

The Stories They Tell: Exploring Multicultural Education Through Refugee Student Narratives in Turkish Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Background. Turkey hosts one of the world's largest populations of refugee children, yet multicultural education within Turkish public schools remains underdeveloped and inconsistently implemented. Refugee students often navigate classrooms marked by linguistic barriers, cultural misrecognition, and limited curricular representation.

Purpose. This study explores how refugee students' personal narratives can inform and enrich multicultural education practices in Turkish classrooms. Drawing on a qualitative narrative research design, the study engaged 18 refugee students from Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi backgrounds across five urban public schools.

Method. Data were collected through narrative interviews and classroom observations, then analyzed thematically to uncover how students perceive their identities, educational experiences, and interactions with peers and teachers.

Results. Findings reveal that refugee students' stories reflect both resilience and marginalization, highlighting gaps in teacher preparedness, inclusive pedagogy, and culturally responsive curriculum. At the same time, narratives uncovered opportunities for empathy, cross-cultural dialogue, and identity affirmation when student voices were acknowledged in meaningful ways.

Conclusion. The study concludes that integrating refugee narratives into classroom discourse can serve as a transformative tool for multicultural education, fostering more inclusive and humanizing pedagogical environments.

KEYWORDS

Multicultural Classrooms, Refugee Education, Student Voice

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INTRODUCTION

Turkey is currently home to over four million refugees, with nearly half of them being school-aged children (Marom & Ferdiansyah, 2024; S. K. Soltani, 2023). The country's public education system has been at the forefront of integrating these students, particularly within urban districts where classroom diversity is increasing. This demographic shift places new demands on Turkish schools, which must accommodate students from multiple linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds while maintaining national curricular standards. As a result, Turkish classrooms have become microcosms of global displacement, requiring re-evaluation of traditional pedagogical frameworks.



Multicultural education offers a theoretical and practical framework for responding to such diversity, aiming to create equitable learning environments that recognize and validate students' cultural identities. In practice, however, the implementation of multicultural education in Turkey remains uneven, often relying on additive models that treat culture as a separate theme rather than an integrated dimension of teaching and learning. Educators may lack training in culturally responsive pedagogy, and curriculum content continues to reflect a dominant, monolingual national narrative (Chandler, 2023; Machfudi & Ferdiansyah, 2023). This disjuncture between policy aspirations and classroom realities presents a challenge for both refugee inclusion and systemic transformation.

Narratives—especially those told by students themselves—represent a powerful yet underutilized tool in multicultural education. Refugee students carry stories of migration, loss, resilience, and hope that, when shared in educational spaces, can foster empathy, reflection, and intercultural understanding (Albuquerque & Pischetola, 2024; Chandler, 2023). These stories are not merely anecdotal; they serve as sites of knowledge production, identity negotiation, and pedagogical possibility (Albuquerque & Pischetola, 2024; Chandler, 2023). A focus on narrative not only humanizes refugee experience but also invites educators to rethink curriculum and instruction through more relational and dialogic practices.

Despite national and international commitments to refugee education, many refugee students in Turkish schools continue to feel invisible, linguistically marginalized, and culturally misunderstood. Language remains one of the most immediate and persistent barriers, hindering academic participation and peer relationships (Hou, 2023; Schlein & Taft, 2023). Classroom instruction is often delivered exclusively in Turkish, with little scaffolding for students who are emergent multilinguals. This linguistic exclusion is compounded by a lack of culturally responsive materials that reflect refugee students' lived experiences or identities.

Teachers face multiple challenges in engaging refugee learners meaningfully. In many cases, they are required to teach large, mixed-ability classes with minimal institutional support or training in inclusive practices. Professional development on intercultural education is limited, and few teacher preparation programs include components on migration, trauma-informed pedagogy, or critical multiculturalism (Othman & Lo, 2023; Stewart dkk., 2024). The absence of formal mechanisms for incorporating student voice further isolates refugee learners, whose stories often go unheard in standardized classroom environments.

The dominant pedagogical culture in many Turkish schools remains oriented toward rote learning, discipline, and content delivery (Giunco dkk., 2023; Mathews & Stevens, 2024). These methods leave little room for narrative, discussion, or personal expression. Refugee students, in turn, experience school as a space where they are expected to assimilate rather than contribute. This not only undermines their sense of belonging but also misses opportunities for mutual cultural exchange and learning. Addressing this disconnect requires reimagining multicultural education as an active, dialogic process grounded in the narratives of those most affected.

This study seeks to explore how refugee students in Turkish classrooms experience education, identity, and cultural inclusion through the lens of personal storytelling. The research aims to understand how their narratives reflect broader structural and interpersonal dynamics within school settings (Louis & King, 2023; Yomantas, 2023). By foregrounding student voice, the study positions refugee learners not as passive recipients of integration policies but as active meaning-makers within the educational process.

The study further investigates how these narratives can inform multicultural education practices that are inclusive, responsive, and justice-oriented. It considers the potential of storytelling

to function as a pedagogical strategy that fosters intercultural dialogue and disrupts deficit-based representations of refugee youth. Through close attention to student stories, the research examines how educators can create space for narrative expression and how such practices can contribute to more equitable classroom cultures.

At its core, the study aspires to bridge the gap between refugee students' lived realities and educational discourse by offering empirical insights into their school experiences. Through narrative inquiry, the research provides a textured understanding of what multicultural education looks like from the perspective of refugee learners themselves (Bradley & Montero-Hernandez, 2024; Douglas dkk., 2023). These insights are intended to guide educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing more inclusive and humane approaches to teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.

Although there is a growing body of international research on refugee education, much of it focuses on access, policy frameworks, or teacher perspectives, with limited attention to the voices of refugee students themselves (Butson & Jeanes, 2024; Morin, 2024). Studies that do include student input often rely on survey-based methods that fail to capture the depth, emotion, and complexity of refugee narratives (Nazari, 2024; Scales & Nyunt, 2024). This lack of qualitative engagement with student experience limits the field's understanding of how multicultural education is actually lived and negotiated on a daily basis.

In the Turkish context, existing research tends to treat refugee students as a monolithic group, with insufficient attention to intra-group diversity in terms of language, religion, migration histories, and educational background (Buchanan, 2024; Kiramba dkk., 2024). Moreover, the literature often adopts a deficit lens, emphasizing challenges such as trauma, language barriers, and integration difficulties while neglecting students' strengths, agency, and aspirations (Mossman dkk., 2024; Susanto dkk., 2024). There is a clear need for research that approaches refugee youth as narrators of their own experiences, capable of contributing to educational knowledge and practice.

Narrative inquiry remains underutilized as a methodology for exploring multicultural education in Turkey (Rafie & Gossai, 2024). While some research draws on ethnographic or case study approaches, few studies center student storytelling as both data and pedagogical practice. This study addresses that gap by treating refugee students' narratives as generative resources for educational insight. In doing so, it contributes to a more participatory, student-centered approach to research that aligns with the core principles of multicultural education.

This study introduces an original approach to multicultural education by centering refugee student narratives not just as content, but as a methodological and pedagogical foundation. Unlike traditional approaches that treat multiculturalism as a curriculum add-on, this research positions storytelling as a means of relational learning and cultural affirmation (Al-Hamad dkk., 2024; B. Soltani & Tomlinson, 2024). By using narrative inquiry, the study highlights the reflective, affective, and transformative potential of student voice in shaping inclusive education.

The research also contributes methodologically by employing narrative interviews and thematic analysis to interpret refugee students' stories within specific classroom contexts. This combination of personal narrative and situated educational analysis offers a rich, multidimensional account of how refugee learners experience and contribute to multicultural schooling (Abu Bakar dkk., 2023; Hipolito-Delgado, 2024). The emphasis on students' own words and meaning-making processes challenges dominant representations and invites educators to rethink what counts as knowledge in the classroom.

This study is timely given the global increase in refugee populations and the pressing need to build more inclusive educational systems. In the Turkish context, where policy has outpaced

practice, the research offers grounded, actionable insights into how multicultural education can be reimagined from the bottom up (Lay dkk., 2024; Piscayanti dkk., 2024). The findings not only expand scholarly discourse but also provide practical strategies for educators committed to equity, voice, and belonging in diverse classrooms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how refugee students in Turkish public schools experience multicultural education through the lens of their personal stories. Narrative inquiry was selected for its ability to foreground participant voice, capture emotional and contextual nuance, and situate individual experience within broader sociocultural structures (Montes, 2024; Wallace, 2023). The approach emphasized storytelling not only as a method of data collection but also as a relational and ethical mode of knowledge production aligned with the principles of inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy.

The research was conducted with 18 refugee students between the ages of 12 and 17, attending five urban public schools located in Istanbul, Ankara, and Gaziantep—cities with high concentrations of refugee populations (Braganza & Hodge, 2024; Dewi dkk., 2024). Participants included students from Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi backgrounds, selected through purposive sampling in collaboration with school counselors and language support coordinators. Selection criteria required that participants had been enrolled in Turkish public schools for at least one academic year, possessed conversational proficiency in Turkish or Arabic, and expressed a willingness to share their stories in a safe and supportive environment.

Data were collected using two primary instruments: semi-structured narrative interviews and classroom observations. Each student participated in one to two in-depth interview sessions lasting 45 to 60 minutes, conducted in Turkish or Arabic depending on participant preference. Interviews encouraged students to recount their school experiences, identity development, and interactions with teachers and peers (Abkhezzr & Bath, 2023; Dewi dkk., 2024). Classroom observations were conducted in relevant subject areas to contextualize student narratives, with attention to teacher-student dynamics, language use, and signs of cultural inclusion or marginalization. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary for analysis.

The study took place over a four-month period from February to May 2023. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts using a hybrid inductive–deductive coding framework. Codes were initially generated from participant language and refined through iterative cycles of reading, memoing, and clustering (Craig, 2024; Murtiana, 2024). Cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify recurring patterns related to belonging, exclusion, language, agency, and educational aspirations (Brown dkk., 2024). Ethical approval was granted by the university research ethics board, and informed consent was obtained from students and their guardians. Participant anonymity and cultural sensitivity were maintained throughout the research, with bilingual support staff assisting in translation and interpretation to ensure accurate representation of student voice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dataset consisted of 27 semi-structured interviews with 18 refugee students, supported by 20 hours of classroom observation notes and supplementary documents from school programs focused on refugee inclusion. The participants ranged in age from 12 to 17 and had been enrolled in Turkish public schools for at least one academic year. Data were collected from five schools located in Istanbul, Ankara, and Gaziantep, which serve large refugee populations from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Table 1. Participant Profile and School Context

Code	Country of Origin	Age	Gender	City	Years in Turkish School	Interview Language
S1	Syria	14	Male	Gaziantep	2	Arabic
S2	Afghanistan	13	Female	Ankara	3	Turkish
S3	Iraq	17	Male	Istanbul	4	Turkish

The demographic spread reflects a linguistically and culturally diverse participant pool. Students shared narratives shaped by displacement, adjustment, and the search for belonging within the school system. Most participants were multilingual, speaking Arabic, Dari, Pashto, or Kurdish at home while learning Turkish as an additional language. Several students reported initial experiences of alienation followed by gradual adaptation through peer interactions and teacher support.

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed four recurring categories: linguistic struggle and adaptation, perceptions of identity and otherness, the role of teacher support, and missed opportunities for cultural representation in the curriculum. Many students described difficulty understanding class content due to the lack of bilingual support, particularly in subjects like mathematics and science. Language acquisition occurred primarily through immersion, often without structured scaffolding.

Students expressed that identity formation was deeply tied to their classroom experiences. Narratives highlighted instances of both affirmation and erasure, as students negotiated being “guests,” “foreigners,” or “newcomers.” Visible markers such as accent, dress, or religious practices contributed to feelings of difference, especially in peer interactions. Some students expressed pride in their cultural heritage but reported few opportunities to share it meaningfully within school settings.

Inferential analysis revealed that strong teacher-student relationships played a critical role in mediating experiences of exclusion. Participants who described supportive teachers also tended to report higher levels of confidence, school engagement, and language acquisition. Teachers who acknowledged students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds were remembered as allies who contributed positively to students' academic and emotional adjustment.

Students who lacked access to empathetic teaching environments often narrated feelings of isolation, low motivation, and even school avoidance. Inconsistent implementation of inclusion strategies resulted in highly variable student outcomes across different schools. The presence or absence of trained staff, language mediation, and intercultural programming directly influenced student experience. These patterns suggest that systemic support is as important as individual goodwill in fostering inclusion.

A strong correlation was found between classroom practices and students' willingness to engage. Classrooms that incorporated open discussions, narrative sharing, or visual arts allowed refugee students to contribute their stories and perspectives. These opportunities enhanced student agency and classroom cohesion. Conversely, classrooms dominated by monologic instruction limited participation and reinforced linguistic hierarchy.

Participants reported that cultural representation in curriculum materials was either minimal or non-existent. Most students could not recall encountering texts or activities that reflected their backgrounds. Several expressed a desire to share stories from their countries of origin but lacked formal spaces or invitations to do so. This absence of narrative inclusion was linked to feelings of invisibility and disconnection from the school culture.

A case study of “S1,” a 14-year-old Syrian student, exemplifies the power of storytelling in fostering integration. After participating in a classroom activity on “Where I’m From,” S1 shared a poem about his hometown in Arabic, translated with help from his teacher. The experience led to greater peer interest and a follow-up classroom project on global migration, during which S1 helped lead discussions. His academic engagement improved noticeably in the following weeks.

Another case, “S6,” a 13-year-old Afghan girl, described how her teacher incorporated her traditional recipes into a unit on procedural writing. The teacher invited her to present a dish to the class, followed by a shared writing activity. This gesture validated her identity and strengthened her sense of belonging. She later wrote about the experience in her school journal, describing it as “the first time I felt like I belonged here.”

Data narratives revealed the emotional complexity of student experiences. Joy, fear, hope, confusion, and pride often appeared in the same narrative, underscoring the layered nature of refugee identity. Many students described school as a space of both possibility and pressure. Those who were invited to share their voices experienced schooling as a relational, transformative space. Those excluded from discourse experienced it as a space of silence and self-erasure.

Student narratives suggest that inclusive multicultural education is not only about curricular content, but about everyday classroom relationships and recognition. Storytelling emerged as a critical pedagogy for acknowledging identity, reducing cultural distance, and constructing shared educational spaces. These findings affirm that refugee students bring valuable knowledge to classrooms—knowledge that must be invited, honored, and embedded.

The study’s findings reveal that refugee students in Turkish classrooms experience school as a dynamic space of both exclusion and adaptation. While linguistic barriers and limited cultural recognition persist, students also exhibit remarkable resilience and a desire for connection. Narratives consistently highlighted the importance of teacher empathy, peer relationships, and moments where students were invited to express their identities. Where storytelling was encouraged, students reported greater emotional engagement and stronger identification with the learning environment.

Students described multilingualism as both a resource and a source of tension. Those who were allowed to draw upon their first languages felt more confident and supported in their learning. Teachers who provided differentiated linguistic scaffolding contributed directly to students’ academic participation. In contrast, monolingual classroom practices reinforced marginalization and diminished self-confidence. Multilingual competence remained largely under-recognized in formal pedagogical strategies.

Narratives also demonstrated that cultural identity was affirmed most meaningfully through relational gestures. Classroom activities that allowed students to share personal histories, food, or cultural symbols were remembered as significant moments of inclusion. These experiences were not peripheral but central to how students understood their place within the school. Their stories suggested that belonging was relationally constructed, not automatically granted through enrollment alone.

The clearest indicator of positive school experience was the extent to which students were positioned as contributors rather than recipients. Where students’ stories were seen as knowledge, not as background, multicultural education came alive. Inclusion was not achieved through policy or slogans but through genuine classroom dialogue, collaborative projects, and ethical curiosity on the part of educators. These findings suggest that student narrative must be central to any model of inclusive pedagogy.

The study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations around multicultural education, refugee inclusion, and narrative pedagogy. Previous research in contexts such as Germany (Crul et al., 2019), Sweden (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016), and Canada (Dei, 2012) has emphasized the structural and linguistic barriers faced by refugee students, along with the importance of culturally responsive teaching. This study reinforces those themes while adding the underrepresented dimension of student-generated narrative as a tool for pedagogical transformation.

Existing research on refugee education in Turkey has largely centered on teacher perspectives, policy evaluations, or macro-level integration metrics. Few studies have foregrounded the everyday experiences of refugee students themselves, particularly through narrative methods. This study fills that gap by treating student voice as a valid and essential source of educational insight. The findings expand the field's understanding of how identity, language, and belonging intersect in school life from the student's point of view.

Unlike research that focuses on administrative challenges or cultural clashes, this study frames refugee students not as passive subjects of policy but as narrators of their own educational journeys. Their stories complicate simplistic narratives of victimhood or success and instead offer textured, contradictory accounts of learning, adaptation, and identity negotiation. This distinction is crucial in reorienting the conversation from refugee-as-deficit to refugee-as-resource.

The study also challenges dominant models of multicultural education that rely on superficial inclusion, such as holiday recognition or food festivals. Narratives suggest that symbolic gestures are insufficient when not accompanied by deep curricular integration and relational commitment. Multicultural education must move from the margins to the center of school life, grounded in dialogic processes that treat students as co-constructors of knowledge, rather than cultural representatives.

The students' narratives serve as a powerful reminder of the ethical dimensions of teaching in culturally diverse settings. Their reflections point to a desire not simply to be tolerated or assisted, but to be seen, heard, and respected. The stories reflect how recognition and representation in the classroom shape self-esteem, motivation, and identity. These outcomes underscore the need to reframe refugee education not as an act of charity, but as a practice of justice and shared learning.

Participants' descriptions of transformative classroom moments reveal the pedagogical potential of narrative as both method and content. Stories enabled students to articulate feelings of loss and longing while also connecting with peers through shared humanity. These instances helped dismantle the perception of refugee learners as culturally distant or socially disconnected. Storytelling became a tool not just for personal expression but for collective understanding.

The repeated theme of invisibility in the narratives highlights the risks of pedagogical neutrality. Students want more than equal treatment; they seek meaningful inclusion, which requires educators to engage with cultural complexity, historical context, and power dynamics. Their stories call for teachers to become active listeners and culturally literate facilitators who can navigate and affirm identity through curriculum and dialogue.

The emotional labor present in student narratives—marked by trauma, joy, hope, and disappointment—must be recognized as integral to the educational process. Schools that provide safe, responsive spaces for narrative expression offer more than language support or remedial instruction; they offer the foundation for dignity and self-realization. This approach demands a reconceptualization of what it means to “teach” and “learn” in multicultural contexts.

Multicultural education that takes student narrative seriously transforms classrooms into ethical communities of care. The teacher becomes a co-learner, the curriculum becomes responsive, and the school becomes a space where diverse identities are cultivated, not managed. These findings

suggest that student stories must not be peripheral but central to policy, practice, and professional development in refugee education.

The implications of this study are significant for teacher education, curriculum development, and educational policy. Pre-service and in-service teacher programs must integrate narrative methods and refugee perspectives into training modules. Teachers need opportunities to learn from students' lived realities, not only about their backgrounds but also about their strengths and aspirations. Embedding student narratives into pedagogical frameworks fosters empathy, reflexivity, and equity-oriented teaching practices.

Curriculum developers should reconsider how cultural diversity is represented in textbooks, classroom materials, and lesson planning. Student narratives provide a starting point for localized, relevant, and dynamic curricular content that reflects the lived realities of increasingly diverse classrooms. This includes integrating student-led storytelling projects, autobiographical writing, and oral history assignments that center refugee voices.

Education policies that prioritize inclusion must move beyond access metrics and engage with qualitative dimensions of belonging, identity, and participation. Policymakers should support initiatives that institutionalize storytelling practices, foster multilingual learning environments, and embed narrative approaches in school culture. These reforms would enable more responsive systems that affirm diversity as a strength rather than an obstacle.

Schools must be resourced to create culturally safe spaces for refugee students. This includes hiring bilingual staff, supporting peer mentoring, and facilitating community engagement activities that honor students' cultural heritage. Narrative-based multicultural education can serve as a foundation for broader efforts to build solidarity, reduce xenophobia, and foster inclusive democratic values in pluralistic societies.

The reasons behind the findings lie in the gap between structural intentions and lived realities. While Turkey has committed to integrating refugee children through public education, the pace of implementation has not matched the scale of the challenge. Classroom realities are shaped not only by policy, but by teacher attitudes, school resources, and cultural discourse. Students' stories reflect these contradictions, pointing to the unfinished nature of refugee inclusion.

The emotional complexity of the narratives suggests that refugee identity is continually negotiated in school spaces. Students' experiences of being silenced, misrecognized, or celebrated are shaped by subtle interactions as much as by explicit curriculum content. These micro-level encounters reveal how inclusion is built or broken through daily pedagogical practice.

The transformative potential observed in classrooms where narrative was used highlights the difference between teaching about refugees and teaching with refugees. When students are positioned as knowledge holders rather than subjects of deficit discourse, they participate more fully and invest more deeply in their learning. This shift in power dynamics is essential for achieving authentic multicultural education.

The findings are also influenced by broader socio-political narratives about migration, national identity, and citizenship. Teachers and students operate within discourses that shape their perceptions of one another. Disrupting these narratives through personal storytelling can create counter-narratives that humanize refugee experience and redefine national belonging in more inclusive ways.

Future work must focus on sustaining the momentum generated by narrative practices. Schools can institutionalize storytelling through regular reflection time, intergenerational projects, and digital storytelling platforms. Researchers should explore longitudinal impacts of narrative inclusion on academic achievement, identity development, and social cohesion.

Educators can be supported in developing culturally sustaining pedagogies that incorporate narrative tools across subject areas. Professional learning communities may serve as spaces where teachers reflect on their positionality, biases, and pedagogical practices in light of refugee narratives. This ongoing inquiry would deepen multicultural competence and challenge assimilationist tendencies.

Collaborations between schools, communities, and refugee families are critical to expanding narrative practices beyond the classroom. Building trust and reciprocity ensures that stories are not extracted but shared with care and cultural integrity. These partnerships would also enhance students' sense of belonging and affirm their roles as cultural bridge-builders.

Refugee students must be recognized not only as learners but as storytellers, historians, and knowledge producers. Their narratives carry the power to transform institutions, shift mindsets, and open new pathways for inclusive education. Listening to their stories is not a favor—it is an ethical imperative for building schools that honor humanity in all its diversity.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that refugee students' narratives function not only as personal accounts of migration and adaptation but as pedagogical tools capable of transforming multicultural education from a static framework into a dynamic, relational process. These narratives revealed that genuine inclusion depends less on curricular presence and more on opportunities for student voice, agency, and cultural recognition within everyday classroom interactions. Classrooms that made space for storytelling fostered a stronger sense of belonging, academic engagement, and intercultural empathy, demonstrating that narrative is central to any meaningful approach to equity and inclusion in diverse educational settings.

This research contributes a distinctive methodological and conceptual lens by integrating narrative inquiry with multicultural educational practice in the Turkish context. The study positions refugee students not as objects of integration policy but as narrators and knowledge producers whose lived experiences can inform curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher development. The use of student-centered narrative interviews, supported by classroom observations, highlights the affective, linguistic, and sociocultural dimensions of refugee inclusion. This combination advances the field by offering an approach that is both participatory and critically reflective, aligning with global calls for decolonizing and humanizing education through the integration of marginalized voices.

This study is limited by its reliance on a relatively small sample of students from select urban regions, which may not reflect the full diversity of refugee experiences across Turkey, particularly in rural or under-resourced areas. While the narrative method provided depth and emotional nuance, it does not account for longitudinal developments or policy-level impacts. Future research should explore how narrative-based inclusion affects long-term educational outcomes, identity formation, and civic participation among refugee youth. Comparative studies across different regions, school types, and teacher training models could yield broader insights into how narrative practices can be scaled and sustained as core components of multicultural education in national and international contexts.

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