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Resisting Invisibility: Immigrant Youth in Higher Education

[1]Gizem Hatipoglu

[1]*Dokuz Eylul University, Türkiye*

*Corresponding Author: gizem.hatipoglu@deu.edu.tr

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Abstract

This study investigates the educational experiences of international students in Turkish vocational higher education through the lens of Social Identity Theory. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, data were collected via focus group interviews with 15 international students from diverse national backgrounds. Thematic analysis revealed five main themes: sense of belonging, social identity and intergroup differentiation, experiences of discrimination, coping strategies, and language and communication barriers. Findings indicate that students face systemic and interpersonal challenges, including social exclusion, microaggressions, and identity marginalization. Despite these obstacles, many demonstrate resilience through peer solidarity, religious faith, and personal determination. The "us versus them" dynamic and linguistic difficulties further complicate students' integration and identity negotiation processes. Positive teacher-student relationships and inclusive classroom practices emerged as significant factors supporting belonging and motivation. The research highlights the importance of inclusive pedagogical strategies, institutional support systems, and culturally responsive policies in fostering migrant student success. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need to view migrant students not just through a deficit lens but as active agents capable of resilience and transformation. The findings have implications for higher education institutions aiming to develop equitable and inclusive environments for international students.

Keywords: Immigrant students, social identity, discrimination, higher education

Introduction

The increasing migration flows due to globalization's impact profoundly affect the demographic structure and social institutions. Education systems are among the institutions most impacted by this transformation. Gathering individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in the same educational environment has made multicultural structures inevitable. This situation becomes even more pronounced in countries like Turkiye, both receiving and transit countries for migration, particularly with a noticeable increase in international students at the higher education level. However, this quantitative increase does not necessarily mean that international students are fully integrated into the education system and have the opportunity to receive education under equal conditions.

While trying to adapt to a new academic education system, international students must also cope with complex social processes such as identity, belonging, and visibility. In this context, evaluating the educational experiences of international students solely through academic success or failure is insufficient, because students' social interactions in the school environment, the groups they feel they belong to, and how they cope with intergroup relations are among the factors that directly shape their educational processes.

In this study, the educational experiences of international students are examined within the framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to this theory, individuals define their identities through their characteristics and the social groups they belong to. These intergroup interactions directly affect an individual's self-perception, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. Educational institutions are fundamental social spaces where individuals construct and reshape their social identities. Therefore, exclusionary attitudes and discriminatory practices that international students encounter in the school environment can erode their social identities, weaken their sense of belonging, and negatively impact their psychosocial adjustment processes.

In this context, the primary aim of this research is to understand the development of social identity, sense of belonging, and experiences of discrimination among international students studying at the university. The research examines how international students position themselves in the school environment, which social groups they feel they belong to, and what social identity they develop within the "us" versus "them" distinction. Additionally, the study focuses on how relationships with teachers and peers affect this identity development, what factors support or weaken students' sense of belonging, and what coping strategies they develop against experiences of discrimination and exclusion.

This study examines the educational experiences of international students within the framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It investigates how students develop a group identity based on their social interactions. The main research question within this framework is: "How do international students develop a group identity based on the social interactions they encounter in their educational processes, and how does this identity development shape their sense of belonging and experiences of discrimination?" Thus, by focusing on how international students construct their social identities through their educational interactions, this study deepens theoretical insights and sets the stage for critically examining the institutional structures and societal dynamics that shape these experiences.

Migration is not merely an individual experience; it is also a process that transforms the structure of social institutions. Turkiye's steadily increasing international student population necessitates that higher education institutions re-evaluate their inclusivity, equality, and multiculturalism principles. The study to be conducted in line with these questions aims to understand the educational experiences of international students studying at the university more in-depth and multidimensionally. Revealing the impact of international students' social

identity construction processes on their academic motivation and success is essential both for highlighting the challenges experienced at the individual level and the institutional shortcomings. Furthermore, the findings will contribute to developing more inclusive and equitable policies in higher education institutions. In this context, this research aims to contribute to understanding international students' social identity construction processes and developing guiding recommendations for education policies and practices. Moreover, the application of Social Identity Theory in the university context has the potential to provide a theoretical contribution to the literature.

Conceptual Framework

Social Identity Theory: Theoretical Foundations

Social Identity Theory (SIT), initially developed by Henri Tajfel and further expanded by John Turner in the 1970s, has become one of the most influential theories in social psychology for explaining how individuals derive a sense of identity through their membership in social groups (Edison et al., 2021; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory posits that people's self-concept is composed of both personal identities, derived from individual traits and experiences, and social identity, which is based on one's group affiliations (Xiang, 2021).

At the core of SIT are three interrelated psychological processes: social categorization**,** social identification, and social comparison (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). These processes help individuals make sense of their social environments and define their position within them. Social categorization refers to the process through which individuals classify themselves and others into social groups based on ethnicity, gender, nationality, or institutional affiliation (Adams et al., 2018). This simplification of the social world enables individuals to navigate social interactions more efficiently and contributes to in-group favoritism and out-group bias (Tajfel, 1974; Liberman et al., 2017). Even minimal categorization—such as assigning individuals to arbitrary groups—has been shown to create preferences for one's group (Tajfel et al., 1971). Social identification involves internalizing a group's norms, values, and goals, leading individuals to experience emotional and psychological alignment with that group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This identification provides a sense of belonging and contributes significantly to self-esteem and psychological security (Nwosu & Uguru, 2021; Simbula et al., 2023). For migrant students, such identification can manifest in peer groups, ethnic communities, or institutional environments. Social comparison entails evaluating one's group relative to others. This process can influence individuals' self-perception, depending on whether the comparison results in a sense of superiority or inferiority (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Favorable comparisons can enhance group cohesion and self-esteem, while unfavorable comparisons may lead to feelings of marginalization or identity threat (Friesen & Besley, 2013).

These processes are especially relevant in educational contexts where group boundaries—such as native vs. migrant, or majority vs. minority—may be highly salient. In higher education, where diversity is increasing, migrant students may encounter both inclusionary

and exclusionary dynamics that influence how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others (Dadak & Demir, 2020; Bat-Chava, 2000).

Empirical research has shown that individuals derive significant emotional meaning from their group memberships, and this emotional significance shapes their behaviors and attitudes toward in-groups and out-groups (Hornsey, 2008; Edison et al., 2021). When individuals perceive their social identity as threatened—either through exclusion, stereotyping, or institutional discrimination—they may adopt various identity management strategies, including individual mobility (seeking to join higher-status groups), social creativity (redefining group attributes positively), or social competition (actively seeking to elevate the group's status) (Ellemers et al., 2004; Bat-Chava, 2000). Understanding social identity dynamics is thus crucial in educational settings where students from diverse cultural backgrounds interact. Migrant students' experiences of belonging, recognition, and participation are closely tied to how their social identities are constructed and negotiated within the institutional culture (Charman & Tyson, 2023; Spears, 2017). When institutions foster inclusive environments that affirm diverse identities, students are more likely to experience positive identity integration, which enhances educational engagement and well-being (Moran & Sussman, 2014; Tjimuku & Atiku, 2024).

SIT also provides a theoretical lens to explore how group-based dynamics contribute to structural inequalities, such as prejudice**,** discrimination, and intergroup conflict (Brown, 2000; Hogg et al., 2017). For example, when dominant groups perceive their status as threatened by the presence of migrant students, they may reinforce exclusionary practices or stereotypes that further marginalize these groups (Curatman et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2008). On the other hand, promoting shared social identity in educational spaces, such as emphasizing collective goals or inclusive norms, has reduced intergroup tensions and fostered solidarity (Hogg et al., 2012). In leadership and institutional engagement, SIT suggests that leaders perceived as prototypical of the in-group are more trusted and seen as more effective, particularly when group membership is central to individuals' identities (Hogg et al., 2012; Sun, 2013). In multicultural classrooms, teachers who acknowledge and reflect the diverse identities of their students are better positioned to gain trust and facilitate meaningful learning. From an applied perspective, SIT has informed interventions in various fields—including education, organizational behavior, health communication, and political science—by offering insights into how identity processes shape attitudes and behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Spears, 2017; Moran & Sussman, 2014). In educational policy and curriculum design, attention to social identity can help build inclusive structures that support all learners.

In summary, Social Identity Theory offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how migrant students perceive themselves, are perceived by others, and navigate institutional environments. By examining the interplay between group membership, emotional significance, and intergroup dynamics, the theory provides valuable tools for understanding

and addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with cultural diversity in education (Jaspal, 2015; Draper & Dingle, 2021).

Migrant Students and Social Role Identity

Migration is a multifaceted phenomenon that significantly reshapes individual lives, particularly through transforming and reconstructing social identities. Migrant students often face the dual challenge of maintaining their cultural heritage while adapting to new educational and social environments. This tension may bring about identity conflicts, as different aspects of the self—ethnic, cultural, and academic—may come into conflict or require renegotiation (Timotijević & Breakwell, 2000). Identity threats impact a person's self-esteem, social inclusion, and psychological well-being (Raja et al., 2021).

Social identity, particularly ethnic identity, shapes students' experiences. Ethnic identity develops from belonging to a specific cultural or social group and is influenced by individual choices, lived experiences, and external interactions (Henríquez et al., 2021). When cultural backgrounds—related to language, religion, race, social status, or economic hardship—are not recognized within educational spaces, students may suffer cultural disconnection, which diminishes learning motivation (Altugan, 2015).

Social role identity—how one sees oneself in societal roles—gains salience during migration. Among these roles, the "student" identity is essential, affecting academic performance, peer relationships, and overall adaptation (Çutuk & Kaya, 2018). Migrant students must reconcile this identity with pre-existing cultural roles, often engaging in strategies to reduce social distance and increase acceptance in the host culture (Hack-Polay et al., 2021). These strategies range from assimilation to selective acculturation and integration, each of which has differing implications for identity negotiation and well-being (Haider, 2020; Ulbricht et al., 2022).

As they enter unfamiliar educational systems, migrant students frequently encounter barriers such as language differences, discriminatory practices, and unfamiliar curricula (Syed et al., 2011). These challenges complicate their academic integration and weaken student identity construction. In response, educational researchers have emphasized the importance of acknowledging students' cultural identities, fostering inclusive classrooms, and using intercultural pedagogies to support engagement (Alisa, 2021; Matthews et al., 2014). Supporting learners' multilingual backgrounds and recognizing their home languages contribute to psychological well-being and academic success (Rahimian, 2015). Even in online learning environments, where identity may seem abstracted, academic self-concept and interaction with educators play vital roles in students' engagement and learning outcomes (Lu, 2024). Structured support programs—including language training, mentoring, and culturally responsive counseling—have been shown to facilitate smoother academic and social transitions (Altugan, 2015; Çutuk & Kaya, 2018). Teachers and school staff who are sensitive to students' cultural contexts can significantly influence how comfortably students assume their student identities. Learning, as a constructivist process, depends heavily on how

students interact with their environment; therefore, recognizing the socio-cultural resources they bring is vital.

The strategies migrants adopt—such as assimilation, separation, integration, or marginalization—reflect their positioning within the host society's cultural framework (Haider, 2020). These approaches are not only employed by migrants but are also shaped by the attitudes of host communities toward immigrants (Ulbricht et al., 2022). Consequently, the dynamics between the host society and migrant populations must be mutually considered in educational planning and integration policies. Social support systems—peer networks, family ties, and teacher involvement—play a crucial role in this identity reconstruction. Positive peer interactions enhance both psychological resilience and social integration (Bayram Özdemir & Özdemir, 2020; Yıldırım & Kumcağız, 2021). Ethnicity, gender, education, skills, religion, and language competence all influence how successfully migrants adjust (Lucken, 2012). Maintaining heritage identity has been linked to improved outcomes in mainstream language acquisition and academic performance, highlighting the risks of over-assimilation (Gu et al., 2021).

Practical communication skills such as active listening, empathy, and self-disclosure—what Atan & Buluş (2020) describe as "ego-supportive"—are essential in fostering constructive relationships and building supportive educational environments. In this regard, school-based efforts that promote social-emotional learning (SEL) are especially relevant for migrant students navigating new cultural landscapes (Haider, 2020).

Social identity theory offers a lens for understanding how group belonging shapes individual self-concept and behavior. From this perspective, cultural adjustment programs and peer integration activities are essential for adaptation and fostering positive identity development (Özyurt & Gülmez, 2020). Especially for young children, peer relationships significantly affect emotional and social development, making early intervention vital (Akın & Sani-Bozkurt, 2020; Özdemir et al., 2021). Intersectional factors—race, ethnicity, gender, language, and class—interact to shape migrant students' educational experiences and identities (Omanović & Langley, 2021). Therefore, equity-focused educational policies must be designed with these complexities in mind.

Another key component of social role identity formation is psychological resilience, or the ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity (Yıldırım & Kumcağız, 2021). Resilience is not fixed; it is a developmental process influenced by positive relationships, goal setting, coping mechanisms, and confidence-building (Cindiloğlu, 2017). For migrant students, supportive environments—through counseling services, peer mentoring, and community programs—can significantly enhance this capacity (Jefferies et al., 2019). According to a multisystemic approach, well-being is co-constructed through relationships between individuals and their socio-educational environments. Early childhood experiences are critical, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and identity formation. SEL programs, which build emotional intelligence, empathy, and decision-making skills, are particularly effective in promoting

migrant children's adjustment and academic success. Schools, therefore, serve as key sites for social connectedness and emotional security (Khawaja et al., 2017; Meroni & Velasco, 2023). Strengthening school-based relationships enhances school success and mental health outcomes (Konishi & Wong, 2018).

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative research design to understand the development of social identity, sense of belonging, and experiences of discrimination among international students studying at the university. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to examine individuals' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes in depth (Creswell, 2013). Within the qualitative tradition, the study specifically adopted a phenomenological design to explore how individuals make sense of a particular lived experience—in this case, being an international student navigating identity, belonging, and discrimination in higher education. Phenomenology is particularly suited to studies that aim to uncover the meanings that participants attribute to their personal and shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This method is essential for evaluating international students' experiences related to social identity, belonging, and discrimination in both individual and group dynamics. Focus group interviews were employed as the primary data collection tool. This approach is aligned with phenomenological inquiry, as it allows participants to reflect on and articulate their lived experiences in a shared social space, often bringing out deeper layers of meaning through interaction (Morgan, 1997). Focus group interviews facilitate the understanding of which factors effectively shape international students' social identities by comparatively revealing their everyday experiences. Furthermore, the interaction within the group enabled the deepening of individual narratives and made visible the reactions of students to similar or different experiences. The shared space also allowed students to co-construct meaning, which enriched the phenomenological exploration of how social identity is negotiated in the educational context.

Participants

The study group of this research consists of 15 international students who had been enrolled for at least one academic semester in vocational departments in Turkiye. The participants were determined using purposive sampling. In this research, purposive sampling was preferred because the participants were required to have a specific experience and be qualified to provide in-depth information about the themes addressed by the study. Purposive sampling is one of the most frequently used sampling strategies in qualitative research and allows the researcher to select information-rich individuals (Patton, 2002) consciously. This approach aims to choose individuals who can provide the most meaningful and insightful information regarding a particular phenomenon. In this context, students who identify as international students, have studied at a university in Turkiye for at least one semester, and are thought to have experiences of social identity, belonging, and discrimination during their educational process, were included in the sample. The inclusion criteria focused on international students

who had experienced academic and social integration processes within the Turkish higher education system. While the study aimed to include participants from diverse national, cultural, and educational backgrounds, the sample was drawn from only three departments, which limited the demographic scope. Future research could expand this diversity. Although the concept of data saturation was not formally employed at the outset, data collection continued until thematic repetition was observed, suggesting a sufficient saturation level for this exploratory study. Diversity in terms of variables such as nationality, gender, and department of the students was specifically considered to enrich the study's insight. All participants study in Turkiye for at least one semester and have sufficient knowledge to share their educational experiences. Information about the students is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of Participants

Student	Nationality	Gender	Department
S1	Syria	Female	Tourism and Hotel Management
S2	Iran	Male	Civil Air Transportation Management
S3	Afghanistan	Female	Food Technology
S4	Iraqi	Male	Tourism and Hotel Management
S5	Somalia	Male	Civil Air Transportation Management
S6	Turkmenistan	Female	Food Technology
S7	Azerbaijan	Female	Tourism and Hotel Management
S8	Egypt	Male	Civil Air Transportation Management
S9	Palestine	Female	Food Technology
S10	Georgia	Male	Tourism and Hotel Management
S11	Sudan	Female	Civil Air Transportation Management
S12	Azerbaijan	Male	Food Technology
S13	Lebanon	Female	Tourism and Hotel Management
S14	Kazakhstan	Female	Civil Air Transportation Management
S15	Kazakhstan	Male	Food Technology

This table includes information on the nationality, gender, and department of study of the 15 international students who participated in the research. The fact that the participants are studying in three different academic programs (Tourism and Hotel Management, Civil Air Transportation Management, and Food Technology) reflects the diversity of international students at the university. Attention was also paid to ensuring a balanced distribution regarding nationality and gender, thereby aiming to obtain multidimensional data regarding the participants' social identity experiences.

Data Collection

In this study, the focus group interview method was preferred to analyze the social interactions of international students in their educational processes and the impact of these interactions on their social identity development. Focus group interviews allow participants to express their experiences more openly by reacting to each other's thoughts (Morgan, 1997).

The data collection process was carried out in May 2025 through three online focus group interviews, each comprising five participants and lasting approximately 60 minutes. Although smaller focus groups may limit individual depth, they allowed for dynamic interaction and were logistically feasible given participants' schedules and time zones. The study's emphasis informed the decision to conduct focus groups rather than individual interviews on collective identity formation and intersubjective experiences. Each interview was conducted online via a digital platform. A semi-structured interview form guided the interviews; the questions in the form were developed within the framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and themes such as social identity, belonging, discrimination, and coping strategies in the context of international students' educational experiences. The interview questions were structured to understand the students' social interactions in the school environment, the impact of these interactions on their identity and belonging perceptions, the types of discrimination they faced, and how they coped with these situations. The interviews were audio-recorded, verbal consent was obtained from the participants, and the recordings were transcribed and prepared for analysis. The guide is available in Appendix A to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. This method consists of six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report. Maximum care was taken regarding ethical principles throughout the research process. The participants were informed about the purpose and process of the research and that their participation was voluntary. The participants' identity information was kept confidential, and the interview recordings were used only for analysis. In the study, codes (S1, S2, etc.) were assigned to each participant, and direct quotations were presented this way.

Validity and Reliability

Thematic analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The initial phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated readings. Coding was performed manually and iteratively, with both a priori themes informed by theory and inductively derived categories emerging from the data. Codes were then grouped into broader themes and subthemes. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts, and intercoder reliability was assessed by cross-checking 20% of the data, yielding an agreement rate of approximately 85%. While no formal statistical kappa coefficient was calculated, discrepancies were resolved through discussion to enhance analytical rigor. To ensure credibility, member-checking was conducted with five participants (representing 33% of the sample), who confirmed that the emerging themes reflected their experiences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process; researchers kept reflective journals to track assumptions, positionality, and evolving interpretations. However, more explicit articulation of the researchers' positionalities and their potential influence on data interpretation is acknowledged as an area for further

elaboration. Participants were fully informed of their rights, and all data were stored securely. Pseudonyms (e.g., S1, S2) were used to preserve anonymity.

Findings

In this section, four main themes and sub-themes supporting these themes emerged in line with the data obtained from the focus group interviews with 15 immigrant students studying at the vocational school. The main themes are Sense of Belonging, Social Identity and Intergroup Differentiation, Discrimination and Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Navigating Language and Communication Barriers, and the sub-themes of each main theme are given in Figure 1.

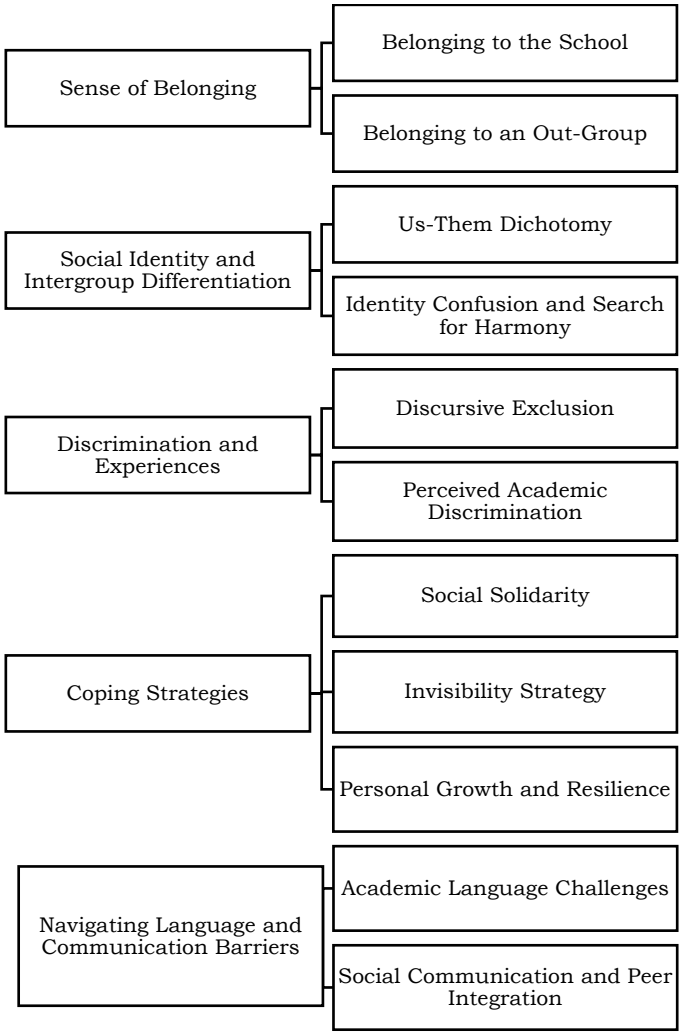

Figure 1. The Main and Sub-Themes

Sense of Belonging

This theme explores how migrant students perceive their emotional and social connection to their educational institution and broader social environment. For many participants, the sense of belonging was not fixed but fluid and situational, shaped by interactions with peers,

teachers, and the institutional culture. Some students described moments of connection and inclusion that helped them feel part of the school community. However, others continued to experience a sense of marginalization due to linguistic, cultural, or social differences that made full integration difficult.

For some, the initial challenges—especially related to language—were gradually eased by peer support and friendly classroom environments:

> At first, I felt like I didn't belong here at all. The language was hard, and I couldn't understand the teacher's words. But over time, I made a few friends in my class, and that helped me feel a bit more comfortable." *(S4). After several years, other students felt emotionally distant from the school community, highlighting a more persistent form of exclusion:* "Even though I've been here for three years, I still feel like I'm just a guest. I go to school, I study, but I don't feel like this is my place. (S2).

Instances of active inclusion—such as being invited to participate in clubs or extracurricular activities—were described as rare but deeply meaningful:

> When my teacher invited me to join a student club, I was shocked. It was the first time I felt part of something in this school. (S7).

Two subthemes emerged under this category: belonging to the school and an out-group. Some participants expressed a sense of belonging nurtured through positive interactions with teachers and classmates. Supportive educators, respectful treatment, and opportunities to engage in school life helped them feel valued and recognized.

> My vocational teacher always talks to us respectfully. He treats me like one of the others, and that makes a big difference. *(S6).*

Such experiences contributed to students' academic motivation and emotional security within the school context. In contrast, several students described being permanently positioned outside the majority group, regardless of their language skills, academic performance, or social efforts. Their migrant background often became a defining feature of how they were perceived.

> Even if I get good grades, I still feel like they don't see me as one of them. I am always the foreigner in their eyes. (S5).

This ongoing "outsider" identity created barriers to full participation and left some students feeling that their place in the school was conditional or superficial.

Social Identity and Intergroup Differentiation

This theme focuses on how migrant students construct and negotiate their social identities in a setting where national, ethnic, and cultural differences are often implicitly or explicitly emphasized. Many participants reported being frequently identified by their nationality or refugee status rather than as individuals or students. These imposed labels usually limited their social interactions and contributed to a sense of not being entirely accepted within the host society. Students described a complex internal process of identity negotiation as they

tried to reconcile their cultural backgrounds with their efforts to adapt to a new environment. Several participants expressed frustration at being reduced to a single aspect of their identity:

> Here, I am not seen as a student first. I am always the Syrian student. That label follows me everywhere. *(*S1).

Others noted that their names, accents, or origins often overshadowed who they were as individuals:

> They call us 'Afghans' like it's a bad thing. I have a name, but it's like they don't even care to learn it. (S3).

Two key subthemes emerged as the us-them dichotomy, identity confusion, and the search for harmony. Participants frequently described a strong sense of division between migrant and local students. These boundaries were often reinforced through everyday social practices, such as language use or group formation, contributing to feelings of isolation and invisibility.

> They sit in groups and speak Turkish so fast that I can't follow. They never invite us to join. It's like we're invisible. (S8).

This perceived separation cultivated a "we versus they" mentality that hindered meaningful interaction and reinforced the marginal status of migrant students. In addition to external labeling, many students experienced internal confusion about their cultural identity. The challenge of balancing their original cultural identity with the desire to fit into Turkish society created emotional tension and a sense of in-betweenness.

> Sometimes I feel lost. I'm not fully Afghan anymore because I've changed, but I'm not Turkish either. I don't know who I am here. (S3).

This internal struggle often involved finding a space where multiple identities could coexist, rather than being forced to choose between cultures. Some students expressed a desire for recognition that acknowledged their backgrounds and efforts to integrate.

Discrimination Experiences

This theme captures the overt and subtle forms of discrimination migrant students encounter in vocational higher education institutions. Discriminatory experiences were reported in both peer interactions and institutional practices, often reinforcing feelings of marginalization. Students described being subject to stereotypes, verbal abuse, exclusion, and unequal treatment from peers, instructors, and even administrative staff. These experiences profoundly affected their psychological well-being and sense of safety within the school environment.

> Once in the hallway, a student said, 'Go back to your country, refugee!' I was shocked. I didn't know what to say. I felt so small. (S4). When we have group projects, no one wants to be in the same group with me. They say I can't speak Turkish well, but I think they just don't want to work with me because I'm not Turkish. (S6). A teacher told me that vocational training is not really for foreigners, and I should think about doing something else. That hurt. (S9).

Two subthemes were identified under this theme: discursive exclusion and perceived academic discrimination. Participants frequently reported experiencing exclusionary verbal behaviors, primarily linked to their accents or physical appearances. These subtle yet persistent forms of discursive exclusion contributed to feelings of otherness and discomfort in academic and social environments. For example, some students described how others would mock or imitate their accents, leading them to withdraw from class participation. One participant shared,

> People ask me to repeat my name and look at me strangely. Even that is disturbing. *(*S9).

This repetitive questioning and unusual attention disrupted their sense of belonging and made them outsiders. Another participant explained,

> Some people started to imitate my accent when I spoke. After that, I stopped talking in class. (S8).

These experiences of being verbally singled out highlight how language and speech patterns become a focal point for exclusion, directly impacting students' willingness to engage and participate. Beyond interpersonal verbal exclusion, several students perceived a differential treatment by academic staff that suggested subtle discrimination. This exclusion was manifested through feeling overlooked or disregarded in academic settings. Students felt that their contributions were ignored or devalued compared to their peers. One student noted,

> Sometimes the teacher pretends not to hear what I say. But when another student says the same thing, they take notes. (S6).

Such perceptions fostered a sense of invisibility and marginalization within the classroom. Another student articulated this sentiment more broadly:

> When the lesson is being taught, we don't even make eye contact. It's like I'm not even there. (S2).

These experiences suggest that academic interactions, which should ideally be inclusive and affirming, can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities and reduce students' academic confidence and motivation.

Coping Strategies

Despite facing significant social and institutional challenges, many migrant students demonstrated remarkable resilience. This theme focuses on how students coped with adversity, including the development of personal agency, reliance on peer support, and motivation derived from family and future aspirations. Some students used creative strategies to navigate discrimination and foster a positive outlook, while others leaned on their communities or religious beliefs for strength.

> Whenever I feel like giving up, I remember why I'm here. I want a better life for myself and my family. That keeps me going. (S2). I found two friends from different countries. We help each other with homework and just talk. That support means everything. (S5).

> My mother always tells me that every difficulty is a test. So, I try to be patient and do my best. I pray a lot; it helps me stay calm. (S6).

Subthemes included social solidarity, invisibility strategy, and personal growth and resilience. In response to discrimination and exclusion, many students emphasized the importance of forming strong bonds with fellow migrant students. These peer networks acted as crucial support systems, helping them compensate for their lack of belonging elsewhere. Students described their groups as safe spaces where they could share their challenges and provide mutual encouragement. For instance, one participant said,

> We have our friend group. We support each other and share our problems. Without them, I would have dropped out a long time ago. (S11).

This sense of social solidarity provided emotional comfort and reinforced a collective identity that helped students navigate hostile environments. Some students opted for a coping mechanism involving reduced visibility in class, aiming to avoid drawing attention to themselves and thus minimize potential conflicts or discrimination. By speaking less or withdrawing from active participation, they tried to protect themselves from negative scrutiny. One student expressed this strategy clearly:

> The less I speak, the less I get noticed. That way, I don't have problems. (S14).

While this strategy may reduce immediate discomfort, it also entails a significant personal cost, such as diminished academic engagement and missed opportunities for expression and recognition. Conversely, several students highlighted how their adverse experiences ultimately contributed to their personal development and resilience. Rather than being defeated by discrimination, they viewed their struggles as challenges that strengthened their character and clarified their goals. A participant reflected,

> Going through difficulties has matured me. Now, I am stronger and know what I want. (S15).

This narrative of resilience suggests a transformative potential in adversity, where students develop coping skills and a sense of empowerment that supports their academic persistence and identity formation.

Navigating Language and Communication Barriers

Language proficiency—especially in Turkish—emerged as one of the most persistent and multifaceted challenges for migrant students. Although most had acquired some basic Turkish skills, many struggled with academic terminology, colloquial expressions, and the fast pace of spoken language, particularly in classroom and social contexts. These challenges often led to a lack of class participation, reduced exam performance, and alienation from their Turkish peers and instructors. Students repeatedly expressed how language barriers made them feel misunderstood, anxious, or invisible. One participant described the fear of being judged for not fully understanding what was being said in class:

> In class, I understand maybe 70% of what the teacher says. But I'm too scared to ask questions because I don't want to look stupid. (S9).

One student shared that social interactions were also fraught with discomfort and exclusion:

> Even when I try to talk with Turkish students, they get impatient or laugh at my accent. So, I just stay quiet most of the time. (S2).

The emotional toll of being able to comprehend but struggling to express oneself fluently was also frequently mentioned:

> I can read and write, but speaking is hard. It's like my brain understands but my mouth doesn't work fast enough. (S5).

Two key subthemes regarding language difficulties were identified: academic language challenges, social communication, and peer integration. Many students noted that vocational education required understanding highly specialized terminology, which added an extra layer of difficulty. Students often had to spend significant time looking up terms or translating materials, which slowed their learning process and led to feelings of inadequacy.

> When we study medical terms, I must look up every word in the dictionary. It takes so much time, and I still worry if I understood it right. (S2).

The pace of teaching also posed difficulties, as instructors often assumed a level of fluency that not all students had:

> The teacher speaks fast and doesn't repeat things. Even Turkish students get confused sometimes—imagine how it is for us. (S7).

Language barriers extended into the social realm, making it difficult for students to form relationships or feel part of the community. Informal conversations, jokes, and slang were tough to understand, reinforcing students' sense of social exclusion.

> They make jokes, but I don't get them. When I ask, they say 'never mind.' That makes me feel like I don't belong. (S6).

Even when students could understand, they often felt pressure or hesitation in responding quickly enough:

> Sometimes I understand what they say, but I can't respond fast enough, so they think I don't know Turkish. It's frustrating. (S1).

Despite these obstacles, several participants were proactive in improving their language skills, often through independent means such as watching Turkish TV with subtitles or taking extra language courses. However, many voiced a strong need for institutional support in this area:

> I watch Turkish shows with subtitles. It helps, but I wish the school offered extra lessons just for us. (S8).

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the educational experiences of immigrant students studying in vocational colleges within the framework of various theoretical approaches, especially

Social Identity Theory. The findings revealed that migrant students' processes of developing belonging in the school environment are complex and multi-layered.

First, students' sense of belonging is closely related to peer relationships and teacher attitudes. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that individuals define their selves through social groups. The students who participated in the study positioned themselves as "us" (immigrants) and "them" (native students) within the school, indicating that intergroup boundaries were reproduced. This suggests that social identities are not only culturally but also structurally shaped. Most participants positioned themselves as outgroup members in social relations at school and expressed feeling "marginalized" due to language, culture, and lack of interaction. This finding aligns with the Cultural Adaptation Theory (Berry, 1997). In the context of adaptation strategies, some students preferred to be invisible by showing a tendency towards "assimilation". In contrast, others tended towards "segregation" and established solidarity only within their immigrant group. This suggests that institutional support mechanisms are insufficient for integration to take place. The findings also show that students are exposed to various levels of discrimination. This can be explained by the microaggression theory (Sue et al., 2007). Experiences such as accent imitations, name-calling, or being ignored indicate that students are consistently positioned as low status in the school environment. Such micro-level exclusion can damage individuals' perceptions of their social identity and negatively affect their motivation to study. Nevertheless, some students stated they experienced personal growth and became more resilient in overcoming difficulties. This can be explained by the Resilience Theory (Masten, 2001). Despite the challenging living conditions, students can sustain their academic and psychological adaptation by utilizing their individual or social resources. This suggests that migrant students should be evaluated not only with their stories of victimization, but also with their capacity for struggle, resilience, and transformation. The study's findings show that migrant students' social identity development is directly related to individual factors, the school's structural features, the teaching staff's attitudes, and the social environment's inclusiveness. Unless inclusive pedagogical approaches are developed in educational institutions, migrant students will remain invisible and excluded.

The findings of this study reveal the complex and layered experiences of migrant students in vocational higher education institutions in Turkiye. Institutional dynamics and broader socio-cultural structures profoundly shape their sense of belonging, identity negotiation, experiences of discrimination, and coping strategies. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and theories of acculturation and resilience in migration contexts (Berry, 1997; Ungar, 2013).

The fluctuating sense of belonging reported by migrant students aligns with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis, which posits that meaningful interpersonal bonds are essential for psychological well-being. For many participants, classroom friendships and

positive teacher interactions played a central role in fostering a sense of comfort and inclusion. These findings resonate with previous research indicating that inclusive school environments contribute significantly to migrant students' academic persistence and emotional well-being (Goodenow, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, this sense of belonging was often conditional, contingent upon academic achievement, language proficiency, and perceived cultural assimilation. The students reported that their sense of acceptance was enhanced when they demonstrated academic competence or actively engaged in cultural practices valued by their Turkish peers (Osterman, 2000). This conditional acceptance can pressure migrant students to conform to dominant cultural norms, potentially undermining their sense of authenticity and cultural identity. The experiences of exclusion reported by other participants highlight the limitations of a purely individualistic understanding of belonging. As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, belonging is also a systemic construct, shaped by social locations and power relations (Kuttner, 2023). Some migrant students in this study experienced active exclusion and discrimination from their peers and instructors, stemming from prejudice, stereotypes, or perceived cultural differences. However, the frequent references to feeling like "outsiders" or "guests" despite long-term enrollment point to a conditional form of belonging. Students were often reminded of their "foreignness" through subtle exclusions or overt labeling. This reflects the concept of "differentiated belonging" (Antonsich, 2010), where inclusion is offered in limited or symbolic forms but withheld at deeper social or institutional levels. These experiences underscore the need for interventions addressing individual and systemic barriers to inclusion in vocational higher education institutions. Addressing school connectedness, belonging, and culturally appropriate care for newly immigrated students is also essential (McCabe et al., 2024). Students who feel part of the school community tend to participate more in academic and non-academic activities (Thomson, 2018). Students from marginalized groups may experience a weaker sense of belonging than their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds (Eshel et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2007).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) helps explain how students internalize or resist externally imposed group categorizations. Migrant students were frequently identified by their nationality or refugee status rather than by their individual qualities, leading to a rigid "us versus them" dichotomy. Such categorization and social comparison processes contributed to students' feelings of exclusion, and in some cases, identity confusion. The desire to maintain distinct cultural identities while integrating into Turkish society created a complex negotiation process for migrant students. Some embraced hybrid identities, blending elements of their original culture with Turkish cultural practices, while others strategically emphasized their Turkish identity to gain acceptance. These strategies align with acculturation models that emphasize the dynamic interplay between heritage culture maintenance and adaptation to the host culture (Haider, 2020). However, participants also described the emotional toll of navigating between different cultural expectations and social contexts. Experiences of cultural clashes at home and ethnic victimization in school can negatively affect healthy adjustment

(Özdemir et al., 2021). The challenges migrant students face in developing a coherent sense of self are closely tied to the concept of "possible selves". Possible selves are future-oriented representations of who we might become, both desired and feared. Migrant students' possible selves are shaped by their aspirations, expectations, and perceived opportunities in the Turkish education system and labor market. The findings also align with Berry's (1997) model of acculturation, particularly the stress associated with navigating between cultural maintenance and host culture adaptation. Many participants felt "in-between" cultures, suggesting a marginalized acculturation experience. While they strove to integrate, institutional and peer-level signals often positioned them as perpetual outsiders, complicating their identity development.

The theme of discrimination—both verbal and academic—was a salient part of participants' narratives. Discursive exclusion, such as accent mimicry or name-based othering, echoes what van Dijk (1993) describes as everyday racism in discourse: subtle, normalized practices that perpetuate social hierarchies. These microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) had significant consequences, including withdrawal from class participation and diminished self-worth. Academic discrimination, such as biased grading or limited resource access, further compounds challenges. These practices mirror broader patterns of educational inequality, where marginalized groups face systemic barriers to achievement. The cumulative effect of such discrimination undermined students' academic confidence and future aspirations. Some students reported that their instructors had lower expectations for them due to their migrant background or language proficiency. This form of prejudice, known as a "self-fulfilling prophecy", can create a cycle of underachievement, where students internalize negative stereotypes and perform accordingly. Academically, perceptions of unequal treatment by instructors suggest institutional bias, whether intentional or implicit. Previous studies (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Arnot et al., 2009) have shown that migrant students often face lowered expectations and invisibility in classroom interactions. These findings reinforce the need for equity-oriented teacher training and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated various coping mechanisms that align with Ungar's (2013) ecological model of resilience, which emphasizes the importance of individual agency and external supports in managing adversity. Social support networks—particularly with peers of similar backgrounds—emerged as a vital source of emotional strength and academic motivation. This mirrors existing literature highlighting peer solidarity as a buffer against institutional exclusion (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Furthermore, the construction of counter-narratives—stories of success against the odds—was a strategy used by some participants to resist negative stereotypes and maintain a sense of hope. These narratives resonate with Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth, which recognizes the assets and resources that marginalized communities draw upon to navigate oppressive systems. Students who demonstrate resilience often draw upon their cultural pride and awareness to construct a positive self-concept, which helps them to counteract hostile psychological forces

in their environment (Hall, 2007). The capacity to view personal characteristics as malleable qualities cultivates resilience when facing social and academic obstacles (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Narratives of students successfully navigating challenging postsecondary learning environments highlight the significance of resilience (Vaccaro et al., 2018). Students' explanations of and emotional responses to academic failure have a compounding effect on vulnerable students, resulting in strong negative emotions (Ajjawi et al., 2019). Educators must consider individual students' resilience stories and how teaching methods might affect their learning experiences (Walker et al., 2006). Students face substantial adversity through rising tuition costs and increasing time and resource demands (Etherton et al., 2020). When students believe their academic and social difficulties can be improved, they may not adequately apply the intellectual or social skills they need to be resilient (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Family expectations and aspirations also served as internal motivators, fostering perseverance even in hostile environments. Some students also drew on religious or philosophical frameworks to make sense of their experiences, which supports research on spiritual coping among displaced populations (Pargament et al., 1998). Interestingly, some adopted "invisibility" strategies—such as silence or self-withdrawal—as adaptive, albeit costly, ways of minimizing conflict. While these may offer short-term relief, they risk reinforcing marginalization and limiting long-term engagement (Delpit, 2006). Academic resilience is overcoming academic obstacles and thriving in school despite adversity, stress, and hardship (Morales, 2008). Academic buoyancy is a student's capacity to successfully deal with academic setbacks and challenges in their education (Cassidy, 2015; Martin & Marsh, 2009; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Resilience has been widely adopted to signify the capacity to cope, learn, and thrive in the face of change, challenge, or adversity (Fru-Ngongban, 2023). Resilient individuals can positively adapt to disruption, adversity, or threats (Martin & Marsh, 2003; Shen et al., 2024; Shengyao et al., 2024).

Language barriers—particularly in academic and social contexts—were a persistent obstacle across participants' experiences. Students struggled not only with technical terminology but also with informal communication, which hindered their social integration. These findings support Cummins' (2000) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and highlight the need for structured language support within vocational curricula. However, the reported experiences of linguistic discrimination were more nuanced, ranging from accent-based prejudice to devaluing non-standard dialects. These microaggressions, often subtle and unintentional, had a cumulative effect on students' confidence and willingness to participate. They also reveal how language operates as a marker of social difference, shaping perceptions of competence and belonging. Furthermore, the intersections of language with other identity markers—such as race, class, and gender—created unique challenges for some participants. For instance, women reported having their contributions dismissed or interrupted more

frequently, while students of color described cases in which their language use was judged against racial stereotypes. These intersectional dynamics support the idea that academic success is tied to more than just mastering the surface features of a language (Cummins, 2014; Lu, 2024). Assessments of academic English language proficiency would encompass tests of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Halle et al., 2011). In addition to these four components, academic language is usually evaluated based on vocabulary usage, grammatical precision, and genre awareness (Jo, 2021). The fact that some students resorted to self-learning through media or peer help reflects their resilience and underscores institutional gaps. As Leung et al. (1997) argue, language policies in education must go beyond assimilationist models and provide sustained scaffolding for learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds. The existing literature shows that the students' linguistic/grammatical and discourse competence is helped by their chance for formal and intensive learning, conversing with a native speaker of the English language, rich exposure to social media networks, and reading materials written in English (Murray, 2011; Spycher, 2007). However, institutional actions can reflect the macrosocial conditions that have enabled linguicism to emerge and pervade social and personal identity through common assumptions of truth that authorize linguistic exclusions (Liggett, 2009). These can be standardized testing regimes, “English-only” language policies, and the marginalization, pathologizing, and/or active erasure of non-dominant languages and cultures.

Overall, the findings point to a complex interplay between exclusionary practices and personal strategies of resistance. Migrant students in vocational education navigate a context where social identity, linguistic ability, and perceived belonging deeply influence their educational trajectories. While many demonstrate resilience and determination, the structural and interpersonal barriers they face necessitate re-evaluating institutional policies and pedagogical practices to create genuinely inclusive environments.

Conclusion and Implications

This research has revealed that the educational experiences of migrant students studying in vocational colleges have a multidimensional structure along the axes of belonging, discrimination, and coping strategies. Students face various exclusionary attitudes while reconstructing their social identities in the school environment, which causes them to position themselves as “the other”. Experiences such as the us-them distinction, discursive exclusion, and micro-level discrimination negatively affect students' educational motivation and school belonging. However, some students cope with these challenges by developing social solidarity and personal resistance mechanisms. The findings suggest that migrant students' educational experiences cannot be explained solely by individual psychological processes, but also by the institutional structure of the school, teacher attitudes, and social interaction networks. In this context, migrant students need inclusive, supportive, and culturally responsive educational environments.

Implications

Educational institutions should create spaces of 'social visibility' for migrant students. Clubs, activities, and student representation structures should be designed to ensure that students feel part of the school, academically and socially. Instructors should receive in-service training on cultural diversity. Discourses not sensitive to accents, names, and cultural differences unknowingly exclude students. To prevent microaggressions, lecturers should be offered "Inclusive language" training. Active participation mechanisms should be developed to avoid the "invisible student" syndrome. Methods encouraging class participation, group work, and project-based assignments should support students' academic identities and increase their visibility. Psychological counseling services should include special support programs for migrant students. Individual support and mentoring mechanisms are vital for students who have problems of belonging, and guidance units should be restructured accordingly. Social solidarity networks among migrant students should be supported. These networks strengthen students' coping strategies. School management should provide safe spaces for these students to build their communities. National higher education policies should have a holistic vision that guarantees migrant students' right to education. Specific strategies for vocational colleges should be developed, and migrant students should be recognized as permanent, not temporary, stakeholders in education.

Conflict of interest

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APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction and Rapport Building

- Can you briefly introduce yourself—where you are from, what department you study in, and how long you've been in Turkiye?

1. Sense of Belonging

- How did you feel when you first started school? How would you describe your sense of belonging at that time?

- Have there been moments at school when you said, "I feel like I belong"? What created that feeling?
- Have you experienced situations at school that made you feel excluded or “different”?
- How did a positive relationship with a teacher or a friend affect your sense of belonging?
- Has anyone ever felt, “Even though I am here, I still feel like a guest”? When and how does this feeling arise?

2. Social Identity and Intergroup Distinction

- How are you usually addressed at school? Is your nationality or background often emphasized?
- How does it make you feel to be labeled as “Syrian” or “Afghan,” for example?
- How are your relationships with Turkish students? Do you feel like you are part of their group?
- Have you found it difficult to balance your own culture with Turkish culture?
- Do you think there have been changes in your identity since living here?

3. Experiences of Discrimination

- Have you experienced any verbal or behavioral incidents at school that bothered you or made you feel excluded?
- Have you felt treated differently because of your accent or physical appearance?
- What do you think about your teachers’ attitudes towards you? Do you feel you are treated differently compared to other students?
- Do you feel comfortable expressing your ideas in class? Why or why not?
- Even though you are academically successful, have there been moments when you still felt like an “outsider”?

4. Coping Strategies

- What or who supports you the most when coping with difficulties?
- What kind of solidarity do you have with other migrant students? How do these relationships help you?
- Have there been times when you preferred to be “invisible” in class or at school to protect yourself?
- How do you think the challenges you have faced have personally affected you? How have they transformed you?
- How do you maintain your hope and motivation?

5. Coping with Language and Communication Barriers

- Are there times when you find it difficult to follow Turkish lessons? In which situations do you struggle the most?
- Do you have difficulties with technical or vocational terms? How does this affect you?
- What kinds of obstacles do you face in daily conversations with Turkish students?
- How do these language difficulties affect your friendships?
- What do you do to improve your language skills? What kinds of support do you expect from the school in this regard?

Concluding Questions

- If you could change one thing in your school to make international students feel more welcome, what would it be?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience that we haven't discussed?