



Silent Struggles of Foreign Fourth-Grade Primary School Students: Psychological Resilience and Invisible Traumas in Türkiye

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Received: 2025-07-15; **Revised:** 2025-08-02; **Accepted:** 2025-08-18; **Published:** 2025-08-25

How to cite: GURHAN, E. (2025). Silent Struggles of Foreign Fourth-Grade Primary School Students: Psychological Resilience and Invisible Traumas in Türkiye. *Al-Adzka: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 15(2), 156–165. <https://doi.org/10.18592/aladzkapgmi.v15i2.17727>

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Abstract: *This study investigates the psychological resilience and invisible traumas of foreign fourth-grade primary school students in Türkiye, focusing on 91 students from Syrian, Iraqi, and Somali backgrounds in a public school in Konya. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews exploring students' migration histories, emotional struggles, school adaptation, and coping strategies. Findings reveal deep psychological distress linked to war, displacement, and migration-related adversities. Students frequently reported fear, social exclusion, and language difficulties, which hindered academic performance and integration. Despite these challenges, many displayed resilience through religious practices, creativity, and strong family ties. Peer interactions emerged as both supportive and discriminatory. While some teachers and peers contributed positively, trauma-informed approaches were largely absent. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and intersectionality, the study emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive educational policies that include psychological support services, inclusive pedagogies, and robust language assistance. By highlighting these students' often-overlooked emotional experiences, the research contributes to the broader discourse on migration and education, offering practical recommendations for promoting equity and well-being in Turkish primary schools.*

Keywords: *Psychological Resilience, Invisible Trauma, Foreign Students, Migration, Educational Inclusion, Türkiye, Trauma-Informed Education*

Abstrak: *Penelitian ini menyelidiki ketahanan psikologis dan trauma tak terlihat pada siswa sekolah dasar kelas empat asing di Türkiye, dengan fokus pada 91 siswa berlatar belakang Suriah, Irak, dan Somalia di sebuah sekolah negeri di Konya. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang mengeksplorasi sejarah migrasi siswa, perjuangan emosional, adaptasi sekolah, dan strategi coping. Temuan mengungkapkan adanya tekanan psikologis mendalam yang terkait dengan perang, pengungsian, dan kesulitan akibat migrasi. Siswa sering melaporkan rasa takut, pengucilan sosial, dan kesulitan bahasa, yang semuanya menghambat kinerja akademik dan integrasi mereka. Meskipun menghadapi tantangan tersebut, banyak yang menunjukkan ketahanan melalui praktik keagamaan, kreativitas, dan ikatan keluarga yang kuat. Interaksi dengan teman sebaya muncul baik sebagai dukungan maupun diskriminasi.*

Sementara beberapa guru dan teman sebaya memberikan kontribusi positif, pendekatan yang berorientasi pada trauma sebagian besar masih belum ada. Dipandu oleh teori sistem ekologi Bronfenbrenner dan interseksionalitas, penelitian ini menekankan perlunya kebijakan pendidikan yang komprehensif yang mencakup layanan dukungan psikologis, pedagogi yang inklusif, dan bantuan bahasa yang memadai. Dengan menyoroti pengalaman emosional siswa yang sering terabaikan ini, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana yang lebih luas tentang migrasi dan pendidikan, serta menawarkan rekomendasi praktis untuk mempromosikan kesetaraan dan kesejahteraan di sekolah dasar Türkiye.

Kata Kunci: *Ketahanan Psikologis, Trauma Tak Terlihat, Siswa Asing, Migrasi, Inklusi Pendidikan, Türkiye, Pendidikan Berbasis Trauma*

Introduction

Migration is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that not only reshapes the demographic composition of host societies but also profoundly influences the psychosocial experiences of individuals, particularly children. In recent decades, Türkiye has emerged as one of the world's largest host countries for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, with millions of children entering its national education system (Emin, 2016; Coşkun & Emin, 2016). While education policies in Türkiye have largely emphasized academic integration and language acquisition, less visible dimensions such as psychological trauma and resilience among migrant children have received limited scholarly attention.

Globally, research indicates that displacement, forced migration, and refugee status significantly increase the risk of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and emotional distress among children (Fazel et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2011). In the Turkish context, many students from conflict-affected regions such as Syria, Iraq, and Somalia carry deep psychological scars stemming from war, disrupted family life, and social instability (Qian, 2024). These invisible traumas often manifest in classrooms as withdrawal, passivity, or academic decline, yet educators frequently overlook or misinterpret them (Betancourt et al., 2012). The limited training of teachers in trauma-informed practices and shortages of school psychologists exacerbate these challenges and hinder adequate student support (Sarier, 2020).

The concept of psychological resilience, defined as the dynamic capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity (Masten, 2014), offers an important lens for understanding the educational experiences of migrant children. Resilience is not an inherent trait but a process shaped by family support, peer relationships, and the broader school environment. However, empirical studies in Türkiye have rarely examined the relationship between resilience and invisible trauma in shaping migrant students' adaptation. Peer dynamics represent another underexplored dimension: supportive friendships can mitigate trauma and foster belonging (Wentzel et al., 2012; Rubin et al., 2015), whereas bullying and ethnic discrimination intensify marginalization and psychological distress (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013; Killen et al., 2013). Although international scholarship highlights the importance of peer relationships, empirical evidence in the Turkish context remains scarce (Birman & Tran, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009).

These gaps highlight the need for further inquiry. Previous studies on migrant students in Türkiye have primarily focused on academic integration and language acquisition (Emin, 2016; Coşkun & Emin, 2016), while issues surrounding invisible trauma, resilience, and peer interactions in the everyday school lives of foreign

primary students remain understudied. To address this gap, the present study draws on Ecological Systems Theory [Bronfenbrenner's \(1979\)](#), which emphasizes how multiple layers of the environment from the microsystem of family and school to the macrosystem of culture and policy shape child development, and Intersectionality Theory ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)), which highlights how overlapping identities such as ethnicity, refugee status, and socioeconomic background compound vulnerabilities.

This study contributes to the literature by exploring the intersection of invisible trauma, resilience, and peer interactions among fourth-grade migrant students from Syria, Iraq, and Somalia in Türkiye. By situating these experiences within ecological and intersectional frameworks, the study expands current understandings of migrant children's adaptation beyond language and academic integration.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of invisible trauma experienced by migrant primary school students.
2. To examine the role of psychological resilience in mitigating the effects of trauma.
3. To analyze how peer interactions and teacher support influence adaptation.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the psychological resilience and invisible traumas of foreign fourth-grade primary school students in Türkiye. The research was conducted in a public primary school located in Konya province, with 91 participants: 84 from Syria, 4 from Iraq, and 3 from Somalia. To capture broader perspectives, six classroom teachers and two school counselors were also interviewed. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation of children affected by war, displacement, and migration-related adversities.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, first-person narratives of students' migration histories, emotional struggles, school adaptation, language barriers, peer interactions, coping mechanisms, and aspirations. Student interviews were conducted in Turkish and supported by bilingual translators when necessary to facilitate comfort and accuracy for non-Turkish speakers. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Teacher and counselor interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and focused on observations of students' emotional states, classroom behaviors, and strategies used to support inclusion and recovery. All transcripts were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase framework: familiarization, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. NVivo 12 software was used to systematically code and organize transcripts, enabling identification of patterns across participants. To enhance the rigor of the analysis, member checking was conducted with participants, and peer debriefing was implemented to validate coding decisions. These procedures strengthened the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Credibility was ensured through triangulation of perspectives (students, teachers, counselors), member checking, and detailed documentation of the analytic process. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability and confirmability were supported by peer debriefing and the systematic use of NVivo software. Ethical approval was obtained from the [Ministry of National Education \(2023\)](#), and informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. This multi-perspective and rigorously validated methodological approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the psychological resilience and invisible traumas of migrant primary school students in Türkiye, integrating both individual narratives and institutional insights.

Results and Discussion

Psychological Resilience in the Face of Migration-Related Adversities

The narratives collected from students and teachers reveal how resilience emerges not as an inherent trait but as a lived process shaped by relationships and daily practices. Despite carrying the weight of forced displacement, conflict-related trauma, and disrupted family life, many children find ways to preserve a sense of stability and hope. These voices illustrate how students build resilience through the protective presence of family, teachers' encouragement, and peers' solidarity.

A student expressed: *"When I felt sad about leaving our home, my mother told us, 'Don't worry, we are safe now. No one can harm us in Turkey.' Thinking about this as a family makes me feel strong"* (Student 7). Similarly, a teacher observed: *"Despite everything they have been through, these children generally try to smile and help each other, showing inner strength"* (Teacher 3). These voices demonstrate how children draw strength from their immediate support networks despite experiencing displacement and trauma.

From these accounts, it becomes clear that family support, religious practices, and creative outlets such as drawing played crucial roles in sustaining students' stability. Teachers and peers encouraged students and strengthened their resilience, yet some students continued to experience anxiety, social exclusion, and sleep disturbances. These findings illustrate that resilience remains fragile and is often tested by lingering psychological challenges.

Theoretically, these results align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which positions the family within the microsystem as the most immediate protective factor ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#); [Ungar, 2011](#)). [Masten \(2014\)](#) further conceptualizes resilience as *"ordinary magic"* rooted in everyday caring relationships, while prior studies confirm that displaced children remain at risk of psychological distress despite protective mechanisms ([Betancourt et al., 2012](#); [Fazel et al., 2012](#); [Arslan, & Ergül, 2020](#)). The findings underscore that while foreign fourth-grade students in Türkiye demonstrate resilience, their psychosocial adaptation remains vulnerable without sustained multi-level support across family, school, and community systems.

Invisible Traumas and Challenges of School Adaptation

Migration often leaves children carrying hidden psychological burdens that do not appear on the surface but profoundly influence their adjustment to school life. These invisible traumas manifest subtly in classrooms, affecting participation, motivation, and social interactions in ways teachers and peers may not immediately recognize.

One student described: *"Sometimes I don't want to speak in class because I think about my father who is gone. He was a martyr"* (Student 12). A teacher observed:

"Some students sit quietly and do not participate in class, not because they do not understand, but because they carry heavy memories" (Teacher 1). These narratives confirm how trauma invisibly undermines learning, supporting the theoretical claim that adaptation must be understood within overlapping social and emotional contexts.

The findings revealed that many children carried invisible traumas that manifested as withdrawal, silence, or inconsistent academic performance behaviors often misinterpreted by teachers as laziness or disinterest. Linguistic and cultural barriers further exacerbated marginalization, reducing participation. Experiences of bullying reinforced ethnic exclusion processes, while adaptation improved when teachers and peers provided inclusion.

These results align with previous research showing that refugee children's hidden distress is frequently underestimated in schools (Betancourt et al., 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). Language barriers amplify educational challenges (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Block et al., 2014), and peer dynamics can either reinforce exclusion (Killen et al., 2013) or provide protection (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). Thus, invisible trauma, compounded by systemic and social barriers, shapes the fragile adaptation process of migrant children in school contexts.

Thus, while invisible trauma and structural barriers undermine migrant children's school adaptation, the role of peers becomes especially critical. Peer relationships can either deepen exclusion through bullying and discrimination or serve as a vital source of belonging and resilience. This dual role highlights the need to further examine how peer interactions shape migrant students' adaptation experiences.

Peer Interactions as Double-Edged Experiences

Among the multiple factors shaping migrant students' adaptation, peer interactions are among the most influential yet paradoxical elements. Peers can become a powerful source of support that fosters belonging and resilience, but at the same time, they may act as agents of exclusion and marginalization.

A student shared: *"One of my classmates always helps me with Turkish words, which makes me happy. My self-confidence is increasing"* (Student 4). Another lamented: *"Sometimes other children don't want to play with me and say I'm different"* (Student 9). A teacher confirmed: *"We see both: some peers try to be supportive, while others exclude them"* (Teacher 5). These voices reveal how peer interactions operate as both a source of support and a source of exclusion in the daily experiences of migrant students.

The findings illustrate that positive peer interactions foster belonging, encourage participation, and reduce trauma symptoms among Syrian, Iraqi, and Somali students. Yet, exclusionary practices such as bullying, rejection, or ethnic labeling deepened feelings of marginalization. This duality underscores how peer relations simultaneously carry protective and risk-laden elements within the school environment.

In broader terms, the results align with Rubin et al. (2015) and Wentzel et al. (2012), who emphasize the ambivalent role of peers in shaping children's development. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, peers constitute a central microsystem influencing resilience. Intersectionality further complicates this picture: migrant status, ethnicity, and poverty intersect to magnify vulnerabilities, echoing the findings of Birman & Tran (2008), Killen et al. (2013), and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2009).

In conclusion, peer interactions represent a double-edged dimension of school life: they can empower migrant children through friendship and solidarity or exacerbate exclusion and trauma. This complexity highlights the urgency of strengthening peer mentoring programs and implementing anti-bullying strategies to promote inclusive school environments.

Resilience Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

Beyond the challenges of trauma and adaptation, migrant children also demonstrated remarkable resilience through culturally and socially grounded coping practices. These strategies highlight individual perseverance and the vital role of family and community in sustaining emotional well-being.

Finally, the study identified diverse coping strategies embedded in cultural and familial contexts. Prayer, storytelling, and drawing provided continuity and emotional release, supporting Masten's (2014) view of resilience as grounded in ordinary resources. Family cohesion was particularly critical, consistent with Walsh's (2016) family resilience framework. These coping practices represented microsystem supports (family, religion) and mesosystem collaboration (family-school dynamics). Somali students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced compounded challenges, echoing Ungar's (2020) work on contextual resilience. Creative expression, in particular, enabled students to externalize emotions and bypass linguistic barriers, resonating with (Betancourt et al. 2012).

Students highlighted these mechanisms in interviews. One explained: "*When I draw, I forget the bad things and calm down*" (Student 11). Another shared: "*When I'm scared, I pray to Allah and then feel stronger*" (Student 2). A school counselor added: "*Parents encourage their children to be patient and hopeful, which helps them adapt*" (Counselor 1). These accounts underline the need for culturally sensitive, trauma-informed educational practices integrating creative and religious coping strategies (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

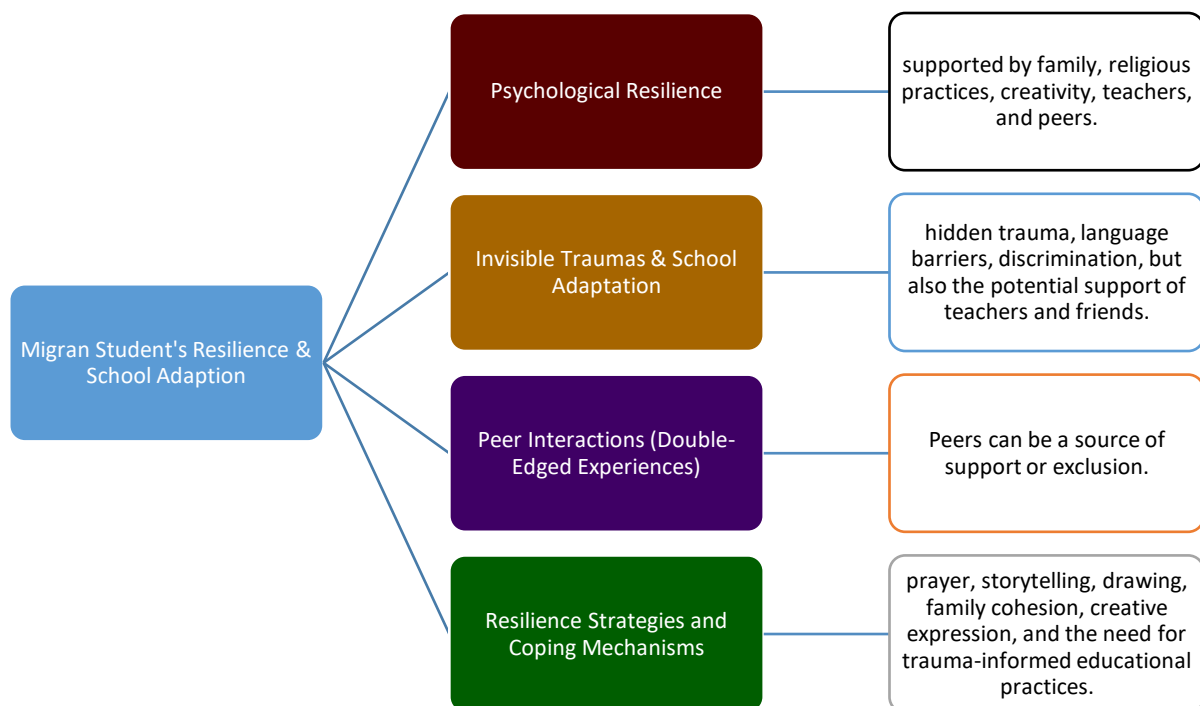
In conclusion, the coping strategies identified in this study demonstrate that migrant children actively draw on cultural, religious, and familial resources to navigate trauma and uncertainty. While these mechanisms foster resilience, their effectiveness depends on sustained support across family, school, and community systems. Therefore, schools must acknowledge and integrate these culturally rooted practices into their educational approaches to promote academic success and psychosocial well-being.

This study provides critical insights into the resilience processes of migrant students in Turkish primary schools. Four interrelated themes resilience, invisible trauma, peer interactions, and coping strategies were identified and supported by direct interview excerpts, offering an emic perspective on children's lived experiences. These voices highlighted that resilience is socially embedded and context-dependent, shaped by the interplay of family, peers, and institutional environments. As students themselves expressed through their drawings, prayers, and testimonies, resilience should not be romanticized as an individual trait but understood as a dynamic process enabled or constrained by ecological and intersectional factors. Despite enduring severe adversities such as war, forced displacement, and socioeconomic hardship, many students demonstrated resilience supported by family cohesion, religious practices, and creative self-expression. Yet this resilience was often fragile and insufficient to fully counteract persistent challenges such as linguistic barriers, peer discrimination, and cultural exclusion. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and intersectionality, the findings confirmed that interactions across multiple systems shape resilience.

At the microsystem level, family and peer support emerged as protective factors, while at the mesosystem level, inclusive school practices either facilitated adaptation or reinforced trauma. Overlapping identities, including refugee status, ethnicity, and poverty, further compounded vulnerability, underscoring the need for multi-layered interventions. From a practical perspective, the study emphasizes the urgency of implementing trauma-informed pedagogical approaches and expanding school-based psychological services. Teachers must recognize subtle signs of invisible trauma, such as silence, withdrawal, or inconsistent performance, and respond with empathy and inclusive strategies.. Peer dynamics, shown to be both protective and harmful, should be actively shaped through structured initiatives promoting cross-cultural friendships, cooperative learning, and anti-bullying programs.

Furthermore, integrating cultural coping strategies, such as creative arts and religious practices, into school curricula can foster emotional recovery and academic engagement. At the policy level, systemic support is essential. National education authorities should prioritize the provision of multilingual resources, recruit specialized school counselors for migrant children, and adopt policies addressing not only academic integration but also holistic well-being. Schools, families, and local communities must strengthen collaboration to create supportive environments that buffer trauma and sustain resilience. Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. Its qualitative design, focusing on a single region, restricts generalizability. Future research should expand to multiple regions of Türkiye, employ mixed-methods approaches, and include longitudinal data to capture resilience trajectories over time. Additionally, examining gender-specific dynamics and differences across migrant groups could deepen insights into intersectional vulnerabilities.

The concept map illustrates that resilience among migrant students emerges from the dynamic interplay of protective relationships, hidden traumas, peer dynamics, and coping mechanisms. While family and cultural supports provide strength, systemic barriers and peer exclusion create vulnerabilities. Sustainable resilience therefore requires coordinated support across family, school, and community levels.



Figur. 1. Findings Migrant Student's Resilience & School Adaption

Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the resilience processes of migrant students in Turkish primary schools, identifying four interrelated themes: resilience, invisible trauma, peer interactions, and coping strategies. The findings reveal that resilience is not an inherent trait but a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by family, peers, and institutional environments. While students demonstrated resilience through family cohesion, religious practices, and creative expression, these strengths were often fragile and insufficient to counteract persistent challenges such as linguistic barriers, discrimination, and cultural exclusion. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and intersectionality, the study highlights how resilience is shaped across multiple systems, where supportive family and peer relations function as protective factors, but structural barriers and overlapping vulnerabilities, including refugee status, ethnicity, and poverty, intensify risks.

From a practical perspective, the study emphasizes the urgency of implementing trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, expanding school-based psychological services, and strengthening inclusive practices that foster belonging. Teachers must be trained to recognize subtle signs of invisible trauma and respond with empathy, while peer interactions should be cultivated through cross-cultural mentoring, cooperative learning, and anti-bullying initiatives. Integrating cultural coping strategies such as prayer, storytelling, and creative arts into school curricula can further support students' adaptation. At the policy level, systemic support is required, including multilingual resources, specialized counselors, and holistic approaches that prioritize psychosocial well-being alongside academic integration. In conclusion, resilience among migrant children must be understood as a socially embedded process that depends on structural, cultural, and institutional supports, underscoring the need for schools to become spaces of healing, inclusion, and growth.

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