*Özgün Makale*

# Syrian Students' Perception of School: Experiences in the Process and the Changes over Time[1]

## Suriyeli Öğrencilerin Okul Algısı: Süreçte Yaşananlar ve Değişim

**Mehmet SAYICI***
**Metin ÖZKAN****

## Abstract

The international mobility that has occurred with globalization and forced migration has great effects on both the host country and the immigrants. This research aims to examine the experiences of Syrian students at secondary school in a border city of Turkey, when they first came to school, and how these experiences changed over time, on the basis of the theory of intergroup contact. The research revealed that Syrian students were exposed to peer bullying and xenophobia by other students started out with the first negative contact. In addition, the research revealed that refugee students experience communication and academic problems due to language barriers. However, with the effect of the students being together over time and the Syrian students learning Turkish, the negative contact between the groups turned into positive over time and it was determined that friendships between the groups were formed.

**Keywords:** Intergroup Contact Theory, Refugee Students, Language Barrier, Peer Bullying.

## Öz

Küreselleşme ve zorunlu göçle birlikte ortaya çıkan uluslararası hareketlilik, hem ev sahibi ülke hem de göçmenler üzerinde büyük etkiler yaratmaktadır.  Bu araştırmada Türkiye'nin bir sınır ilindeki ortaokulda öğrenim gören Suriyeli öğrencilerin okula ilk geldiklerinde yaşadıkları deneyimlerin ve bu deneyimlerin zaman içindeki değişiminin gruplar arası temas teorisi temelinde incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırma, Suriyeli öğrencilerin ilk olumsuz temasın etkisiyle diğer öğrenciler tarafından akran zorbalığına ve yabancı düşmanlığına maruz kaldıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca araştırmada, mülteci öğrencilerin dil engelleri nedeniyle iletişim ve akademik sorunlar yaşadıklarını ortaya konmuştur. Ancak zamanla öğrencilerin bir arada olmalarının ve Türkçe öğrenen Suriyeli öğrencilerin de etkisiyle gruplar arasındaki olumsuz temasın zamanla olumluya dönüştüğü ve gruplar arasında arkadaşlıkların kurulduğu tespit edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Gruplararası Temas Teorisi, Mülteci Öğrenciler, Dil Engeli, Akran Zorbalığı.

## Introduction

With the effect of globalization, mobility between countries has increased greatly in recent years. Children under the age of 18 constitute 40% of the total number of refugees (79.5 million) in the world, according to the report published by the Refugee Agency (UNHRC, 2020). In other words, the majority of refugees, when compared to all age groups, are children. According to the 2022 October data of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) and the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), there are 1.228.202 Syrian children aged 5-18 in Turkey. This number corresponds to 33,77% of the total number of Syrians in Turkey (GİB, 2022). In other words, similar to the general tendency in the world, the rate of children in need of education among refugees in Turkey is very high. Providing educational services to refugee students is one of the most challenging tasks due to the social, health, physical, and psychological problems of these students, which requires special attention (UNHCR, 2001). We can say that the most affected by migration are children. According to Ellis et al. (2010), although they are heavily affected by migration, approximately 92% of refugee and migrant children who need mental health services cannot receive these services. Therefore, it can be envisaged that there may be important deficiencies in the education of refugee children, who are thought to have experienced more intense trauma, and that these deficiencies may affect the whole society. Through a well-planned education, all children in the country, including migrant/refugee children can benefit from this process. However, if this process is not managed well, the children in both groups may be adversely affected and the problems that cannot be solved with education may turn into a different dimension and become serious social and security problems for countries (Eren, 2019).

The perspective of the Intergroup Contact Theory can be used to make sense of the relationships of refugee students at school and in social environments, and to understand the extent to which they can integrate into the culture of the country they live in. With its structure to understand the nature of communication between different groups, the theory can provide a strong basis for understanding refugee students' communication with host students. Intergroup contact theory was first used by Allport (1954) to express the interaction of groups with each other. Intergroup contact can be positive or negative. Positive intergroup contact corresponds to cooperation between individuals with different socio-cultural characteristics in a good atmosphere, while negative intergroup contact corresponds to interactions, including verbal and physical intervention, that occur in a tense atmosphere (Hayvard, Hornsey, Tropp & Barlow, 2017). According to Allport (1954), most interactions do not reduce existing prejudices between groups. According to the author, the prejudice between the two groups can only be reduced if there is an equal status contact between the minority and the majority pursuing common goals, if there is cooperation and this contact is supported by the authorities. In other words, prejudices can turn into positive only with a projected action plan. Later, Pettigrew (1998) revised it and added the friendship dimension to the theory in addition to its stated features. He also focused on the time concept for the development of intergroup contact theory. According to Pettigrew (1998), long-term interaction helps to eliminate prejudices. In addition, if the contact takes place in a positive social environment that does not contain anxiety, negative attitudes towards the outer group turn into positive in time (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Similarly, Aboud et al. (2003) stated in their study that children with friends from different ethnic groups have less prejudices. Long-term coexistence and friendship of individuals from different groups reduce prejudices, and therefore, a decrease in prejudices increases intergroup friendship (Pettigrew, 1997).

In this context, it was considered important to conduct a study in which Syrian secondary school students' first contact and post-first contact experiences were compared and analyzed in

their own eyes, and to determine the psycho-social state of the students at school based on their experiences, and to present a perspective on taking inclusive measures. With the data to be obtained from the research, inclusive steps to facilitate the integration of Syrian secondary school students into education and life will be a source for taking preventive measures for the problems that may arise in education and social life. From this important point of view, the aim of the research is to reveal the meanings attributed to the common experiences of Syrian secondary school students who had to migrate from their countries. For this purpose, the research sought answers to the following sub-problems.

According to the opinions of Syrian secondary school students in Turkey;

a. What are their first experiences at school?

b. How did the experiences differ in the process?

c. How did the differentiation in experiences affect their academic and social lives?

## Methodology

## Research Model

This study which aims to reveal the meaning that Syrian secondary school students studying in Turkey attribute to their common experiences in their schools is a qualitative research. Qualitative researches aim to examine the phenomenon in its natural environment (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2011). Phenomenology was used to examine the common experiences of Syrian secondary school students in their schools. In this study, interpretive phenomenology design, one of the phenomenological research methods, was used. The purpose of the interpretive phenomenological design is to investigate in detail how the participants comprehend their lives and make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

## Participants

The participants of the research are Syrian secondary school students studying in a border province of Turkey. The criterion sampling method was used in the selection of the participants. In the study, having been studying at schools in Turkey for at least four years and being able to express themselves well in Turkish were determined as criteria. The reason why four years was determined as the criterion is the assumption that more and rich data can be obtained from student experiences during this period, and the suggestion of the Intergroup Contact Theory, which contributes to the theoretical basis of the research, that time can be a source for the change of prejudices. In addition, 8th grade students were included in the research, considering that it would have a positive effect on understanding Turkish and expressing themselves. The determination of the students' ability to express themselves was carried out in line with the opinions of the Turkish language teachers at the school.

| Participants | Age | Gender | Years in Turkey |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| P 1 | 14 | Girl | 4 |
| P 2 | 14 | Girl | 8 |
| P 3 | 14 | Girl | 10 |
| P 4 | 14 | Girl | 7 |
| P 5 | 14 | Boy | 5 |
| P 6 | 14 | Boy | 5 |
| P 7 | 14 | Boy | 5 |

**Tablo 1.** Participants' profiles

According to these criteria, the participants included in the study consisted of 7 secondary school students, four of whom were girls and three were boys.

## Data Collection Tool

Data were collected by semi-structured interview method. The form was developed by the researchers. In the development of the data collection tool, literature, tools in similar studies, and intergroup contact theory were used. In the first part of the interview form, questions to obtain the demographic information of the participants and in the second part, interview questions to understand their school life were included. Under each question in the second part, probing questions are included to obtain more data. After the interview form was created, it was presented to two experts who have comprehensive knowledge in the field for their opinions, and the interview form had its final shape after the feedback from the experts. The final version was sent to the experts and they were asked to re-evaluate, and it was deemed as content valid.

## Ethics Approval

Ethics committee approval was obtained with the decision number 246372 of Gaziantep University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee.

## Data Analysis

Firstly, the researchers transcribed verbatim the audio-recorded data during the interview. Data analysis was carried out in a way to include holistic reading with its thematic dimension by asking the question suggested by Van Manen (1997) "what is this text talking about?" (as cited in Iversen, Graue, Haugstvedt, & Råheim, 2018). In the study, a seven-step analysis process suggested by Coliazzi (1978) was used:

> Read and re-read all the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon under study; Extract significant statements from each description that directly pertain to the phenomenon; Formulate meanings from these significant statements; Organize these formulated meanings into themes; Integrate the results of the data analysis into a description of the phenomenon under study; Return the results to the participants for validation; Incorporate any new, relevant data into the fundamental structure of the phenomenon (as cited in Chesser-Smyth, 2005).

## Validity and Reliability in the Research

One of the researchers had the opportunity to make long-term observations about the phenomenon, as he worked as a teacher in schools with foreign students. The fact that the researcher is in the environments where the study is conducted for a long time can help the researcher to prevent prejudices (Başkale, 2016). This also contributed to the development of the data collection tool. The data collection tool, which was created by the literature research and mastery of the field containing open-ended questions. The interview form was finalized by taking the opinion of two academicians who are experts in their fields. Necessary permissions were obtained from school administrators to implement the interview protocol. After the explanations, students who were willing to be interviewed were determined. Eight students were selected among those who were suitable for the criterion sampling, but one student was not included in the study because she did not give rich data to the questions during the interview. After interviewing with seven

students, emerging themes were shared with the students. By giving feedback about the interview, participant confirmation was provided in order to match what the participants wanted to say with what the researcher understood. It was also stated that the results of the research would be shared with the participants.

Criterion sampling was used to ensure transferability. The interviews were held in the multipurpose hall of the school. Before the interviews, the participants were asked again whether they were willing to take part in the research and it was emphasized that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and not answer the question due to the sensitivity of the subject. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder to prevent data loss. In addition, when the student did not understand the question, a translator at the school helped the student. Moreover, each student was given a code name in order to ensure the confidentiality of the participants during the reporting of the research. In order to obtain dependable data about the research, the researchers kept contact with each other at every stage of the research. In addition, the codes and themes that emerged during the transcription were compared. The research results and the raw data were given to the field experts for comparison in order to achieve confirmability of the study. As a result of the examination, the results obtained by the researchers and the judgments reached by the field experts show parallelism.

## Findings

In the research, a main theme and two sub-themes emerged depending on this main theme. While the main theme emerged as "deterioration to recovery, - surface to the bottom- bottom to the surface," the sub-themes emerged as "meaninglessness to meaningfulness" and "negative contact to positive contact". Considering the results of the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews, it was noticed as a dominant view that the difficult situations experienced at school tended to improve over time in each interview. Turning bad into good manifests itself especially in the language dimension and in the improvement of communication skills and education, depending on the language dimension. In addition, while peer bullying, xenophobia and exclusion emerged with the first contact, these phenomena were replaced by friendship and socialization over time.

## Deterioration to Recovery (Surface to the Bottom- Bottom to the Surface)

While living a normal life in their own country, it is difficult for all Syrians to come to Turkey fleeing their country as a result of the civil war and to try to hold on to life under Turkey conditions. This has deeper effects especially for children who are exposed to chaotic and traumatic events such as war or civil war. Having to go to a different country while in this psychological state and, moreover, being a "Syrian student" there means that the conditions become more difficult for them. Difficult conditions for Syrian students include various dimensions such as not knowing the language, feeling unsafe, loss of self-confidence, alienation, loneliness, communication problems, academic failure, xenophobia, and peer bullying. In other words, life for Syrian children means being dragged from the surface of the water along the bottom in a whirlpool. However, this bad situation tended to improve by easing and disappearing over time with the effect of intergroup contact. Over time, Syrian students managed to rise to the surface by overcoming problems with the education they received at schools, continuous communication and individual efforts. Especially the Syrian students, who learned the target language (Turkish) at least at the

level of self-expression, started to succeed in their lessons and gained a sense of self-confidence with the effect of this, came to peace with themselves and got rid of loneliness. In addition, improving communication with other (Turkish) students at the school over time contributed to the reduction of xenophobia in the opposite group and thus to minimizing negative situations such as exclusion and peer bullying. Moreover, it paved the way for intergroup friendship and enabled students to study in a more positive atmosphere. Thus, metaphorically speaking, while the Syrian students were drowning (at the bottom), they rose to the surface over time.

## Meaninglessness to meaningfulness-language barriers

Language is the most important tool that connects people to life and makes sense of the events around them. Without language, people cannot speak even if they have a tongue, and cannot hear even if they have ears. Like a person who goes abroad alone without knowing a foreign language, s/he is helpless and confines herself/himself to watching the surroundings. We can give Syrian students' experiences at schools in Turkey as an example for the similar situation. "Only" more severe, more traumatic and more chaotic... All the students participating in the research stated that the first problem they encountered when they started to study in Turkey was that they did not know the language. Due to the fact that they did not know the language, their education life was interrupted by failures at school. However, over time, they managed to overcome the language problem thanks to the lessons they took at school. For example:

> "My Turkish is better than before. I learned Turkish. Now I understand my lessons better. My grades are also better. I couldn't do homework because I didn't understand the lessons before. Some teachers got angry because I didn't do homework. The thing that affected me most negatively did not understand anything in Turkish." (P4)

Both the traumatic effect of the migration process of students from Syria to Turkey and the language problem at school caused some students to become introverted. This can manifest itself in the form of isolating oneself from society and not wanting to communicate. A student who experienced this situation expressed himself as follows:

> "Now it's okay. But I didn't understand the lessons before. I didn't speak for three years. While the teacher was talking, I did not understand anything. Then my lessons also deteriorated. Compared to the first time, I have learned Turkish better and now I can talk to people" (P5).

In adverse situations, especially those with high resilience levels can overcome the problems, while others cannot and may be stuck with much social and psychological disorders related to the problems. Some may give up and accept rather than face difficulties. A student described a similar situation about his friend:

> "I also have a friend who dropped out of school because he didn't understand the language. Since he did not know Turkish, his condition deteriorated in the lessons and his grades dropped a lot. And he said, 'If I continue like this, there is no point in going to school. Why should I go to school?'" (P3)

The psychological state of people affects their perspectives on life. With the support of the people around us, we get through these difficult times more easily, and our perspectives expand and change. A student who was very successful in his school while he was in Syria, had hard times at his new school due to a language problem and was disappointed. The student, who attributed negative meaning to the school because of his language problem, was able to turn this negative attribution into positive with his own efforts and the support of his teachers:

> "I had been the top student in the school since the first grade in Syria. I was very good. I was hardworking. Teachers loved me too. I didn't understand anything here. It was the lessons that affected me the most because I didn't know Turkish. But the teachers told me 'You can do it... if you work a little bit, you can do it'. They helped me. Then my lessons got better. I used to regard the school negatively." (P7)

Syrian students' learning Turkish at school can contribute to both their own communication skills and their family members' learning Turkish with a multiplier effect over time. A student who experienced this process expressed her thoughts:

> "... I am used to Turkish now. I speak Turkish everywhere, for example, at home with my brothers and sisters. For example, I speak Arabic with my family for a while, and then I translate it into Turkish. My parents have also started to understand Turkish now." (P1)

Another student stated that not knowing the language caused difficulties not only in school but also in social life. This also caused a loss of self-confidence by preventing students from expressing themselves in social life and even meeting their most basic needs. However, learning the language made the student feel more comfortable in society:

> "If you don't know the language, you don't understand anything. It's very difficult... When I wanted to buy something outside of school, I couldn't buy anything because I couldn't speak. I was having hard times. .... (but) I feel more comfortable because I know the language." (P2)

Quotations made under the theme of Meaninglessness to Meaningfulness- Language Barriers reveal the first experiences of Syrian students at school and the change of these experiences over time. While the low level of success in the lessons due to not knowing the language stood out at first, learning the language over time provided both success in the lessons and allowed the students to express themselves more easily in the society.

## Negative contact to positive contact

It has long been emphasized that people can be hostile to what they do not know. Approaching with prejudice because of not knowing means building walls for both sides. However, this prejudice and hostile attitudes that can be observed from time to time are unfortunately the problem of all societies and it is not correct to confine them to a single nation or culture. This also applies to human relations. People naturally keep their distance from people they have just met. The situation may become more brutal when it comes to children and their perceptions created incorrectly by adults. However, over time, children can establish friendships by changing their wrong perceptions, even if it is compulsory, thanks to being together and communicating with each other at school. Findings under this theme will be presented as negative contact findings and then positive contact findings respectively. Thus, the change in the process will be revealed. In the context of the research, when Syrian students first came into contact with local students, the most common problems they faced were exclusion, xenophobia, and peer bullying. At the same time, they experienced feelings of alienation, loneliness and insecurity in their inner world. These problems are inextricably intertwined and trigger each other. A student trying to adapt to the environment she is in described the experience that she thought she was exposed to both in-group and intergroup exclusion as follows:

> "My Syrian friend added me to a WhatsApp group. When I wrote Turkish in the group, they got angry. According to them, I had to act like a Syrian. In other words, if you are Syrian, you must speak Arabic. They said 'if you do not speak Arabic, we will kick you out of the group' and they did. I experienced the same with my Turkish friends. They said 'you are Syrian, do not act like a Turk.'" (P1)

Games are one of the most important tools that support children's social development. Children who implicitly develop their individual and social skills through games are better prepared for life. For this reason, negative experiences related to games can leave deeper traces on individuals. These effects may be more severe in a student who is ostracized by his/her friends in games due to xenophobia among students. A student who experienced this described her experiences as follows:

> "When I first arrived, I had difficulty in communicating. Some of the students did not want to make friends with me because I am Syrian. They always said 'Why did you come? If you have a country, what are you doing here? Go to your country'. They never let us play games. When I wanted to play with them, they said 'No, we only play with Turks'. Those who said this were my classmates." (P2)

A student attributes the reason for xenophobia to the fact that local students do not understand themselves. According to him, the reason of it is that local students have not experienced what Syrian students went through. He expresses the problem as follows:

> "Their hostility affected me the most... They talked without thinking about our feelings. They acted as if there was no war in Syria and we came here for fun. If they had been there and if they had experienced what we went through, they would have understood our feelings. The reason why they acted like this was that they did not experience what we did..." (P5)

The ultimate manifestation of xenophobia, discrimination and exclusion is verbal or physical violence among students. All of the students stated that they were exposed to verbal or physical violence. For example, P3 stated that a student came to the classroom and bullied Syrian students for no reason, and that she confronted this with patience, with the following sentences:

> "There was a boy from another class who would come in during breaks and hit the Syrian students. He wouldn't say anything either. This happened in the 5th and the 6th grades. At that time, I thought that this plight would pass... I thought that they would get used to us at school 1, 3 or 5 months later (P3)"

Bullying affects each student differently. Bullying had a negative psychological impact on a student participating in the research, and the events that took place made the student lonely and introverted. For example:

> "At first, children always hit us. As I walked, they approached from behind and hit me. There was no reason. They swore at me even though I did nothing, but I couldn't do anything. It was affecting me adversely." (P6)

In the interviews, it was determined that the reason for the students to confront the difficulties was the support of their families and being forewarned of negative situations at school. However, one student stated that he is not satisfied with the environment he is in and he misses the past. He expressed this situation as follows:

> "When we met them, they insulted us. For example, they said that 'what are you looking at?' I was not doing anything. I kept quiet. When they hit me, I wanted to hit too, but I was patient. My father would tell me not to fight with them. We came from Syria, but it would have been better if we had stayed there. I would feel better in Syria." (P7)

Similarly, a student stated that the peer bullying she experienced caused her to experience psychological problems and to lose sense of safety. She stated that she held to life with the support she received from her family instead of professional help in order to overcome this problem.

> "When I was in the 5th grade, girls would come after me and say 'We will beat you.' I was walking looking behind me. In 5th grade, I always walked looking behind me. I always felt like someone was behind me." (P1)

Similarly, a student who saw the school as a disappointment due to the difficulties said, "I used to see school as a place where my dreams were destroyed. I thought about dropping out of school. (P3)" This gives us an idea of the level of the student's psychological state.

The problems experienced by the local students who were confronted with a wave of immigration and the students who arrived in a new environment gave way to empathy and friendship gradually thanks to mutual acculturation and interaction. As Pettigrew (1997) stated, the long-term coexistence of individuals from different groups reduces prejudices over time and contributes to the formation of friendship. All the students participating in the research confirm this process. All of the students stated that they did not experience the problems they had had before (language problems, peer bullying, xenophobia, etc.). For example, while a student was talking about the current situation regarding friendship, he summarized the positive change in the process saying:

> "Now I have Turkish friends. We are fine with them. It used to be bad. We get on well with them. They don't say bad words anymore either. Now everything is fine, I love my school and my friends, too." (P7).

Similarly, a student talked about her Turkish friend and said: "I have two close friends. One is Zehra. She is Turkish. I trust her very much. We have a very good relationship, we are like sisters."(P1) This shows how well the student, who was insecure due to the events she experienced during the first contact, developed good relations with someone in the opposite group over time.

Another student, who experienced a similar change, attributed the positive relations in this process to the development of empathy skills of the students in the opposite group and the elimination of mutual prejudices over time. In addition, this change made her happier by changing her thoughts about school: "My Turkish friends are more understanding than before. They learned about us and we learned about them. Now I love my school more. It makes me happy, too." (P2)

A student who stated the change in his thoughts and friendships expressed the difference between the past and the present as follows: "I don't brood over my school and friends any more. All is well now. I love my friends so much. We spend our days happily. I also have Turkish friends." (P3)

Results also prove the change in the students' perspective on school. The perceptions of all students participating in the research about school are metaphorically positive such as *house, light, mosque,* and *door.* For example, a student (P2) likened going to school to *"light"* and expressed her happiness in getting education and learning new things. Another student (P4) likened school to a *"door"* and stated that if she goes to school, he will have a better future. According to her, going to school is like a door to higher education and then a career for a better life. Moreover, one student (P1), who expressed the change in her perspective considering the past situation, said, "School is my second home now. When I first came, I used to liken it to a prison... because then I didn't like the school at all." She revealed the striking difference between the first contact and the last contact.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study determined that Syrian students had difficulties in every aspect due to the negative impact of the first contact with the new culture, people, and environment. The first and the most important of these difficulties was the language problem. This is compatible with the research findings in the literature. Researches (Sarıahmetoğlu ve Kamer, 2020; Solak ve Çelik, 2018) re-

vealed that the most important problem that refugee students experience in their schools is the language problem. Verbal fluency in language takes an average of 3-4 years, and fluency in an academic language takes approximately 4-7 years. However, it takes approximately 10 years for refugee students to have the same level of language proficiency as their peers in terms of education because of being away from school for a while (Miller, 2009 cited in Aydın & Kaya, 2017). This means that refugee students studying at secondary school need longer time to reach a similar level academically with their peers. During this period, it becomes inevitable for refugee students to achieve lower academic success than other students studying in the same class (Greene, 1998). It is known that people who have language problems in their society will isolate themselves from the society. Similarly, in our research, refugee students preferred not to communicate with the other group and to be alone because they did not know the language. Therefore, the language problem caused a loss of self-confidence in refugee students, making it difficult to adapt academically and socio-culturally (Yu & Shen, 2012).

Our research revealed that with the negative effect of the first contact, problems such as discrimination, xenophobia, and peer bullying occur among students. Ethnic discrimination prevents the development of the individual's sense of belonging to the society in general and to the school in particular, and makes social adaptation more difficult (Guo, Maitra, & Guo, 2019). In addition, discrimination has consequences for students such as loneliness, depression, low academic achievement, and decreased self-esteem (Fazel, Garcia, & Stein, 2016). At this point, the findings of our study show parallelism with the findings in the literature as well. The fact that the Syrian students participating in our research described school with negative metaphors in the first years of their arrival at school shows that they could not adopt the school society. As a result of this, academic failure arose in connection with loneliness and language problems. Again, according to the findings, the Syrian students stated that the Turkish students said "Syrians came to Turkey and took away our fathers' jobs". These statements do not reflect the cognitive level of children aged 10-11. It can be deduced that the expressions fuelled by the parents of native students and it shows that the basis of negative contact between groups is laid within the prejudiced family (Harwood, et al., 2006).

One of the prominent sub-themes in the research is peer bullying. Peer bullying is more common in schools where ethnic diversity is higher (Jansen et al, 2016). Also all of the Syrian students participating in the research stated that they were subjected to verbal and physical bullying due to their refugee background. Peer bullying based on prejudice occurs in the form of direct or indirect exclusion, as well as verbal and physical attacks (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). In parallel with this, refugee students in our research stated that they were excluded by their peers in the games. Again, a student stated that she had psychological problems such as not feeling safe due to peer bullying and revealed the extent of the effects of it (Rigby, 2003). In addition, our research revealed that social exclusion is not only between groups, but also members who do not comply with group norms are excluded within the group (Mulvey, Hitti & Killen, 2010). In our study, a Syrian student stated that she was ostracized by her Syrian friends because she was trying to learn Turkish.

However, over time, the activities in the school and the students' spending time together, albeit compulsorily, caused an interaction between the two groups. Long-term interaction between groups also reduces prejudices and leads to the development of mutual positive attitudes. As a result of this, friendships between groups begin (Pettigrew, 1997). Our research which is compatible with the assumptions of Intergroup Contact Theory revealed that the disagreements between Turkish and Syrian students in the early days were replaced by good relations over time. The

positive atmosphere which starts with learning the language of the opposite group has a great effect on the negative contact turning into positive. Learning the language of the opposite group and positive contact affect each other positively and the motivation to learn the language of the dominant group increases (Dörnyei & Csizer, 2005). The participants of our research also stated with similar expressions that they started to be friends with the students in the opposite group. In our research, the problems after the first contact turned into friendship, cooperation and trust in the following years. In addition, it was also determined that the rate of academic failure decreased with learning the language. Moreover, in our research, a Syrian student stated that one of his best friends is Turkish. In addition, it was determined that the rate of academic failure decreased because of learning the language. Accordingly, it can be said that the increase in the language proficiency of the students whose mother tongue is different from the education language brings success in the lessons. It was also determined in the interviews that the success in the lessons and the development of friendship relations increased the connectedness of refugee students to the school. Students' connectedness to school can emerge in the form of using positive metaphors for school, paying more attention to their lessons, and establishing friendships with the opposite group.

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