



Demir, F. E. (2024). Investigating the views of Syrian parents under temporary protection on the education of their children with special needs. *Aula de Encuentro*, volumen 26 (2), Investigaciones, pp. 5-51

## **INVESTIGATING THE VIEWS OF SYRIAN PARENTS UNDER TEMPORARY PROTECTION ON THE EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

### ***INVESTIGANDO LAS OPINIONES DE LOS PADRES SIRIOS BAJO PROTECCIÓN TEMPORAL SOBRE LA EDUCACIÓN DE SUS HIJOS CON NECESIDADES ESPECIALES***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to examine the views of Syrian parents under temporary protection regarding the education of their children with special needs. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically a case study design, and used criterion sampling. Participants included fifteen Syrian parents who were under temporary protection and had children with special needs, residents in a province in the



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Southeastern Anatolia region in Turkey. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview developed by the researcher and analysed through content analysis. The study identified four main areas: language and communication, guidance services, cultural differences, and acceptance and inclusivity. Findings revealed that both Syrian parents and their children with special needs face significant language barriers. Additionally, challenges in accessing necessary guidance services were noted. The research also found out key insights into cultural differences, as well as issues related to acceptance and inclusivity. The study's findings were discussed in relation to existing literature, and recommendations for future practice and research were provided.

**KEYWORDS:** Temporary protection, Syrians, parents, special education, special needs.

### **RESUMEN**

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo examinar las opiniones de los padres sirios bajo protección temporal con respecto a la educación de sus hijos con necesidades especiales. El estudio adoptó un enfoque de investigación cualitativa, específicamente un diseño de estudio de caso, y utilizó un muestreo por criterios. Los participantes fueron quince padres sirios bajo protección temporal con hijos con necesidades especiales, residentes en una provincia de la región del sudeste de Anatolia en Turquía. Los datos se recopilaban a través de un formulario de entrevista semiestructurada desarrollado por el investigador y se analizaron mediante análisis de contenido. El estudio identificó cuatro temas principales: idioma y comunicación, servicios de orientación, diferencias culturales y aceptación e inclusividad. Los hallazgos revelaron que tanto los padres sirios como sus hijos con necesidades



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especiales enfrentan importantes barreras lingüísticas. Además, se encontró que los padres y los niños enfrentan desafíos para obtener los servicios de orientación necesarios. La investigación también descubrió información significativa sobre las diferencias culturales, así como cuestiones relacionadas con la aceptación e inclusividad. Los hallazgos del estudio se discutieron en relación con la literatura existente y se proporcionaron recomendaciones para la práctica y la investigación futura.

**Palabras clave:** Protección temporal, sirios, padres, educación especial, necesidades especiales.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, migration has been a subject of countless debates. In today's world, it has become an even more prominent topic of daily discussion across all societies. However, migration is a longstanding phenomenon that has always existed and will continue to do so. The perspectives on migration and the practices within its scope are influenced by the approaches of societies and international organizations (dos Santos Castro, 2023). Migration can be defined as the movement of people from one place to another that is considered more desirable. It generally falls into two main categories. The first is voluntary migration, initiated by the individual's personal decision. The second is forced migration, where individuals are compelled to leave their homes due to various reasons (Channa *et al.*, 2016). Whether caused by natural or human factors, any migration movement involving coercion, including threats to life and livelihoods, is considered forced



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migration (European Commission, 2024a). The global number of individuals forced to migrate is steadily increasing (Hou *et al.*, 2020). Forced migration, by its nature, significantly impacts the lives of those affected. Researchers have found that it has economic (Dadush & Niebuhr, 2016), health (Saarela & Elo, 2016), educational (Aydin & Kaya, 2017), and social (Okumura *et al.*, 2022) consequences for the individuals involved.

One of the most well-known populations subjected to forced migration is refugees. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as an individual who, *“owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country”* (United Nations, 1951). Another important term in the context of forced migration is “asylum seeker.” An asylum seeker is a person who is seeking international protection. They may not yet have had their request for refugee status or complementary protection processed, or they may not have applied yet but plan to do so (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2024). Temporary protection status is another term relevant to forced migration. This is an emergency and provisional protection measure provided in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons from countries outside the EU, who are unable to return to their countries of origin (European Commission, 2024b). In Turkey, a substantial number of Syrian individuals are under temporary protection status. The use of these various legal terms to describe individuals affected by forced migration highlights the complexity and intertwined nature of the field.

Since March 2011, Syria has been engulfed in a civil war where the Assad regime has been combating opposition forces who voiced their dissatisfaction with

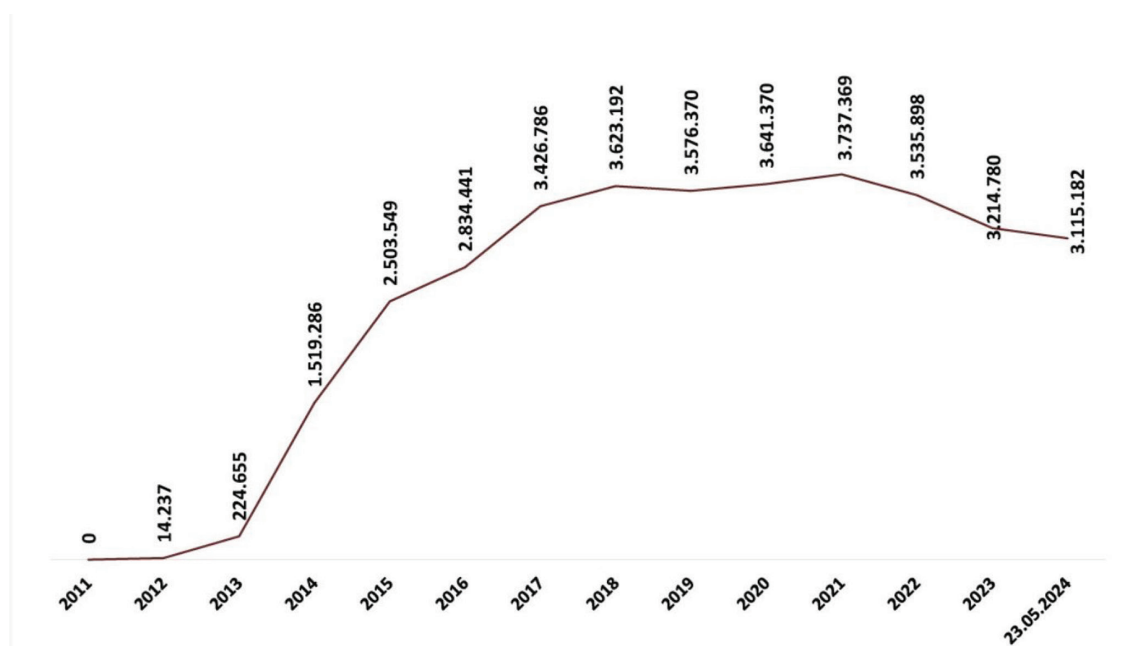


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the regime's domestic policies, inspired by other uprisings in the region. The conflict has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and forced millions to flee their homes (Kadioğlu, 2020; Malantowicz, 2013). The Syrian migration crisis, which began with the civil war in 2011, has had significant global repercussions, particularly affecting regional countries and Europe, and has become one of the crises demanding intensive efforts for resolution. Compared to other past conflicts and civil wars in the Middle East, this crisis has directly impacted neighboring countries, particularly Turkey, and subsequently Europe. These countries, when faced with the influx of displaced Syrians due to the crisis, have experienced firsthand the practical inadequacies of national and international regulations. The onset of the civil war saw a massive migration wave from Syria to Turkey, and then to European countries, as Syrians sought to protect their lives and property, making the crisis a primary concern for the affected countries (Keskin & Yanarışık, 2021). The forced and mass migration to Turkey began and escalated rapidly following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011. Due to Turkey's open-door policy during this period, the number of migrants increased swiftly (Orman & Aydemir, 2022). Syrian individuals who migrated to Turkey are legally classified as "individuals under temporary protection status" (Fansa, 2021). What was initially seen as a temporary situation has evolved into a permanent one over time. According to the latest official data, there are more than three million Syrian individuals in Turkey (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024a). Figure 1 illustrates a graph depicting the number of Syrian individuals under temporary protection by year.

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Figure 1. Number of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey by years (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024a)



The growing population of Syrian individuals in Turkey includes approximately one million five hundred thousand children under temporary protection status (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024b). The population of children under temporary protection status in Turkey, which surpasses the population of many cities, represents a crucial area requiring thorough research in educational, social, and psychological dimensions. Among these dimensions, education is of paramount importance. Children under temporary protection or refugee status, who have experienced forced migration, face numerous barriers to their education. Magos and Margaroni (2018) categorized the problems related to the education of Syrian refugee children into two groups: internal and external issues. Internal barriers are defined as intrinsic limitations, mostly due to the causes of forced migration. External barriers





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are discussed under topics such as education policies, teacher training, provision of suitable materials, and social support. Albakri and Shibli (2019) identified six main barriers to the education of Syrian refugee children: 1) exposure to a new curriculum or foreign language, 2) lack or loss of documents for refugee students (and teachers), 3) poorly constructed educational facilities or limited capacity for refugee students in host communities' educational facilities, 4) economic constraints, 5) exposure to discrimination, bullying, and violence, and 6) trauma. These categories reflect the internal and external barriers to refugee children's education identified by Magos and Margaroni (2018).

Initially, the situation of Syrian migrants in Turkey was perceived as temporary. However, over the past thirteen years, it has become evident that this situation is not temporary in the near term. This assumption of temporariness is one reason for Turkey's slow and cautious approach to policies and practices concerning the education of asylum seekers. Issues such as language and alphabet differences, inadequate physical infrastructure, a shortage of qualified personnel, challenges in obtaining reliable data, and the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the process are significant challenges in the education of Syrian asylum seekers (Duruel, 2016). In addition to the language barrier, there are difficulties in the school registration process and challenges arising from placing students in intermediate grades after the closure of temporary education centers, which increase the risk of marginalization for these students. Preventing the exclusion of Syrian children from the education process is thus critically important. Identifying and addressing the factors that hinder Syrian families, particularly regarding girls' school enrollment, is necessary. Ensuring diversity and pluralism in education, diversifying the curriculum, and recognizing the cultural differences of Syrian families are essential measures (Tanrikulu, 2017). Demir (2019) highlights issues such as language barriers, adaptation to school culture, and



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marginalization in his study on the educational challenges faced by Syrian students. Systematic literature reviews on the educational challenges of Syrian students in Turkey indicate findings such as low school access rates, language barriers, and a lack of qualified teachers (Tunga *et al.*, 2020). Fidan and Taş (2023) also point out issues related to education policies, language-communication problems, factors hindering access to education, out-of-school issues, and cultural problems. When examining the common points of all these studies, the “language and communication” variable emerges as a critical factor. Considering that communication is foundational to educational processes and that language is a key tool for communication, it is clear that language and communication skills are the most significant barriers to the education of Syrian children.

Attaining high-standard education is an empowering factor both economically and socially for individuals who have undergone forced migration (Molla, 2021). In Turkey, the roles and responsibilities of families are crucial for the effective and scientifically grounded education of Syrian students. Parents' meaningful involvement in their children's educational journey can significantly enhance the quality of education. The success of such involvement hinges on integrating families into a school system that promotes positive relationships supporting children's development. Traditional bureaucratic school environments' parent participation programs are less effective than those in schools emphasizing collaborative organization (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Family involvement covers a broad spectrum, from acquiring specific skills to improving intra-family relationships. Despite being legally mandated, achieving family participation is challenging in many countries, with academic literature presenting mixed results regarding its impact on academic success. Research suggests that family involvement can potentially boost students' academic performance (Keçeli-Kaysılı, 2008). It is critically important to understand the perspectives of families, especially





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those of disadvantaged individuals, regarding their children's educational processes to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of these processes. Special needs and forced migration present clear disadvantages. Individuals experiencing both face compounded disadvantages (Buckley *et al.*, 2015; Harris, 2003; Walton *et al.*, 2020). Refugees with special needs form a highly sensitive group requiring special attention. However, there are no international legal documents explicitly protecting their rights. These individuals are only covered under the fragmented provisions of international humanitarian law (United Nations, 2003). Access to education for refugee children with special needs is inevitably influenced by their context. Such individuals might conceal or misreport their needs due to social stigma, fear of rejection by authorities, or other factors, particularly affecting girls (Smith-Khan & Crock, 2018).

Refugee families place significant importance on their children's education, seeing it as crucial for future integration. Nonetheless, many families report facing substantial educational challenges due to language barriers, cultural differences, and traumatic past experiences (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Moreover, refugee families stress the necessity for schools and teachers to understand and address the unique needs of refugee children (Block *et al.*, 2014).

Syrian refugee families believe that their children's education is vital for future success and integration processes. However, these families face severe obstacles in the educational process, including language barriers, traumatic past experiences, and economic hardships (Çelik & İçduygu, 2019). Hence, it is essential to develop specific policies and programs to support the education and facilitate the integration of Syrian refugee children. The literature on the views of parents of Syrian students with special needs under temporary protection is limited. This study aims to elucidate the perspectives of parents of Syrian students with special needs under temporary protection regarding their children's education.



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## METHOD

### Research design

This study adopted case study design, one of the qualitative research methods. Unlike quantitative research methods in the natural sciences that aim for generalizability, qualitative research examines the unique and profound nature of individual human characteristics. Thus, qualitative research, which attaches importance to the depth and originality of information rather than generalizations, focuses on detailed and qualified data obtained from smaller study groups rather than large sample groups. Qualitative research methods are developed to generate knowledge by exploring the depths of individuals' understanding of their own potential, unraveling mysteries, and exploring the depths of social structures and systems they create through their efforts (Baltacı, 2019). Case studies, on the other hand, are comprehensive investigations conducted on an individual, a group of people, or an institution, with the aim of potentially generalizing the acquired knowledge to similar other cases (Gustafsson, 2017).

### Participants

Participants were selected using criterion sampling, which involves identifying cases that meet specific criteria relevant to the research (Baltacı, 2018). This method selects individuals based on predetermined characteristics that directly relate to the research question or hypothesis. It is commonly utilized in qualitative research to thoroughly investigate the research question and gather data pertinent to the research objectives (Creswell, 2016). In this research, two criteria were applied to



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identify parents of special needs Syrian individuals: having temporary protection status and having at least one child benefiting from Turkish special education services for a minimum of one year. Fifteen participants meeting these criteria and volunteering for the study were included in the research. The demographic and relevant characteristics of the participants are delineated in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information

Participant code	Parent Role	Occupation	Age	Type of disability
P1	Mother	Housewife	28	Autism
P2	Mother	Housewife	32	Autism
P3	Mother	Housekeeping	43	Intellectual disability
P4	Mother	Housewife	27	Intellectual disability
P5	Mother	Housewife	38	Intellectual disability
P6	Father	Market owner	44	Autism
P7	Mother	Bakery worker	30	Autism
P8	Father	Construction Master	31	Visual impairment
P9	Father	Unemployed	39	Visual impairment
P10	Mother	Housewife	28	Intellectual disability
P11	Mother	Housewife	33	Intellectual disability
P12	Mother	Housekeeping	27	Hearing impairment
P13	Father	Plumbing master	34	Hearing impairment
P14	Mother	Housewife	42	Autism
P15	Mother	Housewife	37	Intellectual disability

Data collection tools

Data were gathered using semi-structured interview forms. This method involves direct interaction between the researcher and participants, either face-to-face or through various communication channels such as phone or internet, to collect information. Interviews are essential tools in qualitative research for delving deeply



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into participants' experiences and viewpoints (Creswell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews require participants to respond openly to predetermined questions, allowing for in-depth exploration (Jamshed, 2014). Researchers guide the interview based on a specific set of questions while remaining flexible in their approach to responses. This approach systematically gathers comprehensive information within a structured framework to address specific research topics (Creswell, 2016). In this research, semi-structured interviews were chosen to ensure a thorough examination of participants' views while maintaining reasonable interview durations.

Before preparing the semi-structured interview forms, the researcher conducted an extensive review of relevant literature. Then, the interview forms developed based on this literature were sent to four faculty members specializing in the fields of special education, guidance and psychological counselling, measurement and evaluation, and classroom teaching with at least a master's degree. The researcher incorporated feedback from these experts to refine the interview questions. Following this, the revised interview forms were evaluated by two experts in Turkish education with master's degrees, focusing on language use. The forms were adjusted based on their language-related feedback and finalized in Turkish. Given that the study involves Arabic-speaking participants, the interview forms were translated into Arabic. The Arabic version was reviewed by two experts proficient in Syrian Arabic dialect and education, ensuring accurate translation and finalizing the form for use in the study.

### **Data collection**

The research took place in a southeastern province of Turkey. Before commencing, ethical approval was obtained from the Gaziantep University Social



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and Humanities Research Ethics Committee to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines. Subsequently, legal permissions were secured to collect data across the province, following which contact was initiated with five administrators of special education schools in the city center. Two school administrators declined participation on behalf of their schools, thus the research proceeded in three schools. Researchers provided detailed information about the study to school administrators, who then approached eligible parents to gauge their interest in participating. After communicating the study's purpose, administrators contacted twenty-six parents, fifteen of whom consented to participate. Appointments were arranged at convenient times for interviews with consenting parents. Ahead of each interview, researchers reiterated the study's objectives and provided an Arabic-language informed consent form. Following consent, interviews were conducted individually with participants in the school setting.

Due to the participants' limited Turkish proficiency, an interpreter was engaged during the interviews. The interpreter is a Turkish citizen fluent in advanced Arabic and Turkish, specializing in migration studies and experienced in communicating with Syrian individuals. Throughout the interviews, the researcher asked questions in Turkish, which the interpreter verified against the Arabic version of the interview script and then translated into Arabic for the parents. Subsequently, the interpreter translated the parents' responses from Arabic back into Turkish for the researcher. In cases where further elaboration was necessary for questions not explicitly included in the interview script but needed additional detail due to the nature of semi-structured interviews, the researcher posed the question, and the interpreter translated it into Arabic spontaneously before directing it to the parents.



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### **Data analysis**

This study utilized content analysis for data examination. Content analysis is a methodical approach to systematically and comprehensively analyze written and spoken materials, involving the transformation of discourse into numerical data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). It entails creating meaningful themes and categories from the data. The coding process organizes and structures the data, ensuring alignment with the research objectives (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In this research, codes, categories, and themes were developed in accordance with the research aims to maintain relevance and consistency in data analysis.

### **Inter-coder reliability**

Inter-coder reliability is a quantitative measure used to assess consensus among different coders on how to categorize the same data (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In qualitative research, it's crucial for evaluating the consistency and accuracy of the coding process. Miles and Huberman (1994) introduced a widely recognized formula for calculating this measure, which involves determining the agreement between two or more researchers coding the same dataset independently. Inter-coder reliability is calculated as follows:  $\text{agreement count} / (\text{agreement count} + \text{disagreement count}) \times 100$ . Agreement refers to instances where coders used the same code, while disagreement refers to cases where different codes were applied. This ratio indicates the reliability of the coding process, ensuring robustness in data analysis. In this study, a specialist in classroom education with experience in qualitative research coding, apart from the researcher, coded the data. The inter-coder reliability was determined to be 90.7%. According to Miles and Huberman





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(1994), a reliability rate of at least 80% is recommended. The researchers affirm that the inter-coder reliability in this study meets high standards.

### **Ethical Consideration**

This study strictly followed the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Additionally, formal written approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Social and Human Sciences at Gaziantep University, ensuring the study's adherence to ethical standards.

## **FINDINGS**

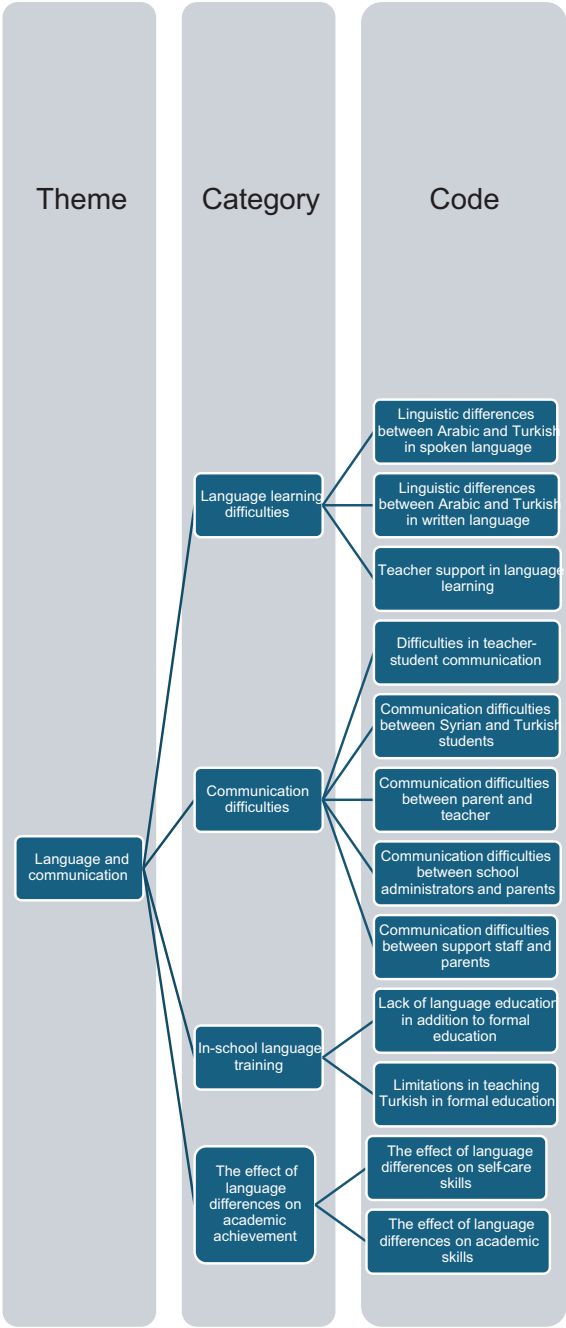
In this section, the research discussed the views of Syrian parents under temporary protection regarding their children with special needs' education. Four main themes emerged from their views on this topic: language and communication, guidance services, cultural differences, and acceptance and inclusivity. Detailed categories, codes, and examples of parental expressions for each theme are provided in the subsequent sections. To ensure ethical sensitivity and protect the confidentiality of participants, individuals are identified using codes such as P1, P2, P3, etc., and their children with special needs are designated using codes such as S1, S2, S3, etc.

### **Findings Related to Language and Communication**

Figure 2 presents the categories and codes related to the language and communication theme.

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Figure 2. Categories and codes related to the language and communication theme





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According to the research findings, participants expressed significant concerns regarding language learning difficulties. They particularly highlighted differences between Arabic and Turkish, both in spoken and written forms, noting the difficulties these pose for both parents and students. For instance, P3 remarked, *“Yes, there are similarities, but the outcomes are different. Arabic is rich and meaningful, and this makes it hard to find the equivalent word in Turkish during conversation.”* P9, who has a son with visual impairment, emphasized the disparities between Arabic and Turkish Braille codes. He stated, *“The characters are different. My child transitioned to writing in Turkish before mastering Arabic. He lacks the proficiency to write Turkish Braille accurately.”* Several participants also discussed the inadequate support from teachers in teaching Turkish to Syrian children. P7, whose autistic child faces language limitations, lamented, *“The teacher doesn’t know Arabic, and my child doesn’t know Turkish either. His speech is minimal, which further complicates matters.”* P11 criticized his child’s teacher for not teaching language, stating, *“She only speaks Turkish. You can’t learn language just by speaking. I went to Turkish courses in public education to learn Turkish. The teacher there cared about us. She also knew Arabic. There’s nothing like that here.”*

Regarding communication challenges, participants often linked difficulties in communication between teachers and students to language issues. P14 described struggling to communicate with the teacher, stating, *“The teacher doesn’t understand me or the child. Sometimes she acts as a translator when I come, then we understand each other, but there is no translator in the classroom. It’s difficult for the child. He was sick once, he couldn’t even explain that he was sick. The teacher understood much later.”* Difficulties in communication between parents and teachers emerged as a common concern expressed by all participants in the data analysis. P1 said, *“We struggle to communicate with the teacher. Sometimes there’s an interpreter, but*



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*mostly not. Communicating via WhatsApp or phone is also challenging. The teacher gets frustrated, but it's not my fault...*" P8 expressed the difficulty experienced in communication with the school administrator: *"He's a well-intentioned man. My child had an accident and wet himself. He texted me to come. When I arrived, he explained a lot of things. I didn't understand most of it. I just nodded."* Moreover, P7 described the difficulty in communicating with the staff in special education schools with these words: *"His sister provides him with lunch. S1 is allergic to milk. I explained this issue and showed her a photo on my phone, but there was a miscommunication. I told the principal. He called someone, who could translate what I said to the child's sister. As you see, even a simple thing takes too much time."*

Participants also highlighted the limited provision of language education within schools. Another recurring issue was the inadequate language instruction offered in formal education settings. P13, discussing her child's hearing impairment and the lack of Turkish instruction at school, commented, *"Turkish isn't taught after school hours or in class. They advise us to speak Turkish at home for the child to learn, but speaking at home isn't enough. Neither my mother nor I are fluent in Turkish."* P5 stressed the importance of in-class Turkish education, stating, *"There's no focus on learning Turkish through homework or other activities. I'm not proficient in Turkish and struggle to communicate. There's little emphasis on language in class."*

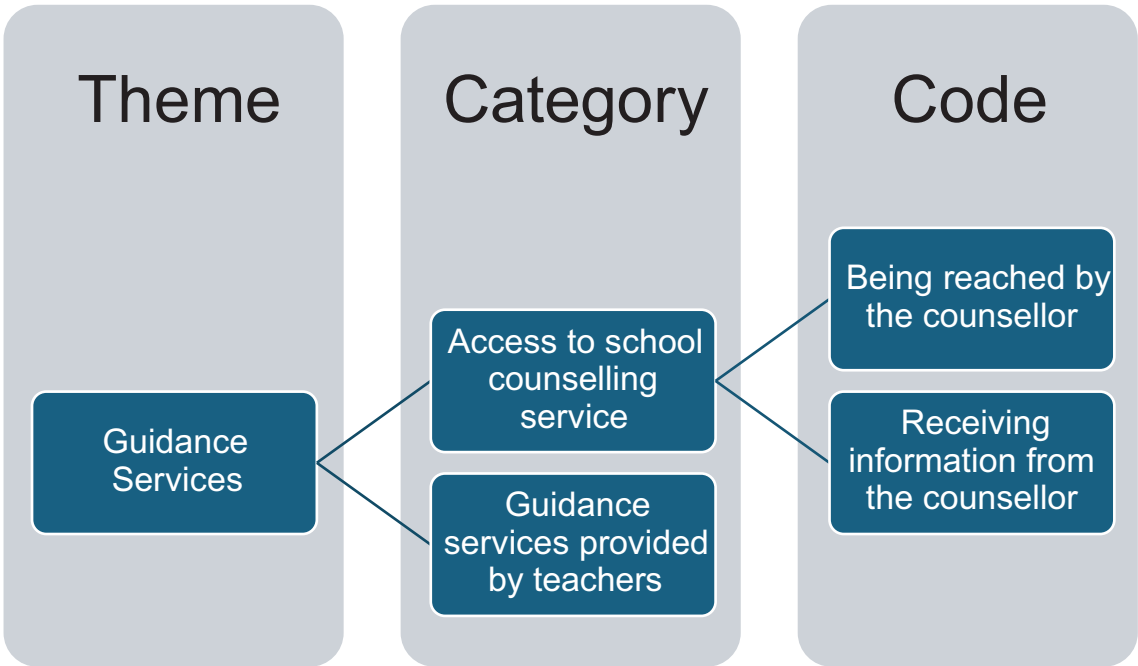
Few opinions were expressed regarding the impact of language differences on academic performance and self-care skills. P6 commented on his child's academic struggles: *"They say his performance is low, but how can he succeed with limited language skills? He's not fluent in Turkish either."* P15 linked language proficiency with self-care skills, stating, *"The teacher tried to teach my child how to button up, but he couldn't understand. They label him as severely intellectually disabled, but he just struggles with understanding."*

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Findings Related to the Guidance Services

The categories and codes related to the theme of guidance services are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Categories and codes related to the theme of guidance services



Participants had a strong need for guidance services, and they mainly emphasized the lack of access to school guidance services. There was a counselling service in all schools where the research was conducted. However, when asked by the researcher if they had met the guidance counselor, thirteen out of fifteen participants indicated they had never met them before. Two participants mentioned they had met them but did not receive adequate support. P2 commented on the



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matter: *"I have never seen the guidance counselor; we were not called. Sometimes S2 gets very angry. He throws himself on the floor. We do everything he says as he is disabled. I, his father, siblings, relatives... I know I shouldn't do this, but I would like to ask him about these things. What I can do..."*. P13 expressed his opinions as follows: *"No, we haven't met before. Maybe they didn't reach out because the child didn't need it. Yes, it would be good to meet."* Regarding the guidance services provided by the teachers, P9 said, *"Teachers do not tell us what to do and how to do it. S3 has only visual disability. He still cannot read. Why can't he read? What should I do, the teacher does not say anything."* P11, on the other hand, reported the counselling services she needed for her intellectually disabled male child as follows: *"S4 has grown up. He didn't know before. He was masturbating in class (The translator could not translate this word because the participant used a local word instead of masturbation. The translator stated that the word was masturbation in context). The teacher calls me every time. She scolds me. Then the school principal calls me and he also scolds me. As if I am guilty. (Addressing the researcher) What can I do to stop him from doing that? There is a solution..."*

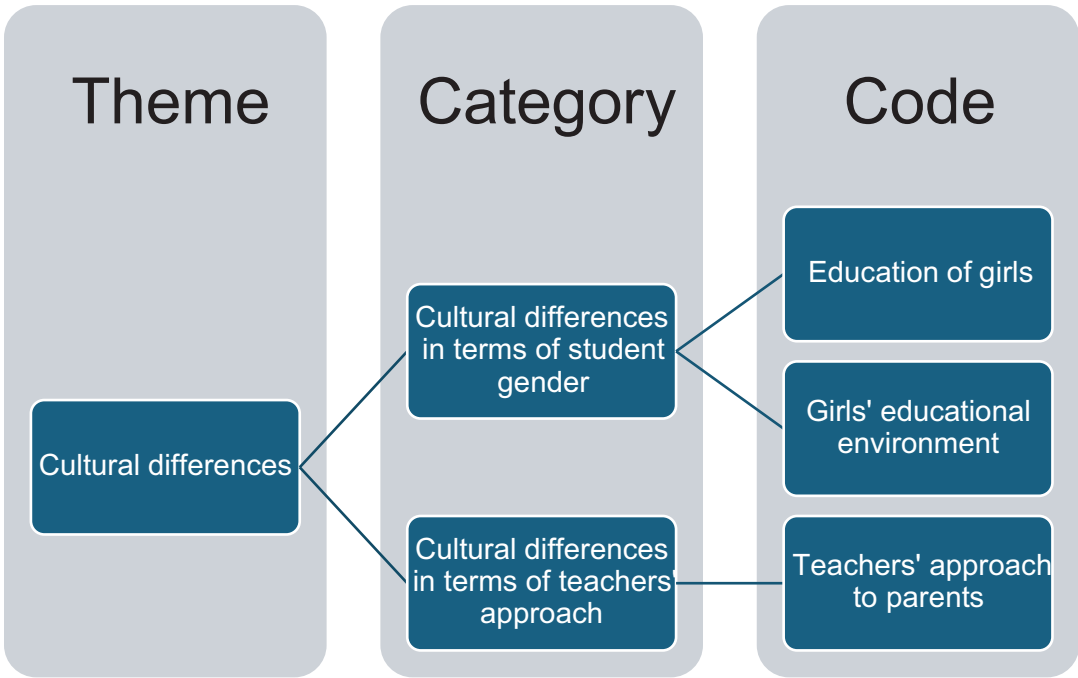
### **Findings Related to the Cultural Differences**

The categories and codes related to the theme of cultural differences are presented in Figure 4.



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Figure 4. Categories and codes related to the theme of cultural differences



Participants primarily expressed opinions regarding cultural differences, particularly within the context of education. Although Syria is a unitary state, the participants' views suggested the presence of varying practices within the educational processes. Regarding girls' education, P3 noted, “Yes, in Syria, girls attend school in elementary grades, but as they get older, they are often withdrawn from school, with some getting married. The situation in Turkey is somewhat different. Education is more highly valued. When my child missed a week of school due to illness, both the teacher and the principal called to check if everything was alright. They follow up, in other words.” P7 similarly remarked,



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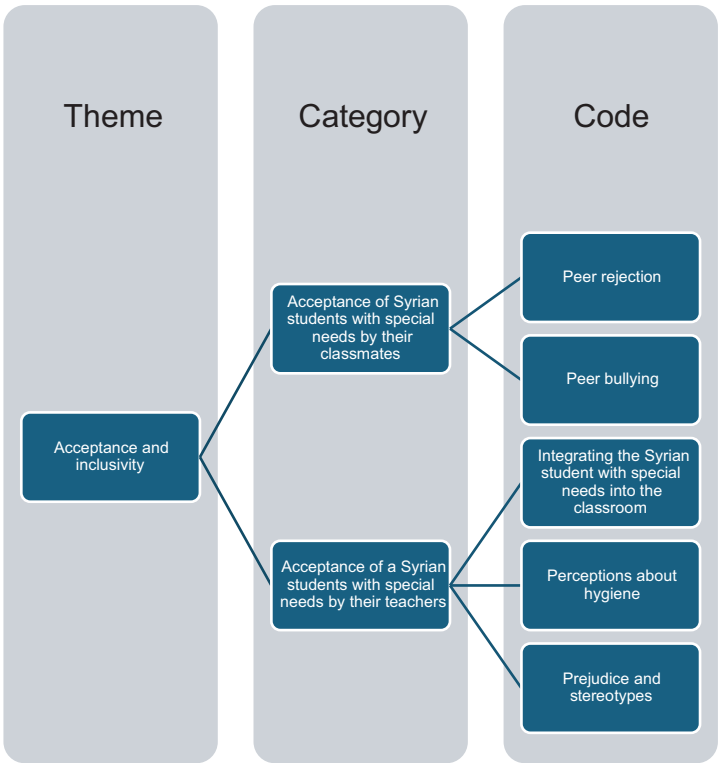
*“Here, there is more concern, and the continuation of girls' education is given more importance. It should be that way. It wasn't like that there.”* Participants expressed diverse opinions about the educational environment for girls. P2 suggested that *“A separate class for girls might be better. I attended such a school in elementary grades. It is also more appropriate considering our beliefs.”* Contrarily, P10 opined, *“I don't think it's necessary. These are children. It's good for them to be educated together so that they get to know each other. This approach is better here.”* There were also differing views regarding teachers' approaches to parents. For instance, P1 mentioned, *“There are differences. Language is also important. As I said, we mostly cannot understand each other. There is also a patronizing attitude from the teacher. The teacher in Aleppo was not like that. Maybe it was because we could understand each other.”* Meanwhile, P12 observed, *“The teacher is concerned; even if we often do not understand each other, they try to do something. The teachers I knew in Syria were stricter. Here, despite all the difficulties, the teachers are more concerned.”*

### **Findings Related to the Acceptance and Inclusivity**

Figure 5 presents the categories and codes related to the theme of acceptance and inclusivity.

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Figure 5. Categories and codes related to the theme of acceptance and inclusivity



The final theme was acceptance and inclusivity. This theme provided essential information regarding the integration of Syrian individuals with special needs into special education services. Participants often mentioned that their children faced exclusion and bullying from their peers. For instance, P8, the parent of a visually impaired Syrian student, discussed peer rejection: *“They see him as different. When we spoke to S5, he said they didn’t include him in their games. Our child plays with other Syrian children. His Turkish isn’t very good, which might be a factor, but something should still be done at school. After all, they are all children.”* P12



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emphasized issues with classroom seating arrangements: *"They don't want to sit with S6. The teacher tries to help, but the children cry when they sit next to S6. They see it as a punishment. So, the teacher has to seat him with another Syrian friend."* Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted that their children experienced peer bullying. P12 elaborated on this issue: *"S6 is hearing impaired and speaks differently. Adding Turkish into the mix makes it even harder. His sign language is also different. His friends mock his speech and sign language. He shares this with us and feels upset, but there isn't much we can do. I can't confront the children. Perhaps the teachers can intervene."* P9 shared his perspective on peer bullying: *"They say he smells. His mother makes sure he is clean before sending him to school, but children can be cruel. They exclude him, calling him dirty."*

Numerous participants shared their views on the acceptance of Syrian students with special needs by teachers. Regarding the difficulties in integrating their child into the classroom, P2 stated, *"I don't think the teacher is integrating S7 into the class. There's a sense of difference because we are Syrian. I feel it, and perhaps S7 doesn't fully grasp it, but he senses it too."* Parents also noted that teachers have misconceptions about their children's hygiene. P8 commented on teachers' perceptions of hygiene: *"His mother washes him before sending him to school. He is clean. Yet, the teacher calls saying he is dirty. This has happened many times, not just once. As I mentioned, sometimes S5 has accidents, but this happens only occasionally. Even when he doesn't, we get the same warning."* P1 shared a similar experience: *"The teacher calls about this issue, saying I send him messy and that I don't clean him at home. This is not true; I ensure he is clean when he goes to school. Even when he has had a bath, they still claim he is messy."* Discussions with participants also revealed data on prejudices and stereotypes. P6, discussing biases against Syrians under temporary protection, remarked, *"It is challenging to be*



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*separated from your country. It is disheartening not to receive the expected support. They call us Syrian. When we don't understand what is being said, they become irritated and say things angrily. I don't know exactly what they say, but they are angry."* P14 emphasized stereotypical views: *"They say Syrians are unclean. Those of us who came here are different from each other. Is everyone living here clean or unclean? Some are clean, some are not. During parent meetings, the teacher constantly warns in front of everyone. It is embarrassing."*

## DISCUSSION

This research aimed to examine the views of parents of Syrian students with special needs, who were under temporary protection, regarding their children's education. Fifteen parents were interviewed. Based on a descriptive content analysis, four key themes were found: language and communication, guidance services, cultural differences, and acceptance and inclusivity.

The researcher conducted the interviews and observed some hesitancy among participants when discussing certain critical questions (e.g., teacher's classroom practices). Despite assurances of confidentiality given before the interviews, participants seemed cautious. To address this, the researcher reiterated the confidentiality of their responses during the interviews to help them feel more at ease. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) emphasized the importance of trust and rapport in semi-structured interviews. In this study, reminding participants of the confidentiality helped to facilitate more open and effective communication.

The first theme was language and communication. This study examined barriers in the field of language and communication in two groups. The first group



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was student-centered language barriers, and the second group was parent-centered language barriers. In this study, Arabic was the native language of all participants' parents. All parents stated that they spoke Arabic at home. Considering the possible limitations in the social lives of families under temporary protection status in Turkey, it can be stated that the school environment is the only environment where Syrian students with special needs under temporary protection status are exposed to Turkish. This situation can be considered to significantly limit second language acquisition. Indeed, according to parent reports, the study revealed limitations in Turkish language instruction as a second language in school environments. The reason why language difference is a barrier can be attributed to the lack of effective and formal Turkish language instruction in schools. Research conducted on Syrian refugees in the United States (US) has also shown that refugees are affected by language barriers and the limitations of support provided in the language field (Darawsheh, 2022). According to a study conducted in Canada with Syrian refugees, Syrian individuals reported language barriers (Kumar-Agrawal, 2019). For Turkish teachers (Kardeş & Akman, 2018; Kiremit *et al.*, 2018; Uzun & Bütün, 2016), prospective teachers (Yolcu & Yurdakal, 2023) and school administrators (Akyavuz *et al.*, 2020; Koşak & Atasoy, 2022; Levent & Çayak, 2017), Syrian children under temporary protection have difficulties in language and communication. The data of this study regarding language and communication barriers confirm both national and international studies. In this study, one of the points cited by the participants as a reason for the difficulties in learning Turkish was that Arabic and Turkish are quite different from each other in written and spoken language. Turkish is a suffix-based language belonging to the Ural-Altaic language family. Arabic, on the other hand, is within the Semitic language family. Işık (2015) examined the differences between Turkish and Arabic under five headings such as differences in letters, differences in





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words, differences in compounds, differences in sentence elements, and differences in sentences. As stated by the participants, Turkish and Arabic languages are quite different from each other. The fact that Turkish and Arabic do not belong to the same language family, along with the noted differences between them, can be interpreted as a barrier for Arabic-speaking individuals and children with special needs learning Turkish. These difficulties in language acquisition can be stated as a problem in acquiring academic and self-care skills, as stated by the participants. Aghajafari *et al.* (2020) stated that refugee children carry significant risks in terms of academic achievement and psychosocial health. This situation can negatively affect both their educational processes and emotional development. The most important factor in overcoming these risks is to teach refugees the language of the country to which they migrated effectively and scientifically. Türker and Göçmenler (2020) examined the problems experienced in teaching Turkish as a second/foreign language to Syrian students and found that students could not learn Turkish at an adequate level. Researchers have reported that this situation brings many problems for Syrian students such as school absenteeism, falling behind the curriculum, being exposed to inequality of opportunity in education and not being able to adapt to the environment. Researchers have identified gaps in curriculum and teaching materials, alongside concerns about teacher competencies. The study also highlights issues with the structure of in-service training programs, the implementation of seminars, and the qualifications of seminar instructors. Participants of this study emphasized both classroom deficiencies in teaching Turkish to Syrian students with special needs and expressed criticism regarding the limited provision of Turkish instruction outside formal school hours. Learning the language of the host country alongside one's native language is crucial for promoting social integration and fostering cohesion. Education policies in host countries should give due consideration to this aspect.



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School curricula should incorporate effective and evidence-based language teaching methods. Additionally, efforts should be made to expand Turkish language education through courses beyond formal school programs. Such initiatives can facilitate the integration of both parents and Syrian students with special needs into society and the education system.

The second focus of this study was about guidance services. A significant finding was that many participants reported never having encountered a guidance counselor. Refugee children face mental health risks (Turan & Özyurt, 2019), underscoring the preventive approach emphasized by Korkut (2003) in delivering guidance services. Given the dual vulnerability of individuals with special needs due to forced migration (Alsancak & Kutlu, 2020), the need for proactive measures in offering guidance services to Syrian students with special needs and their parents becomes paramount. Studies in European Union nations reveal that despite robust healthcare systems, refugees have limited access to mental health services (Borho *et al.*, 2020; Dumke *et al.*, 2024; Lamkaddem *et al.*, 2014), aligning with the access constraints to guidance services found in this study. Few participants acknowledged familiarity with guidance counselors, yet they expressed inadequate benefit from available services. Rumsey *et al.* (2017) identified impediments preventing school counselors from effectively assisting refugee clients, citing language, cultural differences, and family involvement limitations. Language and cultural disparities are also implicated among reasons for the underutilization of guidance services in this research. Thus, it is crucial to implement effective, evidence-based guidance services for Syrian students with special needs and their parents under temporary protection through national-level policies. Providing pertinent in-service training for school counselors and educators is essential to achieving this objective.



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In this study, the third theme explored cultural differences. All participants emphasized the importance of girls being integrated into the education system. However, differing views were expressed on whether girls should be educated in coeducational environments or in separate classes and schools designed for them. Interventions aimed at reducing barriers to Syrian girls' school attendance and facilitating their integration into the educational process are crucial. These efforts are pivotal for enhancing equality and inclusivity in education (Tanrıku, 2017). Among groups most affected by displacement due to war and political crises, women and children, particularly girls, are at high risk. Disrupted access to education is a significant factor contributing to their vulnerability (Kılıç & Özkor, 2019). While this study did not explicitly oppose girls' education, it discussed differing perspectives on whether girls should receive education in segregated settings, posing a risk of school disengagement for Syrian students with special needs under temporary protection status, especially beyond middle school.

Participants presented diverse views on how teachers interact with parents. Some noted Turkish teachers are perceived as more approachable than Syrian teachers, while others described teachers adopting a stricter and more authoritative approach. These dynamics may arise from factors involving both teachers and parents, where individual differences influence teacher-parent interactions significantly. Overall, there is a clear emphasis on the importance of teachers assuming greater responsibility. The integration of immigrants and refugees into host countries' education systems is a multifaceted process encompassing political, social, and individual dimensions. Teachers serve as crucial mediators in this process, facilitating the inclusion and social integration of students with migrant and refugee backgrounds (Giavrimis, 2023). Therefore, interactions between teachers and parents are pivotal. Establishing a collaborative partnership based on mutual



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respect and shared responsibilities between schools and parents can be seen as fostering positive social capital (Fazily, 2012).

The last theme was acceptance and inclusivity. Integrating refugees into host communities involves complex and multidimensional processes impacting both the host society and refugees themselves. Key factors in this integration include enhancing language skills, facilitating access to employment opportunities, and establishing social support systems critical to refugees' adaptation (Ager & Strang, 2008). Education, healthcare services, and social participation emerge as pivotal aspects facilitating refugees' societal integration (Krahn *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless, challenges such as social barriers, discrimination, and exclusion can hinder refugees' integration into society (Berry, 1997). Host communities' attitudes and policies toward refugees are highlighted as crucial determinants of successful integration processes (Phillimore, 2011). This study identifies instances where Syrian students with special needs face peer rejection and bullying in school settings. Peer acceptance, a fundamental aspect of effective integration policies, necessitates interdisciplinary approaches for addressing these challenges. Schwartz *et al.* (2021) underscore the influential role of peers in the integration of forcibly displaced children, noting that negative peer interactions can heighten risks. Furthermore, perceived discrimination correlates with limited social adaptation among individuals experiencing forced migration (Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008). Given the impact of peer acceptance on children affected by forced migration, there is a clear imperative to develop and implement policies promoting inclusive peer environments. A notable finding of this research is parental reports indicating peer bullying experienced by Syrian students with special needs. Existing literature extensively documents peer bullying among children affected by forced migration (Damra *et al.*, 2023; Samara *et al.*, 2020; Yilmaz & Cikili-Uytun, 2020), consistent with the findings of this study.



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Integration of Syrian individuals with special needs into the education system was influenced not only by peer acceptance but also significantly by teacher acceptance. One of the primary roles and responsibilities of teachers was to integrate forcibly displaced students with special needs into the classroom environment. This study identified challenges related to teacher acceptance based on parental reports. According to parents, teachers encounter limitations in integrating Syrian children with special needs into the classroom. Parents also noted that teachers hold incorrect perceptions about their children's hygiene status and possess stereotypical views towards them and their children. The inability to integrate Syrian students with special needs into the classroom stems from teachers' attitudes towards parents under temporary protection status and their children with special needs. Another contributing factor is the insufficient knowledge and experience of teachers in working with Syrian students. Indeed, a study examining teachers' perspectives on the education of Syrian students in Turkey found that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to educate refugee children, cannot make special arrangements for them in the classroom environment, and find the current curriculum inadequate to meet their educational needs (Kardeş & Akman, 2018). Reviewing the literature on teachers' comments about the hygiene of Syrian students, Mercan-Uzun and Bütün (2016) found that teachers often highlight limitations regarding the cleanliness of Syrian students. Stereotypical perceptions towards Syrian parents or students with special needs were a striking finding of this study. Research indicates that teachers often hold negative stereotypical attitudes towards refugee students, which manifest as biases suggesting that refugee students are likely to experience academic failure and adaptation issues (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Such stereotypes can hinder teachers from fully assessing the potential of refugee students and providing them with the necessary support (Pugh *et al.*, 2012).





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When a child under temporary protection status or a refugee arrives in a new country, they face the challenge of adapting to a new school environment, bringing along various experiences and traits from their pre-migration, migration, and post-migration phases. Designing an effective integration process requires consideration of factors like the nature of their escape and refugee experiences, literacy levels in their native language, and the support provided by parents. The characteristics of schools and teachers also play a crucial role in this adaptation process. Teachers need to effectively address the needs of refugee children and establish schools that can cater to these needs (Hamilton, 2003). The views of families under temporary protection status are particularly significant in this context. This is especially true when considering students who face dual disadvantages as forcibly displaced individuals with special needs. This study also underscores the viewpoints of Syrian parents under temporary protection status in Turkey regarding the education of their children with special needs. These insights are anticipated to inform policymakers in shaping policies aimed at supporting the education of individuals with special needs under temporary protection status.

### **Recommendations for future applications**

The research findings indicate that both Syrian parents and their children with special needs face significant challenges in language and communication. To address these issues, it is crucial to provide school-based, scientific, and multicultural language education opportunities tailored to Syrian families. Evaluating the effectiveness of ongoing Turkish language courses and making necessary adjustments is essential. Additionally, offering voluntary basic Arabic training to





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teachers in special education schools could help reduce communication barriers. Expanding interpreter services to all schools, rather than a select few, would further alleviate language issues.

The study also argues that Syrian parents and their children with special needs do not sufficiently benefit from guidance services. Collaborative projects between the Ministry of National Education and universities should aim to provide guidance counselors with the necessary training to support special needs students under temporary protection and their families. Enhancing pre-service training for guidance counselor candidates through courses, seminars, symposiums, and panels can improve their ability to serve these populations effectively.

Findings underline issues related to acceptance and inclusivity. Implementing a multicultural education approach is crucial for fostering acceptance and inclusivity within schools. Both classroom-level and school-wide multicultural practices are essential for integrating Syrian individuals into Turkish society. While no direct findings related to xenophobia were discovered in this study, participants highlight the need for preventive measures against xenophobia. Such preventive efforts should be comprehensive, involving all community stakeholders, not just schools.

### **Recommendations for future research**

This study utilized a qualitative case study methodology to address the research aims. Future studies could investigate the perspectives of families with special needs Syrian students under temporary protection using various techniques, such as focus group discussions. Subsequent research could narrow the focus by



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examining Syrian parents' views on multiculturalism or xenophobia within the school settings their special needs children attend.

This study involved 15 parents. Future qualitative research could be designed with a larger participant pool to improve the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, since most participants were mothers, future research could include fathers to provide a more balanced perspective.

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# AULA DE ENCUENTRO

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