



(ISSN: 2587-0238)

Can Aran, Ö. & Coşkun, Y. (2021). What Do Immigrant Students Think about The School System? Analysis for Improving the Quality of Education, *International Journal of Education Technology and Scientific Researches*, 6(14), 703-724.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.35826/ijetsar.330>

Article Type (Makale Türü): Research Article

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## WHAT DO IMMIGRANT STUDENTS THINK ABOUT THE SCHOOL SYSTEM? ANALYSIS FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

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Received: 27.12.2020

Accepted: 15.03.2021

Published: 01.04.2021

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify immigrant students' views on the school system in Turkey. The participants in this study, in which a qualitative research method was used, comprised twenty immigrant students attending secondary schools in a sub-province of Turkey. The research data were collected via interview forms and then analyzed using content analysis. The findings about the physical conditions of schools demonstrated that the students were most pleased by the school grounds as their areas of physical use and were least pleased with the toilets and safety locks on the windows. Regarding the components of the school curricula, the majority of the students stated that they were not informed about the course objectives, they found mathematics to be the most difficult and science was the easiest; they considered science and mathematics to be the most functional because they will be useful in daily life. Also, most of the students emphasized that they needed individualized instruction in the teaching-learning process, and they preferred projects in which they had time to search for what they did not know as the assessment tool. They enjoyed the good treatment afforded to them by their teachers, with a smiling face, and the administrators ensured discipline but did not like angry treatment.

**Keywords:** Administrator, curriculum, immigrant students, physical conditions, teacher.

## INTRODUCTION

Humans have migrated from one location to another in almost every period of history. The migrations were mostly due to reasons such as wars, famine, political instability, and climate change; however, migration sometimes occurred with hopes of a better living standard. Turkey has always faced a flow of immigrants throughout history due to its geographic, strategic, and cultural position. The fact that millions of people were obliged to abandon their homes owing to political chaos in the Middle East, especially in the recent period, increased migration into Turkey. Protests against political powers that started in Tunisia in 2010, spread into the majority of the countries in the region soon after (Oğuzlu, 2011). Even though the extent to which the opposing masses that took action with demands for freedom and better economic conditions against oppressive and authoritarian regimes attained their goals was a controversial issue, the process is known as the “Arab Spring” by the public. Millions died and millions had to abandon their homes and migrate to other countries in the process. One of the most significant areas of migration was Turkey. Thus, Turkey received dense waves of migration from countries such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Libya (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2020a). According to data from 2020, approximately 4,000,000 displaced people and refugees live in Turkey (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2020b; Refugee Association, 2020; UNCHR, 2020). Approximately 1.082,200 of the Syrian refugees who are under temporary protection are children aged 5-17 years, who are called school-age children. Of the refugee students, about 685,000 attend formal education (PICTES, 2021).

Although educating such a large mass is difficult, meeting the right of education of these immigrant students and adapting them to their new lives are crucial issues of sensitivity for the Republic of Turkey. The government and non-governmental organizations undertake significant work for the welfare of immigrant students. In this respect, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Turkey installed several legal regulations for the education of immigrant students in primary and secondary schools, aiming to coordinate educational activities concerning all children at the age of compulsory education and immigrant students, and also to raise the quality of education (MoNE, 2014). Centres for temporary education were established in provinces and districts that receive massive migration through legal regulations. Efforts are made through such centers for immigrant students to continue with their education by following a weekly schedule. Immigrant students are also given the right to register in educational institutions of any type and level (except for higher education institutions), which are administered by the MoNE, besides centers for temporary education by using their immigrant identification card with no condition for residence if they desire to do so. The centers also give certificates of high school education equivalence. The teacher expenditures working in those centres are met by funds raised by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (Duruel, 2016). Centers for temporary education were closed in the 2018-2019 academic year, and the students attending those centers were given the right to register at the educational institution of formal education of their choice. Regulations were made to open adaptation classes in schools where the number of immigrant students was high so that they could improve their Turkish language skills (MoNE, 2019). Besides, in-service training was offered to approximately 150,000 teachers between

November 4th, 2017, and October 31st, 2018, within the scope of an inclusive education project launched in cooperation between UNICEF, the Turkish MoNE, and Erciyes University. The training aimed to prevent the isolation of individuals for such reasons as sex, ethnicity, social class, medical status, social participation, and achievement, and to assure that the system embraced all students by valuing equality in schools (MoNE, 2018).

There are many regulations on educational equalization in the Turkish system of education. For instance, the law on the unification of education, which was enforced on March 3rd, 1924, in Atatürk's time, and which is considered as an important step towards regulating education regardless of borders for social class (Yıldırım, 2015), similar to the regulations such as "No child left behind" in the United States of America in 2002 and "Building a Europe for and with children" (2020) made in Europe. Also, the law on primary education, the law on education, and the basic law of education aimed to provide individuals with equality of opportunity in Turkey. Although all teachers and school leaders are informed about these laws during their undergraduate years, reminding them of all these regulations through in-service training will support enforcing laws with precision.

The education of immigrant students is a right – as in the case of all other individuals – and it is also an important issue in raising healthy, happy, and moral individuals to contribute to the welfare of society. In this context, immigrant students' views on school – the social structure determining the functioning and quality of the educational process (Demirtaş, 2015) – were consulted in this study. Obtaining the students' views on physical conditions, curricula, the elements of school, which is a socio-cultural environment, including the characteristics of teachers and administrators, sheds light on future regulations required for promoting the quality of education by educators, practitioners, and policymakers.

### **Theoretical perspective**

It is extremely important to reveal immigrant students' perspectives of school, the most basic system and a sociologic element for raising them as qualified individuals who will contribute to the development and welfare of their country and world peace. Dewey (2010) argued that everything that society engendered for itself was inculcated in individuals through schools and believed that the best ideas of society were actualised through schools (Dewey, 2010). Schools should contribute to children's social and emotional development, as well as mental development if they are to fulfil the educational functions for living in a democratic society and for efficient family life (Bruner, 2009). Schools accept all children as members of their small community bodies. They offer education and instruction to children, inculcate the spirit of service in them, and equip them with effective instruments so that they can find their way independently. Thus, they provide the best warranty for a society with a high level of welfare (Dewey, 2010).

Considering school as a culture, it is composed of school leaders, teachers, and students. Development and colleague solidarity is prevalent in schools where a strong school culture is dominant. The value attached to students' learning is prioritized in such schools. The idea that all students can learn if an effective curriculum is used is also dominant in these schools (Deal & Pearson, 2002). A study concerning school reforms focused on

why reformatory regulations in schools had small impacts. The study insisted on the idea that the answer should be sought in teachers, curricula, school administration and inequality between students' income levels (Berliner, 2013). Every feature of school – the most important component of the educational system – is influenced inside the classroom, that is to say, the affective and cognitive development of students. Students' level of learning rises in supportive, positive school environments (Başar, 2013; Janzen, 2013).

The physical structure of a school should be appropriate and attractive in terms of outlook, use, and hygiene (Bruner, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Reid & McCallum, 2014). School conditions are also influential in teachers' devoting themselves to their job. The structure of school management, the characteristics of school managers (Başar, 2013) and the teacher, who is the manager of the learning environment (Başar, 2013; Vernon, Watson, Moore & Seddon, 2019; Reid & McCallum, 2014), are the significant variables of education. The situation can be explained with the environmental and interactive model, which stresses that families and other institutions are in interaction in the development of children. The emphasis is also laid on the effects of such environmental factors as children's social status, culture, and media on children's development. The model indicates that immigrant children's cognitive, affective, and behavioral development is influenced by their social position, incentive or disincentive for school, and the environment in society, which are based on racism, discrimination, and social class discrimination (Coll & Szalacha, 2004). A study conducted with the inclusion of African-American and Latin American children showed that children refused to learn in schools that classified them as being lower class (Coll & Szalacha, 2004). Therefore, schools need to embrace all students in providing them with the socio-emotional support they need in reintegrating into society as individuals who have actualized themselves.

The views of immigrant students living in Turkey on the elements of the school system are also valuable in terms of uncovering the hitches in the system of education because the quality of a country's educational system is determined by educational services offered by schools, the most essential organ of the system. Individuals who are offered good quality education will feel a sense of achievement and they will go on to attain greater achievements that will help their country progress. Bloom (2012) explained the situation in the mastery learning model by maintaining that student's entry characteristics and the quality of instruction were influential in learning outcomes. According to the model, the process of learning can be freed from errors if the factors influencing learning can be determined and controlled. This study makes efforts to determine the quality of the elements of the school system such as the curriculum, teachers, and physical conditions, which are influential in the learning process at school from the perspective of immigrant students.

Studies in the literature concerning immigrant students who migrated into Turkey in the period following the Arab Spring heavily focused on higher education. However, studies conducted with the participation of immigrant students also turned their attention to primary and secondary schools with the effects of the intense wave of migration, especially after 2010. Duruel (2016) considered educational policies that were developed for Syrian refugees. The study suggested that the issue of education was pushed aside due to primary needs such as shelter and food. In addition, the study put forward such problems as language and alphabet differences, lack of

necessary physical conditions, and the absence of adequate and qualified staff as other factors that made the education of Syrian refugees difficult. In a study that consulted teachers' views on primary school education of immigrant students in state schools, Imamoğlu and Çalışkan (2017) tried to identify problems that immigrant students had who were attending state schools in Turkey or were probable from the teachers' viewpoint. The findings suggested that accepting such students into classes with no adequate knowledge of Turkish, inadequacy of in-service training for teachers, failure to communicate with the students, and unavailability of a relevant road map, were the most important problems from the perspective of teachers. In a study conducted at the level of primary school, Sarıtaş, Şahin and Çatalbaş (2016) investigated the problems that teachers and administrators having immigrant students encountered and searched for solutions to the problems. Another study which investigated the problems with immigrant students distinguished such problems as language problems, behavioural problems, problems in cooperation between the ministry of national education and schools, problems in cooperation between school and families, and problems encountered in the process of teaching. In a study performed on the basis of teachers' and students' views on immigrant primary school students' problems, Güngör and Şenel (2018) tried to identify the problems from the perspectives of teachers and students. According to the teachers and students, the problems included language and culture differences, fundamental language skills, comprehension, expressing and interpreting, falling behind the program, and academic failure. A general evaluation of the literature makes it clear that studies in general have looked at the problems from the perspective of teachers and administrators. In this context, this current study, in which immigrant students evaluated elements of the school system in Turkey, is thought to contribute to both national and international literature. It formulates the problem as, "What are immigrant students' views on the elements of the school system?", and searches for answers to the relevant sub-problems given below:

1. What are the immigrant secondary school students' views on the physical conditions of the schools they attend?
2. What are the immigrant secondary school students' views on the curricula for the courses they take?
3. What are the immigrant secondary school students' views on teacher characteristics?
4. What are the immigrant secondary school students' views on administrators' characteristics?

## **METHOD**

This study, which aimed to identify immigrant students' views on elements of the school system in Turkey, used a qualitative research method. It resorts to phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, to be able to analyze relevant student views in detail and in-depth. Focusing on phenomena of which we are aware but have no in-depth and comprehensive understanding is called the design of phenomenology. Efforts have been made to reveal different participants' perceptions of and responses to the phenomena in focus in phenomenology studies (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this study, all procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Ethical Committee of Hacettepe University (Document Date and Number: 15.06.2020/35853172-600) and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later

amendments or comparable ethical standards. This research is also approved by Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education (Document number: 94025929-605.02-E.864777).

### Participants

The study group was composed of immigrant secondary school students who attended schools located in two districts of a province in the Central Anatolia region of Turkey. The province is the fourteenth most densely populated region by Syrian refugees with temporary protection in Turkey (Refugees Association, 2020) and is the eighteenth most densely populated region by immigrants with residence permits (Directorate General of migration management, 2020a). According to the latest data in 2020, approximately 76,000 Syrians who have temporary protection live in the province. The population is 5.47% of the total number of Syrians living in the 81 provinces of Turkey (Refugee Association, 2020). The students were chosen from secondary schools located in districts that were convenient to reach because one of the researchers worked in the region. Criterion sampling was also used in the study. The criterion used in the study was knowing the Turkish language at intermediate (B1) or upper intermediate level. Even though the Syrian students were the majority of the immigrant population in schools where the research was conducted, there were also Iraqi and Afghan students. Thus, maximum variation sampling in addition to convenience sampling was used during the research (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). Given that the majority immigrant population was Syrian and that the remaining immigrants were of other foreign nationalities, it was thought that data collected from the province would represent real-life across Turkey. Care was taken to have diversity in differentiation in terms of sex, age, and grade levels, in addition to diversity in nationalities among the secondary school students who were interviewed. The purpose of using two methods of sampling in combination was to avoid weakness in the reliability, generalizability, and usability of the sample chosen in convenience sampling. Table 1 shows the students' characteristics from the aspect of different variables.

**Table 1.** The Students' Characteristics

		Syrian	Afghan	Iraqi	Total
<b>Sex</b>	Female	9	0	1	10
	Male	8	2	0	10
<b>Age</b>	12	8	0	1	9
	13	8	0	0	8
	14	1	1	0	2
	15	0	1	0	1
<b>Educational Level</b>	6th Grade	15	1	0	16
	7th Grade	0	0	1	1
	8th Grade	2	1	0	3

Accordingly, 17 students were Syrian, two were Afghan, and one was Iraqi. As to sex, 10 were female and 10 were male students. Of the students, nine were aged 12 years, eight were aged 13 years, two were aged 14 years, and one was aged 15 years. Sixteen 6th graders, one 7th grader, and three 8th graders were included in the research.

### **Data collection tools**

A semi-structured interview form containing four main questions and six-sub-problems related to the questions, which was prepared by the researcher, was used as the data collection tool. A semi-structured interview was performed with each participant in which researchers prepared the interview questions beforehand but the questions could be regulated and discussed to provide interviewees with partial flexibility (Ekiz, 2009). The questions in the interview form were prepared after a literature review.

Part one in the trial form for the interview form included explanations for students, part two included demographic information about students, and part three included four main questions and 19 probes, ranging between 3 and 5, to obtain students' views on the physical conditions of schools and classrooms, curricula (objective, content, teaching-learning process and assessment), teachers and administrators. Four experts (two experts on curriculum development, an expert on educational management and supervision planning, and an expert on basic education) were consulted for their opinions about the trial form. Consequently, the experts made recommendations only for part three of the trial form. Thus, some of the probes in part three were removed accordance with expert opinion. Part three in the form was regulated again to include four main questions and 16 probes and thus its final shape was confirmed. Voice recorders were used in the interviews with participants who permitted the use of voice recording devices, and then the recordings were transcribed into writing. In interviews with students who did not permit the use of voice recorders, the students' words were quickly handwritten and then the details were written in full later. Written permission was received for the interviews from both the students and their families.

### **Data analysis**

Descriptive analysis was performed to reflect the immigrant students' views on the elements of the school system and thus to describe the current situation, and content analysis was performed to obtain more detailed findings and to interpret them. The data are summarised and interpreted according to previously distinguished themes in descriptive analyses. The data can be arranged according to the themes distinguished by research questions or presented by taking the interview questions and factors into consideration. Content analysis was performed to reach the concepts and correlations that could explain the data and to process more deeply the content summarized and interpreted in the descriptive analysis. Therefore, the data collected from the 63-page document were first conceptualized and then codes were created from the concepts. The codes are shown numerically in the findings section.

### **Validity and reliability**

Reliability and validity are important for the persuasiveness and value of a study in qualitative research. While reliability is generally concerned with the accuracy of the research results, reliability means that the results can be repeated (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). Several precautions were taken in this study to ensure validity and

reliability. First, a pilot scheme was conducted for the interview questions, incomprehensible questions were modified, those that received the same answers and complicated were changed in line with expert opinion and thus made simple whenever possible. The data were examined by two separate researchers and the codes were distinguished and compared. The comparison demonstrated that there was over 84% agreement. Joint codes were determined through discussion for codes on which there was no agreement.

The questions were asked clearly so that secondary school students could understand and they were read aloud to a few volunteer immigrant students who did not take part in the final form of the research. The researcher who interviewed the participants understood how to approach immigrant students because she had worked with them for years. Thus, the researcher had the belief that the participants would sincerely answer the questions and the internal validity of the research would be raised accordingly. The data were decoded and another expert was asked to perform confirmatory analysis for the consistency of the study. The participants were expected to describe their thoughts in detail for the transferability of the research and thus, they described their thoughts in detail.

## **FINDINGS**

The immigrant students' views on the elements of the school system are presented in the themes of the physical condition of the schools, the curriculum, the characteristics of the teachers, and the characteristics of the administrators as in the following.

### **The physical conditions of schools**

The students' views on the physical conditions of the schools were divided into three sub-themes labelled as what they were pleased with, what they were not pleased with, and the features of their dream school or classroom. Students stated their satisfaction with the grounds (f=8), gym (f=5), smartboard (f=5), canteen (f=4), all areas (f=4), and laboratory (f=2) in their school. They expressed dissatisfaction with the toilets (f=5), windows (f=5), desks (f=2), trash cans (f=2), surveillance sections at classroom doors (f=2), hangers (f=1), curtains (f=1), grounds (f=1), and library (f=1) in their schools. Also, the students described tablets (f=4), wide classes/doors/boards (f=3), robot cleaners (f=2), extensive library (f=2), green gardens (f=1), nice tables (f=1), soap/napkins in the toilet (f=1), fewer books (f=1), in-class cameras (f=1), as physical conditions of their dream school.

On examining the immigrant students' views on the physical conditions of the schools, they were found to be most pleased with the school grounds. For example, Student 5 expressed this as follows: *"Everybody plays there...They can have fun."* Students 13 also stated: *"I like the garden because it is not too crowded. It is large and spacious. I mean the school director controls it."* Also, the majority of students stated that they were pleased with the gym and smartboards. About the gym, Student 8 said: *"Because we can play there (in the gym). For example, when it is cold outside, we can play inside."* Also, Student 20 said about the smartboard that subjects

could be easily presented visually without the need for the teacher to draw on the board thanks to the technological properties of the smartboard:

*"It is very good on the smartboard because we can see our body on the board. We can see what is happening in our body in science classes. Smartboards are very nice. For example, the teacher showed us human organs in the science class. The teacher was very good. He said that they used to draw the lungs on the board, but now the smartboard shows them."* (Student 20)

The majority of the students mentioned the toilets and windows as areas of use that they were not pleased with. It was remarkable that the outbreak of COVID-19 during data collection had increased the students' sensitivity to hygiene. For example Student 2 stressed the following about the toilets: *"There is no liquid soap in the toilets. You know there is the virus and we should wash our hands for protection from the virus. But there is no soap."* Likewise Student 12 said: *"I think there should be soap in toilets. Hands should be washed when you go out of the toilet but there is no soap,"* and Student 6 supportively said *"I demand that toilets be clean. I demand that there be soap."* Student 8 mentioned both toilets and the conditions of the classroom *"Toilets are sometimes not clean. I mean the walls could have been cleaner. There can be fewer desks. We are too crowded in the classroom."* Also, Student 1, associating their reason for displeasure with windows with ventilation, was supportive of the belief about COVID-19: *"I am not pleased with the locks on the windows because they hinder ventilation."*

Although the students were asked about the physical properties of their dream school or classroom, they answered the question as "good friends" (f=5), which was remarkable. The situation can be considered to clearly indicate that friendship is more important than physical variables for these students, who were in puberty and war-weary. For instance, student 10 stated: *"I want not to have swear words in the classroom. I have no physical demands."* Student 15 supportively said: *"(I want) the teacher to like us, my friends' to be good. And nothing else."* Student 1 also expressed: *"In fact, my class is not good at all. My friends are naughty. Friends' good treatment to each other and having everything good, that is to say, nice."* Student 17 also pointed naughtiness: *"(I want) a good class. No naughty students. I want the class to be good and my friends to like me."*

The students' demand that their friends treat them well and to like them can be considered as an indicator of their need for socio-emotional support due to emotional traumas they had experienced because of war. The fact that one of the students said he/she did not have dreams about school can indicate that he/she had adopted "forgetting", one of the defence mechanisms as a result of the emotional trauma he/she had following the war, as in the following statement of Student 3: *"I have never dreamt of such a thing. I don't remember the school I went to in Afghanistan."* The students talked about having a tablet PC second to having good friends while describing the physical properties of their dream school. Student 9 wanted to have tablet PCs to use during classes: *"A tablet PC for each student. I mean it would be nice to teach the lessons with technology."* Student 4 emphasized the tablet request as instructional material: *"I have heard of Tablet PCs which are connected to the board. We can have one of them."* Student 18 also stated the use of tablets as notebooks and also for fun: *"For*

example, students have Tablet PCS and they are writing on them while watching cartoons. It would be better if we also had a Tablet PC in our classroom.” The students’ responses related to their dreams also indicated their expectations of the quality of instruction. One of the students stated their need for good quality and fair instruction as in the following:

*“Because there are too many students in the classroom, there should be fewer students. I have difficulty in understanding in classes. There should also be fewer desks. I would like to make use of technology more on the smartboard in the classroom. And there should be a camera in the classroom to prevent injustice.”*

### **The curriculum**

The students’ views on the curriculum were analyzed according to four basic elements of the curriculum: objectives, content, the teaching-learning process, and assessment. The students’ views on the curriculum objectives were asked in the question “what are your views on the qualities or behaviours you are expected/required to gain in classes?” On asking the students to state their views on the behaviors they were required to gain, it was found that the majority (f=11) were not informed about the course objectives. Student 1 expressed this as follows: *“I don’t have many ideas about it. Teachers already know it.”* Student 10 said: *“What do you mean? I don’t know what an objective is.”* Some other students (f=5), however, said that the objectives were appropriate. For instance, student 2 said: *“What I learn is appropriate for me.”* Similar to this, student 19 replied as follows: *“It is sometimes easy and sometimes difficult. But it is appropriate in general.”* In furtherance, student 18 stated: *“I had difficulty in the first year, but now it is not difficult for me.”* Also, a few students (f=2) stated that objectives were unnecessary. One student expressed that objectives were conflicted, and another said they were difficult.

Opinion about the content and other elements of the curriculum was also taken in this research. The students’ views on the curriculum content were divided into three codes labelled as difficult, easy, and functional courses. Some students considered that Mathematics (f=10), Social Studies/ Revolution History (f=9), English (f=3), Turkish (f=3), Science (f=2) and Writing (f=1) were difficult courses. On the other hand, some of them thought that Science (f= 10), Mathematics/Math Applications (f=7), English (f=6), Turkish (f=4) were easy courses. They also stated Religion culture and moral knowledge (f=3), Technology (f=1), Painting (f=1), Music (f=1), Physical education (f=1), Social Studies (f=1), Technology and Design (f=1) as easy courses. Some students thought that Mathematics (f=8), Science (f=8), Turkish (f=6), Social Studies (f=3), English (f=2), Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (f=2), Technology and design (f=1) were functional courses. As can be seen, the students referred to mathematics and social studies/revolution history as the most difficult courses. Student 2 explained why mathematics was difficult: *“I don’t know why. Is it because I don’t like mathematics or because something else? But mathematics is difficult for me.”* Also, student 11 said that mathematics was difficult due to gaps in his prior knowledge:

*"I didn't go to school for two years in Afghanistan. It was a bit late when I came here. I couldn't understand the subjects. I don't know multiplication for example. But others know it and it is difficult for me.  $2 \times 2 = 4$ . I don't know this but the teacher teaches other things."*

The reason for finding courses related to social studies difficult was knowledge about Turkish history and Turkish culture. Therefore, they, the immigrant students, had difficulty in making sense of the history and cultural characteristics of a different country. Student 9 expressed it as follows:

*"There is too much knowledge in the history of revolution, but in my opinion, it is unnecessary. Because I am from Syria, I came to Turkey 3 years ago and it is too difficult for me to understand it. The subject of Ottomans is difficult."*

The students also stated that they had difficulty in courses because the content was too intensive and because they had to memorize everything. For example, Student 9 said: *"There is too much knowledge in science, I think it is useful but mathematics is also useful."* Student 1 showed the same reasoning: *"Because there are too many things in social studies. And in the exam... We cannot catch up with the exam. The same is true for Turkish and writing also."* On the other hand, the majority of the students referred to the science course as the one with the easiest content. They explained why it was easy with the fact that it was used in life. Student 3 explained it with this sentence: *"Because we experience most of them in our life."* Student 13 also emphasized: *"Of course science. Science is related to life actually. Mathematics is a good course; it is fun, but it is not related to life. It is not as related to life as science is."* Moreover, most of the students mentioned mathematics as the second easiest course after science. It was remarkable that student 19 attributed the easiness of mathematics to using universal signs in the course: *"Mathematics is easy because I can understand regardless of whether I am Syrian or Iraqi because numbers are the same everywhere."*

Some students pointed to mathematics and science as the functional courses that they used the most frequently in their lives. Student 1 explained mathematics as follows: *"Because I face mathematics everywhere I go, for example in shops. I need to make calculations when I buy tomatoes, bread."* Similarly, Student 10 stated: *"Mathematics. I use it when I go to shops."* Also, Student 13 said that they could need mathematics in getting a job: *"I think it is mathematics because we will learn mathematics to get a job."* The students were found to use their knowledge of science most in issues related to health, as Student 10 stated: *"Science. It is the thing I use the most knowledge about health when you are ill, and so on."* Student 17 emphasized health: *"We recognize our body when we become ill. We know things about diseases"* Student 16 stressed the importance of health knowledge: *"Because we know the organs in our body. It is a course which makes our life easier."*

The students' views on the teaching-learning process were consulted. They were asked what type of teaching helped them learn better. Students expressed that they learned better when teachers used the Individualized Instruction method (f=7), Repetition (f=5), Game-based learning (f=3), Direct Instruction (f=3), Questions and Answers (f=1), Visualization (f=1), and Feedback (f=1). In addition, they emphasized that Effective Classroom

Management (f=3), Increased Course Hours (f=1), Opening Adaptation Classes (f=1) were the variables that affected their learning.

The students stated that they needed the most teaching by considering learners' needs, i.e. individualized instruction. Student 4 stated about individualized instruction: *"If teachers explain slowly and not fast, it can be retained in mind."* Student 5 explained the needs for individualized instruction: *"If lessons are taught in simple words."* Student 8 stressed the importance of individualized instruction by saying that students should be made to choose courses at secondary school according to domains they would choose at university, i.e. according to their areas of interest:

*"I am a student of the numerical domain. I wish we could choose at grade 5 or 7 because I want to go to a numerical department or a verbal department. We could have such a thing. All (the courses) are important but they sometimes want us to memorize the history of revolution and it is a bit nonsense to me."*

Student 9 stated, in support of individualized instruction, that he/she wanted courses to progress from easier to more difficult and that the distribution of class hours should be arranged accordingly:

*"You know mathematics is very important. But it would be better if we had more mathematics classes. Because the most difficult questions in high school entrance exams are from mathematics. For example, 8 hours a week. 2 hours for easier questions, 2 hours for intermediate questions, and 4 hours for difficult questions."*

Apart from that, it was also remarkable that the students needed repetition in classes. The demand might have stemmed from the fact that their learning needs were different from other students. Student 5 made a statement as follows: *"For example, a word can be said more than once."* Similarly, Student 4 expressed: *"Teachers should teach it again and again."* Student 6 stressed homework as a way of repetition: *"Teaching well. The teacher repeats a lesson. He gives us homework and we do it."* Student 15 said repetition for clarifying missing points: *"It could be better to repeat if we didn't understand it."* Student 3 and 5 also emphasised the importance of effective classroom management in addition to repetition in classes in the teaching-learning process. Student 3 said as follows: *"Characteristics of a teacher... He should be a bit strict. I think so."* Also, Student 5 explained: *"Better learning can occur if I have the environment in which I can listen to the teacher well."*

Some of the students said that they learnt better through games and entertainment. Student 2 stated: *"I learn better if a lesson is taught in an entertaining way. For example, there can be competitions. Knowledge contests or cultural contests can be held."* Other students also claimed that they could learn better in a direct instruction method. Student 14 stressed it as, *"I like it when the teacher explains everything one by one."* In a similar vein, Student 4 said: *"... The teacher explains and we understand. I like the teacher."* Student 16 added about practising

with the teacher: *"I sit down, the teacher explains and then I understand. For example, the teacher does something and it is better when I go to the board and write it on the board."*

One of the important findings obtained in this study was the emphasis laid on the importance of knowledge of the Turkish language for the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. A student demanded that adaptation classes should be opened again and the Turkish language should first be taught effectively in the following statement:

*"I want to understand lessons very well. I have Syrian friends but they don't understand. They accepted them into nursery classes and then they sent them back to upper classes but I don't think they have learnt Turkish. They should have taught them literacy. I mean there shouldn't be differences between Syrians and Turks. I want to mix into them. I live in Turkey. If there are only Syrians, they are always talking. There is more noise."*

And finally, the students' views on assessment, the final element of the curriculum, were obtained in this study. They were asked the assessment methods that they thought to be effective. The opinions of students centred on Project (f=11), Written Examination (f=5), Oral Examination (f=5) and Homework (f=1). Examination of the students' views on the element of assessment demonstrated that the majority of the students preferred the project method. The reason for their choice of projects was that the method allowed them to learn what they do not know and thus provided the missing information. Student 8 explained this as follows: *"We learn a lot while making projects. We can even learn what we haven't learnt in classes. And if it is written, yes, it can be."* Student 12 similarly emphasized: *"Projects because they are better. For example, I can understand better. We are obliged to learn to prepare our project. It is good."* Also, Student 17 explained that projects had a deadline: *"Projects. Because they are easier for me. And the teacher tells us when to submit our project. It is easier in this way."* Student 9 emphasized projects provided students with the opportunity to complete their incomplete scores: *"I like projects. Students can raise their scores with projects. Some students get 69 or 84. They can miss a certificate of achievement or certificate of appreciation because they need 1 point. Projects can be good in this respect."*

### **The characteristics of teachers**

The students' views on the teacher, one of the most important elements of the school system, were divided into three sub-themes labelled as liked teacher behaviors, disliked teacher behaviors, and dream teacher's behaviors. Students stated that they liked their teachers' smiling face and being treated well (f=7), fair (f=4), good lecturing (f=4), and verbal reinforcement (f=3). On the other hand, students expressed that they disliked angry (f=8), unfair (f=4) and dealing with mobile phone (f=2). Students described their dream teacher as one who did good lecturing (f=9) and was fair (f=3), funny (f=3), and loved students (f=2). As it is seen, the teacher behaviors that the students liked most were a smiling face and being treated well. Student 6 stated this as follows: *"He jokes with us. I like it when we have fun and laugh."* Student 1 expressed about teachers: *"They are not angry. And they treat students*

well." Also, the students highlighted the fact that they needed their teachers' socio-emotional support. Student 20 explained this in the following statements: *"Their smiling face. I like my teacher very much. How can I tell you? I feel happy when the teacher asks me a question and I answer him because I want to be good."* Likewise, Student 11 said: *"I like it for example when the teacher asks me whether I have understood the subject. Then it is better. I need it because my Turkish is not very good."* Student 13 gave an example for the support of teacher: *"The Writing teacher is very nice. It is very nice when she says well-done when I do something good. Her saying good, her joking."*

The main teacher behaviors that students disliked were being angry at students, shouting at or getting angry with them. A sample statement made by Student 7 was: *"I don't like the teacher when he gets angry."* Student 3 stressed that *"Sometimes the teacher shouts at me and I don't like it."* It was remarkable that the students referred to teachers' dealing with mobile phones in classes as the teacher behaviors that they did not like. Student 19 made the following statements in this respect: *"For example, I don't like it when a teacher plays with his mobile phone because the lesson is wasted then."* It was found on asking the students the teacher of their dreams that their greatest expectation of teachers was effective teaching. Student 2 stressed game-based learning: *"The teacher of my dreams should treat everybody fairly, he should teach well, he should give lots of examples, and he should do things like having competitions in classes."* Student 8 explained it as follows:

*"Er... He should be fair; he should teach well. He should make us answer more questions, especially questions of new types because it is a bit difficult. Teachers sometimes do not do exercises of a new type because they take a lot of time. At the end of the semester, we have a high school entrance exam and we have difficulty for this reason."*

The teacher behaviors they liked, disliked, and the behaviors that they expect their dream teacher to have were included in the code of "fairness." The number of students who thought that teachers were fair was found to be equal to the number of those who thought that teachers were unfair. Student 9 stated it like this: *"Their injustice. Their pretending as if we were not in the classroom. Some teachers do so."* Student 8 explained it in detail: *"He should not discriminate between students. He should be fair. As I mentioned before, he should not discriminate, he should consider us equal. He should consider Syrians and Turks equal. That's all."*

### **The characteristics of administrators**

School administrators are greatly important in the formation of a positive school climate, which, in turn, will promote the quality of the educational system. Immigrant students' views on this point were consulted. As in the case of their views on teachers, their views on administrator behaviors were also considered in three themes labelled as what they liked, disliked, and the administrators of their dreams. Students expressed that they liked their administrators' ensuring discipline (f=5), being fair (f=3), supporting students (f=2), being reachable (f=1), and behaving well (f=1). In contrast, students stated they disliked their being angry (f=7), careless (f=2), unfair (f=1) and unreachable (f=1). Also, the good treatment (f=6), fair (f=4), ensuring discipline (f=3), doing the job well

(f=3), being reachable (f=1), having time for students (f=1), and making arrangements to increase academic success (f=1) were stated for the behaviors of administrators in their dream. As it is understood, the thing that the immigrant students liked most about the administrators was their ensuring discipline in school. Student 9 said this as follows: *"Their coming to the classroom, their fairness, their visiting and controlling the classrooms."* Similarly, Student 20 explained it with a specific example: *"I am the vice-president in the classroom. We sometimes don't have a teacher in the classroom. Administrators maintain silence in the classroom. I like it about them."* The main thing that the students disliked about administrators was their anger. It is clear from the statements made by Student 3: *"They rebuke us without listening to us. It is bad in this respect. When floors are dirty they shout at us even without knowing who has done it."* Likewise, Student 1 said: *"Sometimes we go to the school manager and make a complaint to him. He says I have jobs other than you. I don't like it about him."* The students expected administrators mostly to treat them well. The majority of the students explained good treatment with being fair. Student 4 stated as follows: *"Being fair. But they worry us. They get angry at us."* Student 14 said about it: *"I would like them to treat me well."* Student 18 described treatment in their dream: *"for example, their smiling face and fairness."* Also being fair was the common code in administrator behaviors that were liked and disliked about administrators and the behaviors of their dream administrators, again, as in the case of teacher behaviors. The joint code of being fair was one of the behaviors that the students highlighted as the behavior they liked about administrators. Student 8 expressed fairness as follows: *"They should be fair; they should treat immigrants well. And that's all."* Student 2 said about it: *"They should treat everybody equally."* The students' dreams about school administration contained recommendations for resolving the adverse conditions they experienced. In this respect, their dreams shed light on the principles necessary for school administrators to fulfil their duties effectively, as made clear from the statement of Student 3: *"Administrators of my dreams are people who do their own job."* Student 1 explained it as follows: *"Administrators of my dreams do their job and they always have time for students."* Similarly, Student 20 said: *"I was ill. I was going to take sick leave but the teacher didn't come. I couldn't reach him. The administrators of my dreams are reachable."* Student 9 uttered that the duty of administration must not come to the fore of teaching as follows:

*"Administrators, for example, the vice director, is our art teacher. Mostly he doesn't come to classes. And the school director is our science applications teacher. But he sometimes comes to classes or he rarely comes. When he comes, he is in the classroom for about 20 minutes."*

## **CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION**

The results obtained for the immigrant secondary school students' views on the elements of the school system in Turkey were considered in four main categories called the physical conditions of schools, the curriculum, teachers, and administrators in this paper. Accordingly, it was found on examining the students' views on the physical conditions of schools that the areas they were most pleased with were the school grounds. The areas they liked second-best were the gyms in schools. The main reason why they were pleased with those areas might be that they liked the places where they could play and do physical activities outside class hours. Reid and

McCallum (2014) also concluded that students liked places to which they assigned meaning, with which they made ties, in which they had positive experiences, and in which they had dreams more. The majority of the students included in this study were also found to be pleased with having smartboards in the classrooms. A student said that they recognized the structure of their body better thanks to smartboards. The results demonstrated that the positive correlations between physical conditions and learning were critical factors in yielding more fair educational results (Bruner, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Reid & McCallum, 2014).

The physical conditions with which most of the students were not pleased were the toilets and the windows. The students said that the toilets were not clean, there were no products for personal hygiene, and that the safety locks on the windows hindered ventilation. One of the students' dissatisfactions with hygiene pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that the research data were collected in the period when the pandemic was influential might have been the reason for students' joint views on hygiene. Many students talked of good friends in response to a question about their dream school or classroom. The situation can be thought to indicate that having close friends was more important than the physical characteristics of schools. Their dreams of having good friends can be attributed to the fact that they were in adolescence and that they were in the period when friendship was important according to Erik Erikson. Research demonstrated that secondary school students considered having friends (Johnson, 2006) and that high school students in rural areas considered having environments of adaptive friendship (Osborne, 2000) as an important element in the classroom. Reid and McCallum (2014) and Griffith (1997) concluded that students' good relations with their teachers and friends affected their views on school in positive ways. Another factor remarkable was that a considerable number of students answered the question about their dream school as saying that they had no idea or that they were pleased with their school. The fact that a student said they did not have any dreams and they did not even remember the school they attended in their country was significant. The student's reaction might have stemmed from displaying behavior of forgetting as a defence mechanism due to the emotional trauma they had during the war in their country. The majority of the students also said in relation to their dream school that they wanted to have a tablet PC to use in classes. Their reason for having a technological device such as a tablet PC was to make use of technology and to have better learning outcomes (Reid & McCallum, 2014), as in the case of having lessons taught on the smartboard.

The findings concerning the curriculum were considered according to the elements of the curriculum. Accordingly, a considerable number of the students did not state any views on the element of objectives in the curriculum or they said that they did not know anything about the issue. Thus, it can be concluded that they were not informed sufficiently of the issue by their teachers, i.e. the principle of informing of the objective (Gagne & Briggs, 1974) was not employed sufficiently. The interviews with the students also demonstrated that the courses in which the immigrant students had the most difficulty were mathematics and social studies. The reason for the difficulty was that the students did not have adequate prior knowledge and that they were forced to learn more advanced subjects even though they had not even gained skills with four operations. Therefore, they developed negative attitudes toward mathematics. Children are likely to learn any subject better than adults

provided that they are presented in a way that they can understand, according to their readiness to learn (Bruner, 2009). The factors such as the availability of cultural differences and abundance of abstract concepts and knowledge in the social studies course and those students' failure to associate them with their life (Hattam and Zipin, 2009; Reid and McCallum, 2014) made it difficult for the students to understand the course and caused them to develop negative attitudes towards it. The easiest content was in the course of physical science according to the students. The interviews with them made it clear that the reason for considering the course easy was that they associated the course content with daily life more. The emphasis on solving daily life problems in the goals of science education is also supportive of the result (Çepni, 2011). Accordingly, associations with daily life are considered important in organizing course content. Another finding prominent in this study was that the functional courses they used in daily life were mainly mathematics and physical sciences. They explained their reason for their claim as they used their learning in those courses in shopping and medical problems. The finding supports the view that students' engagement and achievement in classes will increase if curricula are designed consistently with their life (Hattam & Zipin, 2009).

Concerning the learning-teaching process, another element of the curriculum, the majority of the students said that they needed individualized instruction by considering the properties of learners. The second most frequently demanded thing about the learning-teaching process was repetition or revision. The students included in the research said that they fell behind the program because their proficiency in Turkish was poor and because of deficiencies in their prior knowledge. The finding confirms the conclusions reached by Güngör and Şenel (2018). Similarly, Duruel (2016), Imamoğlu and Çalışkan (2017) also demonstrated that immigrant students' low levels of Turkish language skills caused significant problems in their education in Turkey. Teachers can use individualized instruction, which focuses on organizing teaching according to students' needs (Keller, 1968; Slavin, 2006), and thus they can support students' learning. Most of the students chose assessment with projects concerning the element of assessment in the curriculum. They stated that they had a long time to prepare projects and that they had the opportunity to learn what they did not know in the process. In a similar vein, Tatar and Şaşmaz Ören (2009) also argued that alternative approaches to assessment such as projects provided students with opportunities to do research.

Such teacher characteristics such as having a smiling face and treating students well were found to be the qualities that the students liked the most. The teacher behavior that they disliked was mainly teachers rebuking students or getting angry with them. The most remarkable characteristic of teachers of their dreams was to teach well. Studies conducted with students of different ethnicities or with low socio-economic level demonstrated that the learning environments and social circles at school are influential in students' achievement and their attitudes towards school (Griffith, 1997; Reid & McCallum, 2014). Research has also shown that the school satisfaction of students with a low socio-economic level was correlated to teacher support (Vernon, Watson, Moore & Seddon, 2019; Reid & McCallum, 2014). Besides, it was also found in the present study that the joint theme about liked and disliked teacher behaviors and the behaviors of the students' dream teachers was fairness. Secondary school students' belief in a fair world, in particular, is substantially influenced by the school

environment. The situation is different for primary school and high school students. Primary school students are in childhood and the impacts of their family are continuing, but high school students are in adolescence, they have a more comprehensive perspective of social events, and friendship out of school and worries about the transition into higher education and getting a job is more important in that period, which demonstrates that their belief in a fair world is influenced by other more primary factors. The research results indicated that the factors that predicted all primary, secondary, and high school students' perspectives of justice jointly accepted the compatibility of rules, student-student relations, and the teacher's positive and socio-emotional support. That teachers' positive and socio-emotional support was a mediating variable between students' belief in a fair world and the school environment was another result (Thomas, Santo & Moreira de Cunha, 2019). In this context, the results of this study indicate that teachers' support is more important for war-weary students who have been emotionally exhausted.

An examination of the students' views on school administrators demonstrated that maintenance of discipline in school was the characteristic of administrators that the students liked the most. The finding was similar to that obtained by Eddy (1997). The administrator characteristic that the students liked the least was administrators rebuking them and their displaying anger. The administrators of their dreams were the ones who did not rebuke them and who liked them. It was remarkable that the issue of fairness was the point they agreed on in the liked and disliked administrator behaviors, as well as the behaviors of their dream administrators, as in the case of teacher behaviors. On evaluating this finding along with the finding that the students liked disciplined administrators, the finding obtained in this study is in parallel to those obtained by Thomas, Moreira de Cunha, Americo de Souza and Santo (2019), that students' sense of justice was high in schools where authoritarian culture was dominant.

As a result, the school system has a complex structure that is affected by many different variables. We based this study on the physical conditions that directly affected the quality of education in the school, the applied curriculum, and teachers and administrators as variables. Although most of the immigrant students stated that they were satisfied with the school grounds, they cited basic hygiene as the area they were not satisfied with in schools. We revealed that COVID-19 could be considered as a mediator for this research. Also, the opinions of the students about the curriculum showed that the students did not have information about the goals of the courses they attended and they needed support due to their learning deficiencies. In particular, students' deficiencies in their knowledge of the Turkish language made their understanding of courses difficult. In addition, students stated that they had more difficulty in lessons that were not close to life, such as Turkish history, whereas they understood courses close to life such as science. Moreover, we revealed that students expected the school administration and teachers to treat them well and fairly. This was explained by the need for socio-emotional support of the war-weary students as indicated by the previous literature. Taking all things into consideration, for war-weary immigrant students' to feel that they belong in the Turkish education system, they must be raised as happy and healthy individuals. Arrangements to be made at the points where the views of

immigrant students regarding these variables are common will contribute to increasing the quality of the education system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the views stated by the immigrant students, many arrangements can be made in the school system. First, areas where students can play and do physical activities should be created in schools or existing ones should be improved. Toilets and other places should be cleaned meticulously such that students can be educated in healthier environments. Also, students should be informed of the curriculum objectives. Course content should be associated with real-life and made more interesting for students. Instruction should be differentiated by taking students' learning needs into consideration in the teaching-learning process. Additionally, support should be given to students who are weak at Turkish language skills. Projects and performance activities in addition to written examinations should also be considered important in assessment. Also, immigrant students should be offered psychological support by considering their socio-emotional needs so that they can cope with the traumas they experienced due to the war in their country. Teachers and administrators should be offered in-service training in this respect and should be made to communicate better with immigrant students.

## ETHICAL TEXT

*Conflict of interest:* The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

*Ethical approval:* All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Ethical Committee of Hacettepe University (Document Date and Number: 15.06.2020/35853172-600) and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

In this article, the journal writing rules, publication principles, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical rules were followed. This research is approved by Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education (Document number: 94025929-605.02-E.864777). The responsibility belongs to the authors for any violations that may arise regarding the article.

**Author(s) Contribution Rate:** In this study, the rate of first author's contribution is 50% and of the second author's is 50%.

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