


## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## An Examination of Bullying Experiences in Peer Relationships of Syrian Adolescents in the Context of Acculturation

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study aims to examine the peer bullying experiences of Syrian adolescents who migrated to Turkey, within the context of their acculturation process.

**Methods:** A qualitative approach was adopted in this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with Syrian adolescents aged 14–20 who migrated to Turkey. A total of 14 adolescents (7 girls and 7 boys) participated in in-depth interviews. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the findings were systematically presented.

**Results:** The study revealed that participants frequently faced exclusion, discrimination, and bullying in peer relationships at school due to their Syrian identity. Similar issues were noted in teacher-student interactions, although some teachers played a key supportive role. Acculturative stress was linked to emotional withdrawal, negative self-image, and psychological distress. Social support—especially from family and supportive teachers—emerged as the main protective factor. Language proficiency and positive contact with the host community facilitated adaptation. School was portrayed as both a site of hardship and a space of opportunity for future aspirations.

**Conclusion:** This study explores how acculturation affects Syrian migrant adolescents' school life, emphasizing the role of language proficiency and social support in this process.

**Keywords:** Acculturative Stress, Peer Bullying, Acculturation, Adolescents, Migration

### Introduction

Migration has historically been driven by factors like security concerns and economic opportunities. It involves not just physical relocation, but social, cultural, and psychological transformation. In multicultural societies, acculturation refers to the process of adaptation to cultural change due to the interaction of multiple cultural groups, impacting both groups and individuals over time.<sup>1</sup> This adaptation

process can be a source of stress, sometimes overwhelming individuals' coping abilities and leading to psychological difficulties.<sup>2</sup> For children and adolescents, who are in early stages of development, this process presents significant risks.<sup>3</sup> Experiencing war and migration at a young age involves various risk factors that contribute to psychological issues. Traumatic experiences across the migration process, intergenerational stress due to family

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members with psychopathology, linguistic barriers, and economic hardship all contribute to the complexity of adjustment for adolescent migrants, particularly when there is a discrepancy in acculturation levels between them and their families.<sup>3-8</sup> Another important issue for children and adolescents is their school life in the new country of residence. Migrant children of school age often face the challenge of receiving education in a different language and experiencing discrimination in peer relationships at school, both of which are stressful life events in the post-migration period.<sup>9</sup> The existing literature indicates that discrimination experienced by migrant adolescents in their relationships with teachers and peers negatively affects school adjustment, hinders the development of positive behaviors, and poses a risk to their sense of school belonging.<sup>10</sup> Being a migrant, along with experiencing discrimination and bullying at school, leads to higher levels of stress and psychological issues in adolescents.<sup>11,12</sup>

Migrant adolescents' school adjustment is closely tied to social support from teachers and peers, affecting both cultural adaptation and psychological health.<sup>10</sup> Discrimination negatively impacts school adjustment and belonging, while belonging is linked to academic success.<sup>13</sup> Thus, acculturation significantly influences academic success. Understanding adolescents' relational experiences in school is key to supporting their adaptation and well-being. The combined effects of war, migration, and negative relationships heighten their vulnerability.

Building on the existing literature, this study explores how acculturation-related challenges shape Syrian adolescents' experiences of peer bullying in Turkish schools. By examining the psychosocial impact of these experiences, the study aims to identify potential pathways for creating more inclusive and supportive school

environments that effectively address the needs of migrant adolescents.

## Materials And Methods

**Participants:** The age range of the participants in this study was between 14 and 20 years, with a mean age of 17. The participant profile consisted of Syrian adolescents under temporary protection who had migrated to Turkey due to the Syrian war. A purposive sampling method was used for participant selection. The inclusion criteria were being a high school student or a recent graduate, having received education alongside Turkish students, and self-reported proficiency in speaking and understanding Turkish. Meeting these criteria was important to obtain meaningful data based on participants' experiences and to ensure communicative accessibility during the interview process.

**Procedure:** In total, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 14 adolescents (7 girls, 7 boys). All interviews were held in settings where participants felt safe and comfortable. Data collection was concluded when data saturation was reached—indicated by the repetition of themes and a decline in the emergence of new and meaningful information. Therefore, after ensuring both data depth and diversity of data, the sample was not expanded further.

**Measures:** The interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions. Eleven open-ended questions were developed based on a review of the relevant literature and were prepared to guide the interviews with participants. Examples of the questions include: *"As a Syrian your age, what is it like to live in Turkey?"* *"How do you experience the cultural differences between Turkey and Syria in your daily life?"* and *"How do you experience being a Syrian student at school?"* The questions focused on types of bullying, difficulties

experienced in the acculturation process and coping mechanisms.

**Data Analysis**

This study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, and thematic analysis was applied to the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analyzing recurring patterns of meaning in research data.<sup>14</sup> Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by an initial review to note ideas before coding. Using an inductive approach, the first codes were created for the entire data set and grouped into themes based on similarities and differences. The main themes and sub-themes were reviewed, named, and refined. The analysis process was thorough, and the coding was verified by the thesis supervisor.

**Results**

The themes frequently encountered in the interviews were analyzed, and three main themes shaping adolescents' experiences were identified: *The Acculturation Process*, *Turkish Language Proficiency*, and *The Importance of School* (Table 1). The acculturation process was experienced as both a stress-inducing and adaptive experience, while Turkish language proficiency was seen as both a barrier and a tool for resilience; school emerged as a critical space for both victimization and support.

**Table 1.** Main themes

	<b>Frequency</b>
Acculturation Process	14
Impact of Turkish Language	14
Importance of School	5

**Acculturation Process**

The participants' experiences of the new cultural context post-migration were examined through their responses. They shared the challenges they faced in adapting to the differences between their home and host societies, how these challenges affected them, and how they coped with them. The analysis identified factors *facilitating* and *challenging* adaptation to the new culture, as well as coping strategies, which were categorized as sub-themes (Table 2). In the sub-theme "*Negative Experiences of Being Syrian in Social Relationships*," participants predominantly reported negative experiences in peer relationships at school. These experiences were identified as various forms of bullying (Table 4).

**Negative Experiences of Being Syrian in Social Relationships**

It was observed that the participants' negative experiences in social relationships were often experienced in peer relationships at school. For example, one participant described the difficulties he experienced as follows;

*"For example, my friends were playing during sports time. I wanted to go and play too. I wanted to play with them, but they would say, 'Go play with your Syrian friends.' So, I would sit aside and watch them. Then, for example, we would go to the cafeteria, and I wanted to get food, but there was a line, and they would push me. I was young and didn't know. They would push me and say, 'You're Syrian, go to the back.' And I would go."*

After peer relations, the most frequently mentioned issue was the negative experience of being Syrian in their relations with teachers. One participant described the incident as follows;

*"This year, we're going to 12th grade. My friend had a presentation. We all had to talk about a war."*

**Table 2.** Factors facilitating and challenging adaptation to the new culture

Facilitators	Frequency	Challenges	Frequency
Social Support	11	Negative Experiences of Being Syrian in Social Relationships	5
Social Proximity to Members of the Settlement Community	6	Attending an Arab School	3
Personal Characteristic	5	Factors Preventing Social Contact with Members of the Settlement Community	2
Seeing Their Future in Turkey	2	No Syrian Students in School	2
		Poor Turkish Language Skills	1

**Table 3.** Effects of Acculturation Stress and Coping Resources

Stress Factors	Frequency	Effects	Frequency	Coping Resources	Frequency
Negative Experiences of Being Syrian in Social Relationships	14	Emotional Effects	11	Social Support	12
The Early Post-Migration Phase	8	Withdrawal	6	Using Verbal Expression	8
Adaptation to the Education System	2	School Avoidance	4	Avoidance of Conflict in Response to Bullying	5
Acculturation Discrepancy Between Parents and Children	2	Negative Self-Perception	3	Passive Coping Through Ignoring Bullying	4
Financial Difficulties	1	Efforts to Assert One's Identity	2	Personal Motivations	4
		Wanting to Return to Syria	2		
		Decline in Academic Achievement	2		

*Each of us had to choose a war and write about it to present. We had an assignment like that. My friend's Turkish wasn't very good, it was actually quite bad, but she could still speak, like somewhat. We all started taking turns to present over the weeks. It was my friend's turn. She went up, and she was quite confident. But since her Turkish wasn't good, she faced many difficulties while speaking. The teacher seemed to get quite angry because of this. The teacher started saying things like, 'Your Turkish isn't good, why are you coming up here?'*

### **Effects of Acculturative Stress**

The research shows that school is an important area that plays both a protective and risk-inducing role in adolescents' cultural adaptation process. Participants frequently shared their challenging experiences in social relationships during the cultural adaptation process, particularly with peers and teachers at school, and discussed the various impacts of these difficult relational experiences. Under the sub-theme of effects of acculturative stress, sub-themes of negative emotional impact,

introversion and negative self-perception emerged (Table 3).

**Social Support**

Social support was the most frequently mentioned factor facilitating adaptation to the new culture and coping with negative experiences of being Syrian in peer relationships at school (Table 3). For example, one participant stated that social relationships facilitated his adaptation to the new culture as follows;

*“It was a bit difficult but my classmates were very good. They were very, very good. I mean, in 9th and 10th grade, it was like we were at home. They never made me feel like a stranger. I never felt like a stranger.”*

A participant who said that their relationships with their teachers supported them in dealing with difficult situations they experienced, stated the following;

*“For example, when there was a problem in front of the teachers, they stood by us. They would tell us: ‘Don’t be embarrassed, tell us if something happens, if you feel uncomfortable with your friends, come and tell us. They were supportive.”*

In line with the literature, supportive relationships with family were the most frequently mentioned source of social support in this study;

*“My mum especially. You should study, you should be what you want to be, studying is a very good thing, you have a goal. You will not spend your life sitting at home. Nothing happens without studying. You know, my biggest support is my mother.”*

In this study, while participants identified establishing social contact with members of the host country as a factor that facilitated adjustment, they also identified situations that prevented establishing social contact with

members of the host country as factors that made adjustment difficult. For example;

*“But there was a Syrian school there, I was never enrolled there. I think I was lucky to go to a Turkish school. There were few Syrians there, so that’s it, for example, when I first arrived, I concentrated on Turkish. There were Turks there, I played with Turks, I studied with Turks. I did everything with Turks, so it was easier.”*

**Table 4.** Negative Experiences in Peer Relations at School

	Frequency
Discrimination	8
Mocking	5
Opinions that Syrians are favoured	4
Negative Attitudes towards Immigration	3
Humiliation	2
Violence	2
Blaming Syrians for Unfavourable Situations	1
Slander	1
Expression of Negative Thoughts	1

**Impact of Turkish Language Proficiency**

All participants were proficient in Turkish, and they were asked how this affected their lives. Responses showed that language proficiency was key in both bullying experiences and social relationships for Syrian adolescents (Table 5). Participants reported that language skills helped them build positive relationships with peers and teachers and enabled them to actively cope with bullying. They also noted that Turkish proficiency influenced academic performance and overall well-being. One

participant explained that a lack of language skills hindered cultural adjustment as follows:

*"For example, I have a friend, by the way, I always give examples of my friends because I always see my friends and they are Syrian, I have a friend from Damascus who doesn't know Turkish. He went to school and he still did not learn Turkish. Because he doesn't want to learn Turkish, he doesn't learn it. We went to the same school, I used to interpret for him all the time. He trusted me a lot. He did not learn Turkish. When I left him, the schools were closed, he went to a school near his home and I went to a school near mine. He couldn't go to school. Because he doesn't speak Turkish. He can neither understand the lessons nor communicate with his friends. He has a lot of difficulties."*

**Table 5.** Impact of Turkish Language Proficiency

	Frequency
Building social relationships	8
Independence	8
Coping with Negative Experiences of Being Syrian in Social Relationships	4
Helping Family Members	4
Academic Achievement	4
Positive Emotional Impact	2

### **Importance of School**

Participants indicated that school is a key place for Syrian adolescents, where both bullying and support mechanisms influence their acculturation process. Five participants described school as crucial for their future, serving as a source of hope for improving living conditions. One participant said:

*"I don't know, I love it very much, it would be better for my family. To help them in the future. You*

*know, the person who does not study works in construction or something. In the sun, in the rain... Why should I be like that? I don't want to be like that, I want to be better."*

### **Discussion**

This study explores the peer bullying experiences of Syrian adolescents in Turkey within the acculturation context, highlighting the psychosocial impacts of migration on their school life. It emphasizes the importance of peer and teacher relationships, with Turkish proficiency playing a critical role in enhancing resilience and coping with bullying. Negative social experiences, including social exclusion, mockery, and discrimination, are significant stressors, and the literature indicates that such experiences are particularly perceived as severe stressors by migrant adolescents.<sup>4,15-18</sup> Participants frequently reported these issues, alongside perceptions of discrimination, such as the belief that Syrian students were favored in exams.

The study's findings align with the literature, indicating that migrant students face challenges in both peer interactions and teacher relationships, which negatively affect their academic performance and school engagement.<sup>10</sup> Participants described a lack of sufficient teacher support and experiences of discrimination. Bullying is linked to psychological issues like depression, anxiety, and PTSD <sup>4,9,19</sup> with acculturation stress and social isolation leading to similar outcomes. <sup>11,20,21</sup> Participants reported feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, withdrawal, and academic failure as consequences.

These negative social experiences weaken migrant students' support networks and hinder academic success and school adjustment. <sup>9,10</sup> Despite this, participants found

academic achievement and career goals motivating in coping with bullying. Temporary education centers and adaptation classes, which often lack sufficient focus on Turkish language instruction, contribute to academic delays and hinder peer integration, underscoring the role of language proficiency in social relationships, independent functioning, and mental well-being, which is also supported by the literature.<sup>18,22</sup> Language was identified by participants as crucial for coping with bullying and accessing social support.

These findings highlight the need for educational programs that strengthen social relationships and provide psychosocial support for migrant students. Additionally, integration policies addressing language proficiency, school belonging, and academic support are essential.

The findings and scope of this study are limited to the 14 adolescents who participated in the research. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. However, considering the parallels with existing literature, it is believed that the experiential data gathered through in-depth interviews with participants offer valuable contributions that enrich the current body of knowledge

## Conclusion

Syrian students' integration requires both academic support and initiatives to strengthen peer relationships. Schools should promote inclusive activities to enhance interactions between migrant and local peers. Language proficiency and academic support should be prioritized through structured programs. School staff need training on migration, discrimination, and refugee mental health. Early psychosocial support and life skills programs are essential for adaptation. Further research on Syrian students' language

development, academic achievement, and well-being is needed.

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