who are not educated is considerable. According to 2021-2022 data, Şanlıurfa has the highest percentage of children out of education (8.3%). This is followed by Gaziantep (7.3%), Kahramanmaraş (6.2%), Adana (5.6%), Diyarbakır (5.5%), Kilis (5%), Osmaniye (4.2%), Hatay (4%), Adıyaman (3.4%), and Malatya (2.7%) (ERG, 2023). The possibility that the proportion of children who did not have access to education during the pre-earthquake period may have increased due to the earthquake should be read as data indicating the issue's sensitivity.

The context of the February 6 earthquake in Türkiye brought about more profound trauma for refugee groups beyond the devastation in the region where the earthquake occurred. In the context of a *complex emergency* (INEE, 2004, p. 7, Kagawa, 2005), which is a combination of refugeeization caused by artificial destruction (Nicolai, 2003, p. 11; Bromley & Andina, 2010, p. 575) and problems caused by a natural disaster (Nicolai, 2003, p. 11; Bromley & Andina, 2010, p. 575), it is important to keep in mind that education activities should vary according to the nature of the crisis and the country's circumstances. Based on Sinclair's (2002, p. 26) emphasis that *every emergency is different and no definitive formulas exist for a successful response*, the crisis in the region has been evaluated in this study within its context and with a holistic understanding.

### **Conceptual Framework: Education in Emergencies**

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) considers two broad categories of emergencies: natural disasters and complex emergencies. Complex emergencies are "man-made" situations often caused by conflict or civil unrest, and they can be compounded by natural disasters (INEE, 2004). Natural disasters that reduce enrolment and disrupt education services can cause massive environmental destruction, including the destruction of educational infrastructure (Kagawa, 2005). Since the 1990s, the theme of "education in emergencies" has received considerable attention and has been linked to the concept of "complex humanitarian emergencies." Emergencies are used to describe crises that last for years, if not decades. They can involve the displacement of people within a country or across country borders, and the ongoing crisis can sometimes affect the collapse of a central or provincial government (Kamel, 2006, p. 4).

Education in emergencies was first coined at UNESCO's 1996 meeting in Amman, Jordan. This meeting emphasised the need to provide primary education during "crisis and transition situations" (UNESCO, 2000, p. 7; Kagawa, 2005, p. 488). Schooling and other structured activities for people, especially children, whose lives are interrupted by extraordinary and challenging situations or emergencies refers to the concept of education in emergencies. Accordingly, education in emergencies is defined as

“education that protects well-being, promotes learning opportunities and nurtures the overall development (social, emotional, cognitive and physical) of children affected by conflict and disasters” (Save the Children Alliance Education Group – 2001, cited in Kamel, 2006, p. 4). The term ‘education in emergencies’ refers to education for communities with difficulty accessing education systems due to unforeseen natural disasters (Sinclair, 2001). This definition refers to all children displaced by the February 6 earthquake in Türkiye and living with their parents or orphans. However, given the challenging conditions of refugee children in Türkiye during the pre-earthquake period, it is crucial to recognise that the natural disaster will have long-term devastating consequences for the education of refugee children in Türkiye.

As a type of natural disaster, earthquakes cause mass human displacement, destroy settlements, and disrupt access to humanitarian needs. Education is increasingly gaining attention as a critical component of mitigating psychological damage, providing immediate health and safety information, and promoting long-term stability, reconstruction, and development (Bromley & Andina, 2010, p. 576). Therefore, rapid access to education services for disaster-stricken communities, in addition to addressing a range of needs such as shelter, nutrition, and health, is critical for mitigating or eliminating the adverse effects of a disaster and returning to normalcy.

Since the effects of natural disasters, such as the February 6 earthquakes in southeastern Türkiye, can be profound and long-lasting, “emergency” refers not only to acute interventions but also to a long-term, multi-year process that eventually merges with standard development patterns. In line with this approach, UNESCO defines an educational emergency as a crisis caused by conflicts or disasters that destabilise, disorganise, or destroy the educational system (UNESCO, 1999).

Education is a human need and fundamental human right that requires special consideration in disasters such as earthquakes. The institutionalisation of education as a human right has paved the way for the rise of emergency education as a field. Considering education as a human right emphasises the inclusion of every person, regardless of circumstances, in an education system, which is the primary justification for access to education in emergencies (INEE, 2004, p. 5). Access to education as a vital right and resource is often limited in times of crisis. However, education can play a crucial role in helping affected populations cope with their situations by acquiring additional knowledge and skills to survive and return to normalcy. On the other hand, particularly vulnerable groups may require additional support during emergencies. Governments, communities, and humanitarian organisations must ensure that all individuals have access to quality educational opportunities, that learning environments are safe, and that learners’ developmental, emotional, and physical well-being (INEE, 2004, p. 39).

Where state bureaucracy is absent or slows things down, non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, must support education services during emergencies. Sinclair (2001, p. 23) noted that NGOs or international organisations can support schools in communities where access to services has been disrupted or provide additional educational activities to protect children from harm and promote cognitive, emotional, and social development. Even before water, food, and shelter are fully secured in an acute emergency, people affected by the crisis often try to provide education and impart knowledge to their children in informal ways. In emergencies, parents usually turn to instruct their children to stay safe and healthy and equip them with the skills necessary for their future. A few days after an emergency, parents may form groups for activities like those in school, such as basic maths and reading exercises, sports, and games, without a specific curriculum. These informal education activities can be integrated into the formal education system by activating schools (Triplehorn, 2001, p. 3). However, informal education practises indicate a transitional phase; thus, formal education must be rapidly reintroduced.

The infrequent shift of support to educational services during crises is a serious problem. The disengagement of children, especially girls, from school after a natural disaster (Pigozzi, 1999, p. 1) deepens the fragility and instability of the country facing the crisis (Burde et al., 2017, p. 620-621). In this context, it is vital to quickly identify gaps in crisis-induced services to ensure all children have access to education and provide education support to protect children.

To ensure that education as a human right is available to all and accessible in all circumstances, education systems must not ignore the traumatic impact of disasters on young children and their families, whether they cause the destruction of communities and infrastructure or disruption and displacement (Bensalah et al., 2001). Education in emergencies is valuable because it implies a sense of urgency to address disaster aftermaths, even if it refers to a temporary situation and is not appropriate for describing prolonged crises (Burde, 2017, p. 623). It is also clear that prioritising education services, even during emergency and challenging conditions, will strengthen the community's perception of the value of education. Priority given to education in cities with increased vulnerability after disasters will revitalise urban life by enhancing residents' ties to the town and encouraging them to return to the city. Burde et al. (2017, p. 623) emphasised that the state's rapid and positive interventions in education will also increase its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. As a result, education in emergencies improves individual and community resilience after disasters by supporting individuals' social and psychological well-being and communities' recovery and development processes.



## Method

This study used a qualitative research approach to examine the effects of the February 6 earthquake in Türkiye on the education of refugee children. Qualitative research uses a range of interpretive techniques to explore the meaning of phenomena that occur naturally in the social world rather than their frequency. Accordingly, the following elements are considered crucial in understanding the nature of qualitative research: “*focus* (on process, understanding, and meaning), researcher (primary instrument of data collection and analysis), process (inductive) and product (detailed descriptions)” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Qualitative methods facilitate in-depth and detailed study of topics. The qualitative research approach allows an unrestricted approach to fieldwork with predetermined categories of analysis, which contributes to the depth, clarity and detail of the research (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Given the exploratory nature of our research question, a qualitative approach allows for rich, detailed data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research aims to understand unique situations in a specific context and its interactions. Akbaş and Akbaş (2019, p. 159) stated that qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, is an endeavour to discover how the subjects participating in the research construct social reality (Akbaş & Akbaş, 2019, p. 159). Since the participant group of our research is children, it was concluded that qualitative methods are the most appropriate research tradition that allows us to examine the context in which they are located. In line with this explanation and the multiple vulnerabilities that the study focused on, we chose a case study approach, the study focuses on, we chose a case study approach, which is one of the qualitative research design. Yin (2018, p. 45-46) defines case study research as empirical research that examines a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context. This approach is appropriate for our research because it exemplifies current phenomena (such as the February 6 earthquake and being a refugee in Türkiye) and the challenging circumstances of our participants in multiple contexts. Therefore, this method was considered to provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation by enabling an in-depth examination of participants’ experiences of vulnerability. This methodological approach, supported by relevant literature (Akbaş & Akbaş, 2019; Kuhlicke, 2013; Steigenberger, 2016; Zaman, 2019), enables robust investigation of the research topic. Furthermore, the case study design provides a comprehensive framework for capturing and analysing the complexity of participants’ experiences through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

## Procedures and Participants

The study sample group was determined using criterion sampling and convenience sampling techniques. The criteria specified within the scope of the criterion sampling strategy were being Syrian, attending secondary or high school, and being exposed to the February 6 earthquake. Students who met these criteria were invited to study with



the guidance of teachers (convenience sampling). From December 2023 to February 2024, teachers were asked to invite 25 eligible Syrian students to participate in the study. The researcher used two criteria to identify participants (Francis et al., 2010, p. 1234). Within the scope of the first criterion, referred to as the “initial analysis sample,” at least ten interviews were conducted, and within the scope of the second criterion, defined as the “stopping criterion,” a study group of 25 people was targeted, with the participation of 15 more people. Seven of the students invited to the study were excluded from the study group because their families required permission or they did not attend the time and place determined for the interview several times. The remaining 18 Syrian students were interviewed with the consent of their families. This study was approved by Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Ethics Committee Decision Meeting Date and Decision No: 20.03.2024 / 03-332). After institutional approval, the interviewees were contacted through the researcher’s networks, colleagues, and support from secondary and high school teachers in Gaziantep province.

The participants included in this study comprised 11 girls and 7 boys, 10 secondary school students and 8 high school students. The average age of the participants was 15.2 years (range=13-17), and their length of stay in Türkiye was 10.2 years (range=7-13). Although all participants were born in Syria, they migrated to Türkiye at a young age. All but one of the participants started their education in Türkiye. These data are essential in demonstrating that the participants’ Turkish acquisition and adaptation to Turkish culture began at an early age.

## **Interviews**

The interviews included questions that focused on the participants’ experiences before, during, and after the earthquake using a semi-structured interview form. The researcher interviewed 3 participants with the help of an online meeting application (Zoom). Three participants (female and high school students) answered the questions in writing because they refused to be recorded and were interviewed face to face. The teachers who supported the participant identification process conducted interviews with the remaining participants, with the researcher participating online. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher gave the teachers an informative seminar on the application procedures and content of the interview questionnaire.

In qualitative research with children, ethical dilemmas and risks must first be identified, and these risks must be minimised (Akbaş & Akbaş, 2019, p. 156). Based on this warning, general information was given to the teachers, parents, and students who supported the research to protect the personal rights of the participants within the scope of ethical rules. An informed consent form was shared with the participants before they participated in the study, and the necessary permissions were obtained from their parents. This form stated that participation in the study was completely

voluntary and that the participant had the right to withdraw at any time. Although the participants were informed that they could leave the study during the interview, all interviews were completed without interruption. In addition, the form included information about the purpose of the survey, length of the interview, and location. In this context, the interviews were conducted in a school environment where the participants indicated that they would feel more comfortable. To protect the participants' privacy, the participants were informed that real names would not be used and personal information would be anonymized. Considering that one year had passed since the earthquake, semi-structured interview questions were shared with the participants to refresh their memories and prepare them for the interview.

A draft of the interview questions was prepared using a literature review and unstructured interviews with field experts. After being applied to 3 students in the pilot study, the draft form is ready for implementation. The interview questions were finalised by two field experts in terms of scope and content and by one Turkish expert in terms of grammar and meaning. The interview questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The first section included demographic information on the participants and questions about their migration experiences to Türkiye, their acclimatisation to Türkiye, their language skills, the difficulties they experienced in Türkiye, and their living conditions. The second section asked questions about the participants' school lives. In this context, the focus was on adaptation to school, friendship relations, and difficulties experienced at school. The third section asked questions about living conditions before, during, and after the earthquake. Finally, the fourth section discusses the opposing school experiences caused by the quake, the harms of being away from school and friends, and the benefits of attending school.

The interviews were recorded on a computer with the help of a voice recorder. The Voicedocs programme was used to transcribe the voices recorded during the interviews. The total recording time of the interviews was 312 min (Range= 9 min-30 min). A total of 18 interviews were organised in written form, and a 67-page text was obtained. The researcher re-listened to the audio recordings and analysed these raw texts for errors and omissions. The transcriptions were then discussed with the teachers who interviewed the students. In addition, participant confirmation was obtained for hesitant interview notes regarding content and meaning. Because of the discussions and participant confirmation, the transcriptions were finalised and ready for analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Creswell (2007, p. 207-209) recommends using at least two strategies along with triangulation to ensure the validity of the research. Based on this recommendation, in addition to participant and researcher triangulation, participant confirmation, expert review, and peer debriefing strategies were employed in our study. Including middle

and high school students in the study points to this strategy of participant triangulation. Within the scope of the researcher triangulation strategy, more than one researcher supported data collection and analysis. Expert review and peer debriefing strategies were used to develop the interview questions and data analysis. In addition, the participants and teachers who supported the data collection were confirmed that the information was not understood or was not in line with the collected data. Finally, presenting detailed descriptions of the study was adopted as another validity strategy.

The triangulation strategies used in this study ensure reliability. In addition, a detailed explanation of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes in various parts of the study was used as another reliability strategy. Miles and Huberman's model was used to calculate the reliability of the results obtained from the data analysis in this study. Within the scope of this model, which is called internal consistency and conceptualised as the consensus between coders, the formula " $\Delta = C \div (C + \partial) \times 100$ " calculates the similarity between categories revealed by coders. In the formula, " $\Delta$ " the reliability coefficient " $C$ " is the number of topics/terms on which there is consensus, " $\partial$ " representing the number of issues/terms on which there is no consensus. According to a coding audit that provides internal consistency, consensus between coders is expected to be at least 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because of the data analysis, three themes, 15 subthemes, and 72 codes were identified (see Table 1). The total number of codes is 72, with eight new codes obtained after repeated content analysis. Therefore, it is seen that the consistency between the two coding processes is approximately 90%. According to the analyses made by the two coders, 10 codes differed (approximately 87% agreement level), and a consensus was reached by giving them their final names. These results indicate that the minimum criteria for reliability in the Miles–Huberman model are met.

### **Data Analysis**

To ensure confidentiality, the participants' personal information was replaced with functional codes. For example, codes such as OK-1, =K-1, =K-2, ... were used for a female student attending middle school, LE-1, LE-2, ... for a male student attending high school, and LK-1, LK-2, ... for a female student attending high school. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data obtained from the interviews was analysed using content analysis. The stages of data analysis were coding, finding themes, organising, and interpreting the codes and themes. In this context, the transcripts were first read one by one, and the participants' salient experiences and concerns formed the basis of the themes. Individual transcripts were read, and the participants' salient experiences and concerns formed the basis for the themes. These themes were identified through two stages of open and closed coding. In the open-coding phase, the interview transcripts were read holistically, and critical issues raised by the

participants were noted. In the selective coding stage, essential statements and comments were labelled and categorised according to their content. These labels are called themes. The relationship between the emerging themes and the original data was evaluated in collaboration with the teachers who conducted interviews with the participants and the researcher, and the themes were finalised. The researcher’s quotations from the participants’ original statements concretized the findings. The data obtained from the participants and the theoretical and conceptual discussions in the literature were used to form the theme headings. Table 1 presents the relationships between themes and categories.

Table 1  
*Relational Representation of Themes and Categories*

| Theme   | Sub-Theme   | Code  |
|---|---|---|
| Withdrawal from School or Social Ties Breakdown | Disruption of social ties   | Lack of friends, separation from teachers, longing, and loneliness  |
|   | Social and cultural alienation due to uprooting   | Failure to socialise, estrangement from one’s roots, alienation from one’s culture, and adaptation difficulties   |
|   | Multiple migrations   | Moving, change of school, change of neighbourhood, moving away from friends, not getting used to it   |
|   | School success and attendance   | Academic failure, lack of concentration, and school absenteeism   |
|   | Traumatic experiences   | Fear, panic, stress, boredom, despair, and distraction  |
| Fragility and Marginalisation                   | Deepening migration-induced poverty in response to earthquakes                                | Unemployment, financial difficulties, lack of shelter, staying in a ruin house, becoming hungry   |
|   | Earthquake adversely affects resilience   | Being alone in the city, not being able to access aid, excluded, othered  |
|   | Deepening vulnerability due to insufficient in-group and out-group support                    | Not knowing the language, not being able to reach state institutions, not being able to reach the authorities, everyone is left to their troubles, not being able to access aid, and lack of social support |
|   | Increased mothering during earthquakes  | Injustice in rental fees, charging refugees higher rents, providing less aid to refugees, and ignoring refugees   |
|   | Increased isolation and marginalisation due to exclusionary practises in earthquake processes | Being alone, isolated, evicted from home, dropping out of school  |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Reasons for School Attendance: To move away from vulnerability, for normalisation, and to support resilience capacity | Ensuring the right to education during crises                               | School closures, long-term absenteeism, falling behind peers, child labour, having to move, changing schools                           |
|   | Access to education to meet psychosocial, physical, and cognitive needs     | Need for protection, missing friends, playing games with friends, and falling behind in schoolwork                                     |
|   | School attendance for social adaptation and normalisation processes         | Language learning, cultural adaptation, making Turkish friends, normalisation, returning to school routines                            |
|   | School attendance to develop individual and community resilience capacities | Socialising, getting away from troubles, returning to pre-earthquake habits, feeling safe at school, and getting support from teachers |
|   | Staying in school to preserve hope for the future                           | Helping family members, being helpful, having a job, going to university, overcoming difficulties, prosperity, and hope                |

## Results and Discussion

### Withdrawal from School or Social Ties Breakdown

Education emergencies can be “noisy,” “quiet,” or “complex.” “Noisy emergencies” are “natural” disasters, wars, or conflicts that destroy educational infrastructure and disrupt education (Kagawa, 2005, p. 494). Damage to school buildings and educational infrastructure due to disasters prevents children from accessing education (INEE, 2004). In addition, the fact that many people lost their lives due to the disaster and had to migrate more than once, as can be seen from the shares below, will also negatively affect education processes due to the breakdown of social ties and traumatic experiences.

We lived in Hatay when the earthquake happened. I lost all my friends in the earthquake. The most difficult thing for me was that my friends lost their lives. I could not continue to school there. Other family problems arose, and we had to migrate from Hatay. (LE-1)

After the earthquake, we went to Syria. It was not easy to stay away from school. It was hard not to see my teachers and friends. (LK-2)

We had to move after the earthquake. We barely found a rental house to rent. I had to leave my friends. That process made me very depressed. (LK-3)

Trauma is a feeling of being completely overwhelmed by a stressful event in which the structure that gives people a sense of control, connection, and meaning is destroyed (Herman, 2015, p. 33-51). This sense of overwhelm means that family, friendship, love, and social ties are shattered, and belief systems that accord meaning to the human

experience are weakened. In parallel with Kaplan's (2000, p. 10-29) findings, this study revealed that traumatic experiences negatively affected students' academic achievement and attendance.

After the earthquake, I stayed away from school for two months. I missed my school. It was good that school started. However, because of the fear of an earthquake, I thought about my family while at school. I could not concentrate on my studies because of the fear that something would happen to them. 2 of my close relatives dropped out of school because of this fear. These two people did not want to be separated from their families because of fear. Therefore they dropped out of school. (LE-2)

It is stated that the trauma experience resulting from disrupted family, school, and community life experiences, multiple losses, and problems encountered in the places of migration with the effects of the disaster can last for some children at specific developmental stages and others for a lifetime (Frater-Mathieson, 2004, p. 13). As Sinclair (2001, p. 2) emphasises in his research, which coincides with the sharing of our study cited below, education, which is seen as one of the basic humanitarian aids for vulnerable and dependent children, will provide the opportunity to start the healing process of this trauma and learn the skills and values necessary for a more peaceful future.

The earthquake happened in Syria. Some of my friends from my hometown died from this earthquake. We somehow reached food, clothes, and other necessities, but there was no remedy for what was left. I feel sorry for my friends who have died and for others. I would not have been able to recover if I had not started school again. (OK-1)

It should be considered that internal migration after disasters indirectly causes trauma to children. As an example of Kagawa's (2005) conceptualisation of a "loud-silent or complex emergency," this warning becomes even more critical in the presence of 202,817 students who were transferred to other provinces from the provinces in the earthquake zone on March 2, 2023, due to the February 6 earthquakes (MEB, 2023). Children who constantly encounter experiences such as sudden home and school changes may be deprived of people with similar cultural backgrounds (Hart, 2009, p. 355). The sharing of LE-1 emphasised that refugee children who had to migrate for the second time due to the disaster or who were separated from their friends, even if they did not migrate, faced a severe threat in terms of social capital.

We migrated to Türkiye from Syria 8 years ago to settle in Hatay. The earthquake heavily damaged our house, and then it collapsed. We had to migrate from Hatay to Konya. All my friends stayed behind. I felt very lonely and orphaned. Konya was not good for my father because it was cold. From there, we moved to Bursa, where they treated us well. They did not maltreat us because we were Syrian. My teachers and friends were excellent. I still talk to one of my teachers on the phone. We came here (Gaziantep) because of my father's job. It was hard to get away from my friends in Bursa. Now, I am trying to get used to it. (LE-1)

In his study on the mental health and cultural development of migrant children, Eisenbruch (1988, p. 283-291) used the metaphor of uprooting to indicate that children who move away from their place of origin face both personal and cultural deprivation. According to him, uprooting refers not only to the physical environment, such as the homeland and home, but also to the deprivation of culturally necessary emotional and social support. This emphasis coincides with OK-1 sharing.

My parents want us to speak Arabic at home. Unfortunately, this is not possible. Sometimes, my family gets angry because we always speak Turkish at home. They say, "It should not be like this; your mother tongue is Arabic." We should not forget Arabic when communicating with relatives and friends in Syria. I speak Arabic, but my younger brother's Arabic is very poor. My family says we should not forget our mother tongue. However, we are moving away from Arabic and customs in Syria. We are trying to get used to it. (OK-1)

In uprooting, schools contribute significantly to the post-earthquake adjustment process by reducing the environmental stress of alienation and increasing the child's resources and competence to cope with cultural loss.

### **Fragility and Marginalisation**

Vulnerability is an individual or community's susceptibility to harm by a "natural, economic or politically dangerous event" (Gaillard & Pangilinan, 2010, p. 219). According to another definition, vulnerability refers to the capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the effects of a hazard caused by a natural disaster (Wisner et al., 2003, p. 11). Therefore, vulnerability is a measure of a person's or group's exposure to the effects of a natural hazard and includes the degree of recovery from the event (Wisner et al., 2003, p. 110). In the pre-earthquake period, Syrians who left their country due to migration were plunged into deep poverty and faced many psychological, social, and economic problems. These problems deepened even more during the earthquake. The excerpts below show that almost all Syrian children who supported our study expressed these problems.

We arrived in Türkiye at the end of 2014. We had no place to stay when we first arrived. It was not easy. My mother washed the pillows we found in the garbage and put them under our heads; that is how we slept. My father works to make us happy. However, sometimes it saddens me that I cannot bring food for my siblings. (OK-4)

Before the earthquake, we were trying to get used to these places, but the period after the earthquake was painful for us. Psychologically, we were very worn out. (LE-3)

My parents came to Türkiye when I was one year old. They talk about it all the time at home. They came on foot, running a lot. They were terrified. So, they came here very hard. We first settled in Istanbul. I received my education in 1st grade there. Then we wanted to go to Antep because our relatives were there. They were staying in a tent city in Nazi. We first settled there, too, but then they evicted us. The most difficult things for us to do here are material things and



economic conditions. We live in a room with my mother, father, and five siblings. Our house has a stove, and there is no heating. It is a tough house. The week after the earthquake, everyone had left Antep for other cities. We always stayed in Antep. We had nowhere to go but our house. (OK-2)

We came here eight years ago. After the war in Syria, we lived in the war for 5-6 years. We came here when we could not bear it. (OK-3)

My father was a maths teacher in Syria. He works in a factory here. When we first arrived, he applied for a teaching job but did not get it. While there were Turkish teachers who were not appointed, it was normal that they did not take my father. My father is distraught but continues to work in the factory to support us. After the earthquake, my brother went to Germany to study with my uncles. They tormented him a lot, both at school and in the neighbourhood. He could not bear it; he went to Germany. For example, during an earthquake, they gave us a blanket. When my brother brought it to my brother to cover him, some Turks with knives took it from him by force. In addition, they beat him for it. He went through many things like that. My brother is 16 years old; he's just a child. My brother and many other children have been subjected to these things. (OK-1)

While studies widely recognise that socio-economic inequality is one of the leading causes of disaster vulnerability (Donner & Rodriguez, 2008, p. 1090), studies show that in any society, resilience to natural disasters remains a challenge for disadvantaged groups (Wisner et al., 2003). Disaster-resistant housing and affordable insurance are often beyond the poorest groups' financial means, placing them at greater risk. Moreover, as seen from the following excerpts, which align with Donner and Rodriguez's research findings (2008, p. 1090-1091), disasters affect economically, politically, and culturally disadvantaged groups the most.

The day after the earthquake, we stayed on the street. Then, we went to my uncle's industrial workplace. We stayed there for 1-2 weeks. There was no food or clothes, and we were sleeping on cardboard. We were not helped at all. (OK-5)

We left our hometown because of the civil war and fled there. We have been living here for 13 years. We had housing problems when we first arrived. We have lived in caravans for eight years. We were then able to move to a rented house. Rents are very high. It was tough for us to pay the rent. The earthquake was a terrible time. The weather was freezing. We had a lot of financial difficulties. We had to move. We barely found a house. We were depressed at the time. We had already left our hometown and missed our homeland. Still, thank God. (LK-3)

If we change our neighbourhood, we will be sent to Syria. Therefore we cannot leave the neighbourhood. It is difficult to change houses in the same neighbourhood. For example, there was an earthquake. The owner of the house we stayed in wanted us to stay downstairs after the earthquake. We were evicted from there. We have changed many houses. The landlords say, "Either pay more or go to your hometown." Knowing we were in a difficult situation, they asked us for more than Turkish tenants. (OK-1)

The house we were staying in was destroyed after the earthquake. We could not find a house. We stayed with our relatives. Another acquaintance's house was destroyed. Thus, they left school and went to another place. (OK-6)

After the earthquake, there were almost no Turks left. Everyone went to other cities. We stayed on the streets for about a month. It was freezing and very difficult. (LE-3)

It is argued that people's vulnerability is determined by social class, education, gender, age, and language proficiency rather than the disaster itself. In addition, numerous authors emphasise that typically marginalised populations, such as migrant and minority groups, are often more vulnerable in disaster situations because they are less prepared, have fewer resources to evacuate when necessary, and experience inequitable access to relief and recovery support (Marlowe & Bogen, 2015, p. 126). Therefore, it is of sensitive importance to consider additional measures to protect culturally and linguistically diverse communities of refugee origin from the harmful effects of disasters.

Many reasons increase refugees' vulnerability during disasters. One of the main reasons is the need for intra- and inter-group solidarity. In addition, newcomers' access to support is more limited and challenging because of their low familiarity with institutional structures, inadequate language skills, and cultural unfamiliarity (Marlowe & Bogen, 2015, p. 126). The participant accounts quoted below confirm that in the absence of intra- and inter-group support, the problems caused by the earthquake deepened.

After the earthquake, there was aid, but none for us. People were not supporting each other at all. Everyone was left to their own devices. We were freezing because of the cold. We had nothing. My father was shouting Allahu Akbar in the neighbourhood. Some people were filming him with their phones. (OK-4)

After the earthquake, people whose houses had been destroyed received aid. It was fair, but we were also in a difficult situation. We had no support from anyone. We slept on cartons for a few days. Then we stayed in a tent for a month. We could not sleep at all. We needed many things like coats, food, and drinks. Our lives were difficult after the earthquake. My father was unemployed for eight months. He just started working. (OK-5)

Issues such as low language proficiency, inadequate social capital, difficulties in accessing information on interventions to protect against disaster damage and difficulties in accessing post-disaster assistance have been found to deepen refugee group vulnerability. In line with the participants' statements in this study, Sinclair (2001; 2002) stated that during and after natural and artificial disasters, such as armed conflicts, meeting the comprehensive humanitarian needs of the affected population, such as clean water, food, shelter, and security, will contribute to the capacity development of refugees.

Vulnerability to natural hazards reflects the marginalisation of people within society. As Gaillard and Pangilinan (2010, p. 222) point out, people affected by disasters are marginalised geographically because they live in dangerous places (e.g., informal

settlers), socially because they belong to minority groups (e.g., refugees), economically because they are poor (e.g., homeless and unemployed); and politically because their voices are ignored by those in political power (e.g., women, children and the elderly). It is argued that vulnerability and marginalisation, which are directly correlated, are reinforced by limited opportunities that reduce the ability to cope with natural hazards. The information gathered from the participants in the sample group reveals that Syrians are geographically, socially, and politically marginalised. Therefore, it should be noted that the lives of Syrians, which were already difficult after the February 6 earthquakes, have worsened. Within the framework of minimising the harmful effects of earthquakes, it is vital to elaborate on the rationale for including refugee children in educational processes as an example of a complex emergency.

### **Reasons for School Attendance: To Move away from Vulnerability, for Normalisation, and to Support Resilience Capacity**

The core rationale for education in emergencies is primarily about individuals. Because children and their future are at risk, education in emergencies is a high priority. The three basic principles on which education efforts in emergencies are based are “the child’s right to education, the child’s need for protection, and the educational priority of a society” (Nicolai, 2003, p. 6). Children’s right to education is a fundamental right, and education programmes should protect or fulfil this important right even in times of crisis (Pigozzi, 1999).

In UNESCO’s (2000, p. 1) thematic study on *education in emergencies and crises*, natural disasters were seen as significant obstacles to achieving education for all. Therefore, education about natural disasters is included within the scope of emergencies education. As Kamel (2006, p. 9) points out, this decision gains delicate importance in the context of the benefits of education in emergencies, such as meeting and protecting the psycho-social needs of children, teaching new skills and values such as health and survival, social cohesion, rebuilding economic foundations from family to nation, and sustainable development. This finding, which coincides with our research findings, is elaborated in the following quotations.

I was sad when I left school after the earthquake. After the school opened, my family did not want to send me to school because of the fear of an earthquake. However, I wanted to go back to school. Then, I was thrilled when I went to school, and thank God, nothing bad happened. (OK-4)

Reuniting with my school after the earthquake was perfect for me psychologically. Getting together with my friends and leaving home made me feel good. (OK-5)

Being away from school caused me to experience different emotions. Being away from my friends made me sad. We returned to normal life after we started school. Going to school reduced my fear of the earthquake. My friends and I supported each other. (LK-1)

I stayed away from school for a while after the earthquake. It was hard for me to stay away from school. I had Syrian friends at school before the earthquake. They left after the earthquake. Some of my friends dropped out of school. I felt emotional when I went to school after the earthquake. I missed my school and teachers very much. I got better psychologically with the opening of the school. (LK-3)

In line with the participants' sharing, most of the researchers addressing the relationship between education, disaster, and psycho-social well-being highlighted the impact of trauma on children's education on the one hand and the potential of schools to mitigate the effects of trauma on the other (Burde et al., 2017, p. 634-635). Similarly, Sinclair (2001; 2002) noted that education is increasingly recognised by researchers and policymakers as a critical component of mitigating psychological harm, providing immediate health and safety information, and promoting long-term stability, reconstruction, and development.

The fact that education protects children from harm has compelled international organisations to fund and standardise education services for children during emergencies. The Minimum Standards for Education, first developed by INEE in 2004, emphasised the importance of ensuring quality education and quality learning outcomes for children during emergencies. In this context, planning interventions with a humanitarian perspective in conjunction with the emergency is crucial. This humanitarian approach includes participatory teaching methods and learning processes that respect students' dignity and the ability to create safe and inclusive learning environments (Burns & Lawrie, 2015). On this basis, the INEE Minimum Standards emphasise the following claim: "From emergencies to recovery, quality education provides life-saving physical, psycho-social, and cognitive protection from the dangers of a crisis environment" (INEE, 2010, p. 2-3).

This perspective assumes that education mitigates the negative impact of crises on children in several ways. First, and perhaps most importantly, schooling is believed to provide children and teachers with a sense of normality in a crisis setting by providing them with a structured and stable routine and, thus, a source of hope for the future (Davies & Talbot, 2008, p. 513). According to Sharma and Sharma (2012, p. 284), the opportunity to attend school increases the resilience of children affected by crises by providing a normalisation experience. The routine of school attendance has a normalising effect on children and their families. Activities related to being at school, such as getting up at a fixed time, getting dressed, travelling on public transportation, and spending a few hours with people other than parents, as well as returning home and doing school-related work with the help of parents and siblings, contribute significantly to the construction of an average identity for disadvantaged children during the post-earthquake period. Attending school thus promotes a sense of well-being for the entire family.

There are various empirical studies on the benefits of school attendance. A longitudinal study has shown that education can support immediate physical safety and promote children's future economic and sense of security (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). A study (Betancourt, 2005, p. 335-336) on the psycho-social dimensions of an emergency education programme for internally displaced children showed that building relationships with friends and engaging in meaningful joint activities enhanced a sense of normality. A study of the progress made in meeting children's rights in emergencies (Kamel, 2006, p. 6) showed that studies have focused on the examination of trauma, psychology, psychiatry, and medicine on how children can be returned to 'normal life.' On this basis, greater efforts than currently are needed to ensure the care and education of children during emergencies.

### **Conclusion**

During periods of earthquakes or other natural disasters, refugee students face unique challenges that can significantly impact their education and overall well-being. Syrian students in Türkiye had interrupted or limited access to education before the earthquake due to factors such as conflict and displacement. The earthquake further disrupted students' learning, leading to gaps in their education. Moreover, the earthquake added another layer to displacement, further disrupting Syrian students' education. The earthquakes in Türkiye on February 6 intensified the mental health problems that refugee students in Türkiye were already facing because of their past negative experiences.

According to the results obtained in this study, the most prominent problem for refugee children in Türkiye resulting from the February 6 earthquakes is not going to school. These children, who could not interact with their friends because of the closure of schools, lost the most important social capital bond. For refugee children whose friends had died because of the earthquake, the normalisation process was more difficult. Therefore, for these children, the quake brought not only physical trauma but also loss of social ties and psychological problems. As Kaplan (2000) noted, the results of this study indicate that the breakdown of social relations led to a sense of depression and a weakening of the belief system, which negatively affected school success and attendance. According to the data from this study, it is understood that the school adaptation, school success, and social and psychological problems of Syrian children, who had to add a new link to their war-induced migration experiences by changing homes and schools due to the disaster, have deepened. It should be emphasised that the reopening of schools after the earthquake played a role in reducing these problems and eliminating their vulnerability by increasing children's social, psychological, and personal resources.

This study showed that education is vital for reducing the destructiveness of natural hazards such as earthquakes, which have significant destructive effects. School attendance has significant consequences, especially for refugee groups with multiple vulnerability characteristics. The most important finding is that school attendance increases community resilience. The revival of urban life with the opening of schools, the support of school routines to return to the pre-disaster period, and the socialisation practises of students and their families were evaluated as significant contributions to community resilience.

Syrian children were found to be socially vulnerable due to their susceptibility to earthquake damage and their low capacity to recover from such damage. Based on the findings of the study, it is understood that the low level of Turkish language capacity and adaptation to the Turkish culture of some Syrian families negatively reinforced the vulnerability of this group. The complex socioeconomic conditions in which Syrian children live have worsened because of the earthquake, further deepening their vulnerability. The fact that almost all the participants interviewed had never been able to leave Gaziantep due to insufficient social and economic resources concretises this determination. Syrians' stay in Gaziantep after the earthquake was incredibly challenging in the first month after the quake, due to the cold weather and the lack of or limited access to food, shelter, and water. Despite these challenging conditions, Syrians' stay in the city for compelling reasons is of critical importance because it contributes to the return of those who left the city and the normalisation of life.

According to the study results, refugee children in the education system can speak the host community's language fluently and thus have easier access to information about disaster processes, which can be considered a capacity-building intervention. Marlowe and Bogen (2015, p. 126-127) stated that the Syrian students who were schooled in this study represented the linguistic link between the two groups and acted as a bridge, especially in situations where family members were not fluent in Turkish. Syrian children and their families will have insufficient capacity to reduce disaster risks without knowing the social relations and values in Türkiye. Therefore, in this study, including refugee students in educational processes was considered an opportunity to develop relationships with host communities before, during, and after the disaster and minimise the harmful effects of the disaster.

Education should not be considered a relief activity because of its positive impact on natural disasters and emergencies. However, it should be conceptualised as a development activity central to human and national development. Moreover, as Triplehorn (2001, p. 5) noted, promoting the connection of teachers and educational administrators to schools during crises will contribute significantly to protecting national educational investments. In this regard, it is helpful to consider the possibility

of risking hard-won family and national development gains due to the February 6 earthquakes. Pigozzi (1999) emphasised that the recommendation to restore educational activities as soon as possible in emergencies is one of the most sensitive issues related to the February 6 earthquakes. From this perspective, it should be noted that the urgent restoration of education services following the February 6 earthquake helped protect investments in Syrian children.

Although access to education was restricted for a relatively short period in the areas where the earthquakes struck, it has been noted that some Syrian children living in these areas have not returned to school or are at risk of not completing their education. It is critical to track Syrian children who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out to help them return to school. This intervention will also help Syrian children who could not attend school during the pre-earthquake period. Therefore, in this study, the measures taken in the aftermath of the February 6 earthquakes are considered an opportunity to restructure the system and address pre-emergency problems.

In the aftermath of the February 6 earthquakes, when the education system was rendered dysfunctional, reconstruction provided a significant opportunity to transform education to meet Syrian students' learning needs. In this context, if necessary, make-up programmes for children who have been out of school and opportunities for young people to maintain and improve their basic work skills should be provided. This recommendation is also included in INEE's (2004, p. 39-40) basic response programme for education in emergencies. Meeting Syrian students' educational needs in the aftermath of the earthquake requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts by local, national, and international stakeholders. Recognising this vulnerable population's specific challenges and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment are essential to foster the individual and community resilience necessary to overcome crises such as natural disasters. Long-term plans are needed to address the immediate post-earthquake needs of Syrian students and their educational recovery, recognising the critical contribution that supporting their overall well-being can make to community resilience.

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**Acknowledgements:** The author would like to sincerely thank the school administrators, students, and, in particular, the teachers who conducted the interviews.

**Ethical Approval:** This study was approved by Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Ethics Committee Decision Meeting Date and Decision No: 20.03.2024 / 03-332).

**Informed Consent:** Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study.

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Grant Support:** The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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