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## Examining the Levels of Social Integration and Acculturation of Turkish and Syrian Middle School Students<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

### ARTICLE INFO

Individuals engage in voluntary or forced migration for various reasons and objectives. Due to its geographical location, Turkey has been exposed to waves of migration and has hosted millions of Syrian nationals of different age groups since 2011. School-age children are among the groups most affected by the migration process. Since 2016, migrant children and young people have been included in the compulsory education system alongside Turkish students. While compulsory education is an important step towards integration, it may not be sufficient on its own. There is a need to address issues such as marginalisation, language barriers and school adaptation among migrant students. It is crucial to provide environments where students can interact with each other, speak a common language, adapt to society and collaborate. In this process, it is necessary to determine the extent to which students have adapted to society in order to plan effective interventions. In this context, the study aims to examine the levels of social integration and acculturation of Turkish and immigrant middle school students. The research was conducted using a quantitative survey design. The study group consisted of a total of 23 sixth and seventh grade students, including 12 Turkish and 11 Syrian students studying in Istanbul. Data were collected using a social integration scale and an ethnic acculturation scale. The data were analysed using statistical software; it was determined that the data set followed a

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normal distribution, and t-tests were applied. Additionally, mean scores and standard deviation values were calculated. The results of the study revealed a significant difference between the ethnic acculturation scores of Turkish and immigrant students, but no significant difference in their social integration scores. It was determined that the social integration and ethnic acculturation levels of Turkish and Syrian immigrant students were at an intermediate level. Based on the findings, recommendations were developed to support the integration processes of Turkish and Syrian students.

**KeyWords:** Turkish, Migrant, Social Integration, Ethnic Acculturation, Secondary School

## **Türk ve Suriyeli Ortaokul Öğrencilerinin Toplumsal Entegrasyon ve Kültürlenme Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ÖZET**

### **MAKALE BİLGİSİ**

Bireyler, çeşitli nedenler ve hedefler doğrultusunda gönüllü ya da zorunlu göç hareketleri gerçekleştirmektedir. Coğrafi konumu nedeniyle göç dalgalarına maruz kalan Türkiye, 2011 yılından bu yana farklı yaş gruplarından milyonlarca Suriye uyruklu bireye ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Göç sürecinden en fazla etkilenen grupların başında ise okul çağındaki çocuklar gelmektedir. 2016 yılından itibaren göçmen çocuklar ve gençler, Türk öğrencilerle birlikte zorunlu eğitim sistemine dâhil edilmiştir. Zorunlu eğitim uyum sağlanması adına önemli bir adım olmakla birlikte, tek başına yeterli gelmeyebilir. Göçmen öğrencilerin ötekileştirme, dil engelleri ve okula uyum sorunlarının çözülmesine ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Öğrencilerin birbirleriyle etkileşim kurmaları, ortak dili konuşmaları, topluma uyum göstermeleri ve iş birliği yapabilecekleri ortamların sağlanması bu süreçte büyük önem taşımaktadır. Bu süreçte, öğrencilerin topluma ne ölçüde uyum sağladıklarının ortaya konulması, etkili müdahalelerin planlanabilmesi açısından gereklidir. Bu doğrultuda çalışmada, Türk ve göçmen ortaokul öğrencilerinin toplumsal entegrasyon ve kültürlenme düzeylerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırma, nicel yöntemlere dayalı tarama deseni kullanılarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

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Çalışma grubu, İstanbul'da öğrenim gören 12 Türk ve 11 Suriyeli olmak üzere toplam 23 altıncı ve yedinci sınıf öğrencisinden oluşmaktadır. Veriler, toplumsal entegrasyon ölçeği ve etnik kültürlenme ölçeği kullanılarak elde edilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler istatistik programı aracılığıyla analiz edilmiş; veri setinin normal dağılım gösterdiği belirlenmiş ve t-testleri uygulanmıştır. Ayrıca, ortalama puanlar ve standart sapma değerleri de hesaplanmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda, Türk ve göçmen öğrencilerin etnik kültürlenme puanları arasında anlamlı bir fark olduğu, ancak toplumsal entegrasyon puanları arasında anlamlı bir farklılık bulunmadığı tespit edilmiştir. Türk ve Suriye göçmeni öğrencilerin toplumsal entegrasyon ve etnik kültürlenme düzeylerinin orta düzeyde olduğu belirlenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular doğrultusunda, Türk ve Suriyeli öğrencilerin entegrasyon süreçlerini destekleyici öneriler geliştirilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk, Göçmen, Toplumsal Entegrasyon, Etnik Kültürlenme, Ortaokul

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## Introduction

Throughout history, people have moved from place to place, either individually or as a community, or in other words, they have migrated. Push and pull factors influence individuals' decisions to migrate and drive them to migrate. Migration is not only driven by the desire for better living conditions but also by factors that make life difficult or risky, such as political reasons, inadequate educational environments, epidemics, wars, and natural disasters (Koşak & Atasoy, 2022; Telsaç & Telsaç, 2022; Tümertekin & Özgüç 2020). Indeed, migration caused by war and violence is among the most destructive forms of forced migration due to its negative sociological and psychological effects (Özkarslı, 2014). Migration, which has become a social issue for countries and is important for the future, is a multidimensional phenomenon with a variable and dynamic structure (Özer & Yıldırım, 2024). Although this phenomenon is essentially perceived as human mobility, it is an action that involves constant change and interaction (Coştan & Yaylı, 2020). If this action takes the form of a change of location involving the movement of individuals from one country's border to another, it falls under the scope of international migration and external migration (Perruchoud & Cross, 2011; Yaylı & Aslan, 2023) and causes more problems than internal migration within a country.

Turkey and Anatolia have been constantly affected by external migration processes due to their geopolitical location and have faced many waves of migration from neighbouring countries (Cebeci, 2015). Due to its current position and proximity to many countries, it is a transit country (Yaylı & Aslan, 2023) and one of the first destinations for Syrian migrants (Akşit et al., 2015; Arslan & Uslu, 2020). As of 2025, Turkey is hosting approximately 2,807,615 registered Syrian migrants under temporary protection status (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025).

Migrations are phenomena that bring about social, economic and cultural changes and, at the same time, accelerate these changes (Zafer, 2016). Migrations are seen as representative of social mobility, which can have major social impacts (Çağlayan, 2015). The interaction

between the sending and receiving sides necessitates change and creates problems for both sides. This is because the coexistence of different religions and cultures inevitably leads to difficulties (Yardımcı, 2017). The profound changes experienced by migrants and the locals of the destination region also bring about adaptation problems based on the differentiation of social and physical environments (Zafer, 2016). This situation can result in some migrants either preserving their own values and living in harmony with the host society or assimilating by melting their socio-cultural values into the dominant culture (Kılıç, 2021).

A healthy transformation process in countries receiving migrants is only possible if migrants are able to adapt (Özer & Yıldırım, 2024). This situation brings the concept of social integration to the fore in terms of effectively implementing social and societal change and improving the process. The concept of integration, which has been frequently discussed worldwide over the past 10 years, has been explained by Dere & Demirci (2021) as the process of immigrants being accepted by individuals in the country to which they have migrated. Despite its important position in migration literature, it is a controversial concept on which there is no consensus (Fokkema & De Haas, 2015). Integration is a two-way process that refers to the harmony that emerges from the coexistence of migrants and the host society (Martikainen, 2010). Integration, a complex and ongoing phenomenon, is examined in many dimensions (Danış & Dikmen, 2022). It is primarily examined in three dimensions: physical, psychological, and social integration. Physical integration refers to an individual's physical participation in society and access to services, psychological integration refers to an individual's sense of belonging to society, and social integration refers to an individual's social interaction with members of society (Aslantürk, 2016; Bekiroğlu & Yılmaz, 2021; Wong & Solomon, 2002). Kılıç (2021) emphasises that the integration process can be successful if host individuals refrain from exclusionary behaviour towards migrants, strengthen social relationships, and demonstrate sincere approaches.

The element of acculturation emerges in the process of individuals learning to live together and be harmonious in society (Yaylı & Aslan, 2023). In the acculturation process associated with migration, the influence of the dominant culture on ethnic identities is examined (Yetim, 2024). Acculturation refers to the process of change in individuals' orientations towards different cultural contexts and environments (Titzmann & Lee, 2022). In general terms, it is defined as the cultural adaptation of immigrants to the mainstream society (Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Padilla & Perez, 2003). Acculturation explains the changes that occur when multiple cultures come together (Akdeniz, 2018). It also points to the psychological and behavioural change process that results from the interaction of cultures (Aliye & Öğülmüş, 2016). The sociocultural and psychological adaptation of individuals affects their traditions, economic and political lives (Berry, 2003). The acculturation process can be influenced by the characteristics of the host country, the attitudes of the local population, cultural similarities and differences between countries, and the reasons for migration (Zafer, 2016). In some cases, migrants may show a tendency to live as a whole with the cultural identity of the host society and their own ethnic identity, or sometimes they may show a tendency to be unable to harmonise between the two identities (Sağır, 2020). In other

words, migrants have the option of adopting the new culture and wanting to stay away from their own culture (Padilla & Perez, 2003).

Ethnic identity is explained as a component of “awareness, labelling, attitude and behaviour” that results in an individual identifying with a particular group and forming an emotional bond with that group (Verkuyten, 2018). Regardless of individuals' attachment to their own countries, their attachment to the host country is determined by ethnic identity (Constant et al., 2009). Behaviour, values, and beliefs influence the change in ethnic identity through acculturation (Arandia et al., 2018). An individual's declaration of membership in a particular ethnic group and the resulting impact on the individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions are evident (Piña-Watson et al., 2018). In this regard, it can be said that individuals' ethnic identities serve as protective factors against the difficulties they experience when entering a new culture (Arenas & Urzúa, 2016).

Children are one of the groups most affected by the migration process and the changing conditions, and for children, the most fundamental aspect of the integration process is education (Dere & Demirci, 2021). Indeed, it is clear that the reflections of the migration process are even more serious in school-age children. Disruptions in children's education and the exclusion of some students from the process can lead to significant problems (Er & Bayındır, 2015; Koşak et al., 2022). Research shows that Syrian migrant students are unable to adapt to the education system due to language and cultural differences; they have low achievement levels, difficulty understanding lessons, and are unable to fulfil their responsibilities (Akyavuz et al., 2020; Turan & Polat, 2012; Üstün & Baş, 2022). Education, one of the main areas of integration, contributes significantly to the acceptance of individuals into society (Dere & Demirci, 2021; Kucur et al., 2024). The lack of sufficient support from families and schools for immigrant children can hinder their successful integration into the new environment (Benner & Wang, 2014). Therefore, schools constitute the first step in the acculturation process for immigrant children (Akdeniz, 2018).

Turkey's education system provides compulsory education to all Syrian refugee students. Therefore, the education system has taken on a quantitative role in ensuring the integration of refugees into society in our country. However, it will be valuable to conduct studies on establishing a balance between the identity to which students belong and the alternative identity they have acquired. It is important that refugee students complete their integration and acculturation process without suffering any damage. In this context, the first step is to identify and examine the social integration and acculturation status of individuals. Based on this, this study aims to examine the social integration and acculturation status of Turkish and migrant secondary school students. To this end;

1. ‘Is there a significant difference between the ethnic acculturation scores of Turkish and migrant students?’
2. ‘Is there a significant difference between the social integration scores of Turkish and immigrant students?’
3. ‘What are the ethnic acculturation scores of Turkish and immigrant students?’

4. ‘What are the social integration scores of Turkish and immigrant students?’ ,the research questions shaped the research process.

## **Method**

### **Research Model**

The study was conducted using a survey model based on quantitative research methods. A survey aims to collect data to determine the characteristics of a specific group (Büyüköztürk et al., 2023). The current study aims to compare the levels of social adaptation and acculturation of Turkish and Syrian middle school students. In this context, the survey model was preferred based on the objective of systematically revealing the levels of social integration and acculturation of students.

### **Working Group**

The research was conducted with middle school students attending a public school in Istanbul during the 2022–2023 academic year. The study group consisted of a total of 23 students, including both migrant and local students in the seventh grade. The study group was determined using criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods. In this type of sampling, the basic understanding is to work with individuals who meet a pre-determined set of criteria. The criterion or criteria can be determined by the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In this context, the purposive sampling method determined in the study ensured that Syrian immigrant students belonging to a socio-economically disadvantaged group and Turkish students studying in the same class were included. Care was taken to ensure that the participating students were between the ages of 12 and 15. Twelve of the students in the study group were Turkish, and 11 were Syrian refugee students. Eight of these students were female, and 15 were male.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Data collection was carried out using the social integration scale and ethnic acculturation scale. The social integration scale developed by McColl et al. (2001) consists of 10 items. There are no reverse-coded items in the scale. The scale is a 5-point Likert scale and is rated as follows: 1- Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Undecided, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly agree. The Cronbach Alpha value of the scale is 0.87 overall. The minimum score that can be obtained from the scale is 10, and the maximum score is 50. Another data collection tool, the ethnic acculturation scale, consists of 29 items. It was developed by Berry (2011) and adapted into Turkish by Akdeniz (2018). The scale is rated on a 7-point Likert scale. (1) Strongly disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Disagree (4) Undecided (5) Somewhat agree (6) Agree (7) Strongly agree. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability values for the scale are 0.70 and above. The minimum score that can be obtained from the scale is 29, and the maximum score is 203.

### **Data Collection Process**

The study data were collected using the Social Integration Scale and Ethnic Acculturation Scale, which were determined as data collection tools. The scales were completed face-to-face with participating middle school students in a classroom setting. Before proceeding to the application stage of the form, the students were given the necessary explanations and information about filling out the form. No intervention was made until the data collection process was completed.

### **Data Analysis**

The students' responses to the scales were reviewed and verified in the first stage. In the next stage, the data obtained from the students' responses were transferred to the SPSS statistical programme. The normality of the distribution of the scores was checked to determine the type of analysis to be used in the analysis of the scales. Since the sample size of the data set was 50 or less, the Shapiro-Wilk results were examined, and no significant difference was found in the data set ( $p>0,05$ ), indicating that the data followed a normal distribution (Büyüköztürk, 2019). Since the data set obtained from the ethnic acculturation and integration scales showed a normal distribution, it was decided that it was suitable for parametric test analysis. Independent t-test statistics were used in the analysis of the scales. In addition, the mean score values and standard deviation values of the data set were calculated.

### **Ethical Processes in Research**

The purpose of the study, the reasons for conducting it, and where their responses would be used were clearly explained to the middle school students who participated in the study. In addition, students were assured that their responses to the measurement tools would be kept confidential in accordance with the principle of confidentiality. Furthermore, student names and surnames were kept confidential and a coding method was used. Within the scope of the research conducted, the necessary legal permissions were obtained from the Academic Ethics Committee of Yıldız Technical University (Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, meeting dated 02.05.2022 and numbered 2022.05).

### **Findings**

Within the scope of the study, data obtained using the 'Social Integration Scale' and 'Ethnic Acculturation Scale' data collection tools were analysed and the findings of the analysis were presented.

#### **Findings Related to the Social Integration Scale**

Table 1 presents the findings of the normality distribution test results for the scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian migrant students on the social integration scale.

**Table 1.** Findings from the Normality Distribution Test Results for Social Integration Scores

Social Integration Score	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test			Shapiro-Wilk Test		
	Statistics	df	p	Statistics	df	p
Turkish Students	0,201	12	0,195*	0,869	12	0,063
Syrian Students	0,234	11	0,093	0,897	11	0,170

Table 1 shows the normality distribution results of the social integration scale scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian immigrant students. Upon examining the normality distribution results, it is understood that there is no significant difference in the data and that the data show a normal distribution ( $p>0.05$ ).

The findings of the independent sample t-test results for the social integration scale scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian migrant students are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Findings from Independent t-Test Results for Social Integration Scores

Social Integration Score	N	$\bar{X}$	Sd	df	t-Value	p	Cohen's d
Turkish Students	12	39,16	9,68	21	1,89	0,072	0,79
Syrian Students	11	30,36	12,50				

Table 2 shows the results of the independent sample t-test for the social integration scale scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian migrant students. When examining the social integration scores, the average score for Turkish students was found to be  $\bar{X}_{\text{Turkish}}=39,16$ , with a standard deviation of  $Ss_{\text{Turkish}}=9,68$ . The average social integration score for Syrian migrant students was found to be  $\bar{X}_{\text{Syrian}}=165,45$ , with a standard deviation of  $Ss_{\text{Syrian}}=39,24$ . It is understood that the social integration scores of Turkish students are higher than those of Syrian refugee students. However, when looking at the social integration scores, it is understood that there is no significant difference between the scores of Turkish and Syrian refugee students ( $t=1,89$ ;  $p>0,05$ ). The Cohen's d effect value of 0,79 for the t-test supporting this result indicates that the effect of the obtained result is large. This effect size indicates that the difference in social integration scores between Turkish and Syrian students is of moderate significance.

### Findings Obtained Regarding the Ethnic Culturalisation Scale

The findings of the normality distribution test results for the scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian immigrant students on the ethnic acculturation scale are presented in Table 3.



**Table 3.** Findings from the Normality Distribution Test Results for Ethnic Culturalisation Scores

Ethnic Culturalisation Score	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test			Shapiro-Wilk Test		
	Statistics	df	p	Statistics	df	p
Turkish Students	0,187	12	0,200*	0,883	12	0,096
Syrian Students	0,245	11	0,065	0,878	11	0,097

Table 3 shows the normality distribution results of the scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian immigrant students on the ethnic acculturation scale. When the normality distribution results are examined, it is understood that there is no significant difference in the data and that the data show a normal distribution ( $p>0.05$ ).

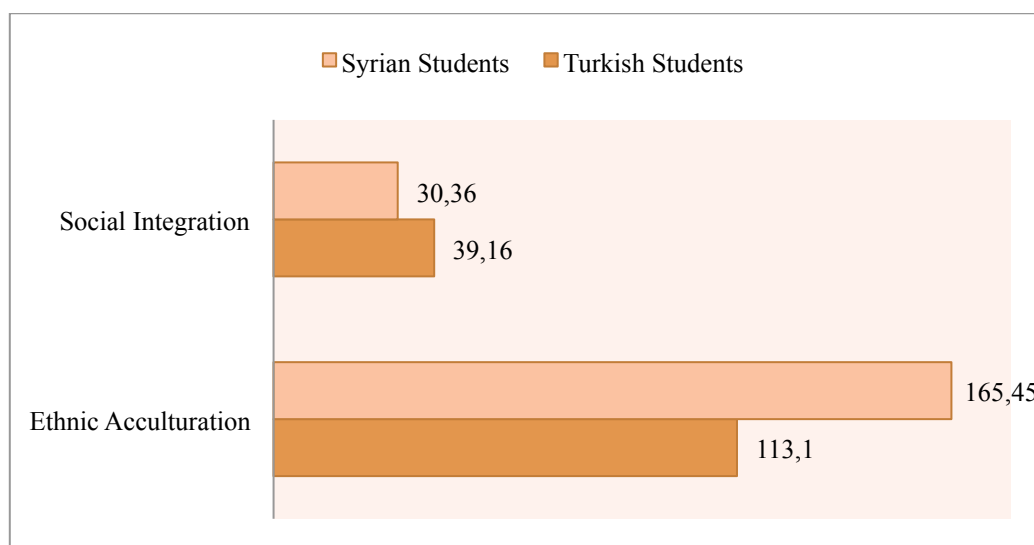
The findings of the independent sample t-test results for the scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian immigrant students on the ethnic acculturation scale are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Findings from the Independent t-Test Results for Ethnic Culturalisation Scores

Ethnic Culturalisation Score	N	$\bar{X}$	Sd	df	t-Value	p	Cohen's d
Turkish Students	12	113,10	38,04	21	3,24	0,004	1,36
Syrian Students	11	165,45	39,24				

Table 4 shows the results of the independent sample t-test for the scores obtained by Turkish and Syrian immigrant students on the ethnic acculturation scale. When examining the ethnic acculturation scores, the average score for Turkish students was found to be  $\bar{X}_{\text{Turkish}}=113,10$ , with a standard deviation of  $Ss_{\text{Turkish}}=38,04$ . The average ethnic acculturation score for Syrian immigrant students was found to be  $\bar{X}_{\text{Syrian}}=165,45$ , with a standard deviation of  $Ss_{\text{Syrian}}=39,24$ . It is understood that the ethnic acculturation scores of Syrian immigrant students are higher than those of Turkish students. However, when looking at the ethnic acculturation scores, it is understood that there is a significant difference between the scores of Turkish and Syrian immigrant students ( $t=3,24$ ;  $p<0,04$ ) and that this significant difference is in favour of Syrian immigrant students. The Cohen's d effect value of 1,36 for the t-test indicates that the effect is large. This effect size indicates that the difference in ethnic acculturation scores between Turkish and Syrian students is quite strongly significant.

Figure 1 shows the average scores for social integration and ethnic acculturation among Turkish and Syrian immigrant students.



**Figure 1.** Findings Regarding Students' Average Scores for Social Integration and Ethnic Acculturation

Figure 1 shows the average scores of Turkish and Syrian immigrant students in terms of social integration and ethnic acculturation. It was found that Turkish and immigrant students had average scores in terms of social integration and ethnic acculturation. Turkish students had higher average scores in terms of social integration and lower scores in terms of ethnic acculturation compared to Syrian students.

### Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to examine the levels of social integration and acculturation among Turkish and Syrian migrant secondary school students. According to the research findings, while there was a significant difference between Turkish and Syrian students in terms of ethnic acculturation scores, no significant difference was found in terms of social integration scores. These findings indicate that Syrian students tend to preserve their cultural identity and maintain a closer connection with their traditional structures. Yetim (2024) interprets the high acculturation scores in his study as a strong search for belonging rather than identity conflict. In this regard, the current research findings are consistent with the interpretations in the literature and support the results of the study. Çömez Polat & Kaya (2017) argue that the perception of Syrian refugees as 'temporary guests' in Turkey may hinder their long-term integration. In this context, the students' tendency to remain closely attached to their ethnic culture may indicate that they do not see themselves as part of a 'permanent' community. On the other hand, it is understood that Syrian students participate in social life at a similar level and interact socially with Turkish students. The results obtained are consistent with the 'integration' form in Berry's (1997) acculturation strategies model. Syrian students tend to both

preserve their ethnic identity and establish relationships with the society in which they live. This indicates that they are in a two-way adaptation process rather than assimilation (Berry, 2003; Padilla & Perez, 2003). Additionally, this situation indicates that the host society and immigrants have positive interactions in common social environments (such as school, classrooms, and peer relationships).

Turkish students have a higher level of social integration than Syrian students, while Syrian students have a higher level of ethnic acculturation. Turkish students exhibit a higher level of social integration than Syrian students, while Syrian students exhibit a higher level of ethnic acculturation. However, when considering the social integration and ethnic acculturation scores of both groups, they are generally assessed as being at a medium level. These findings are consistent with the studies conducted by Akdeniz (2018) and Kuzucanlı (2019), indicating that students are generally at a medium level in terms of integration and acculturation processes.

One of the most fundamental obstacles Syrian students face in the integration process is the language barrier (Akyavuz et al., 2020; Er & Bayındır, 2015). Özer et al. (2016) state that the most fundamental difficulties Syrian students face in the school adaptation process are language inadequacy and socio-emotional exclusion. These findings, in parallel with the cultural attachment observed in the current study, can be considered as one of the reasons for students' tendency to protect their identity. However, the fact that students in the classes where the research was conducted received education in a common classroom environment may have contributed to overcoming this barrier over time. This situation demonstrates the positive effect of compulsory education, which has been implemented in Turkey since 2016 and includes immigrants, on integration (Dere & Demirci, 2021). Arslan and Uslu (2020) have revealed that teacher-student relationships and classroom dynamics play a decisive role in the academic success of immigrant students. The results of the current study also show that students' social adaptation is directly related to these interactions.

In conclusion, Syrian immigrant students maintain a high level of attachment to their own culture while also adapting to the society in which they live on a social level. Being educated alongside Turkish students facilitates their social integration process. The integration levels of both groups are moderate, but Syrian students maintain their cultural identity more distinctly.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, our recommendations are as follows: school-based social integration programmes should be expanded; tools such as group work and cultural sharing activities should be used to encourage students to get to know each other. Crul and Schneider's (2010) 'comparative integration context' theory, developed on immigrant students in Europe, reveals the impact of the content of the education system and the structure of social inclusiveness on students' levels of integration. The fact that compulsory education in Turkey

increases interaction among students suggests that these structural factors can positively influence integration. Guidance services should be planned to develop intercultural communication skills; supportive structures should be established, especially for students experiencing language barriers. Refugee students' families should be actively involved in the process; parent meetings and joint activities should be organised to increase home-school cooperation. Social media and digital tools can be used as pedagogical tools with content that supports integration (Kuzucanlı, 2019). Teacher training aimed at creating an inclusive educational climate in schools should be encouraged (Benner & Wang, 2014).

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