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Preschool Teachers' Views and Experiences on Peer Bullying of Immigrant Children

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Abstract

Multicultural classrooms encompass children from diverse religious, linguistic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds, which can generate both positive and negative interactions. This study explores kindergarten teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding peer bullying involving immigrant children. The study was designed as qualitative phenomenology and consisted of thirteen preschool teachers who were selected by using convenience sampling. Each teacher has to work at a public school, have at least one immigrant child in their class. The data of the study were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. The collected data were then systematically examined and analyzed by employing axial coding analysis. The findings indicate that teachers are aware of peer bullying and recognize that immigrant children may assume the roles of both perpetrators and victims. According to teachers, immigrant children often respond to bullying either passively or with aggressive reactions. To address such incidents, teachers employ preventive strategies, including fostering empathy, establishing classroom rules, and conducting systematic observations. Furthermore, language and communication barriers, economic disadvantages, prejudice, and cultural differences were identified as critical factors that heighten the risk of immigrant children both engaging in and being subjected to bullying.

Keywords: Immigrant children, multicultural education, peer bullying, preschool teacher, early childhood education

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Introduction

Global migration and displacement have led to increasingly diverse societies, resulting in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous school environments worldwide. Schools now serve a growing number of students from cultural and ethnic minorities, including migrants and refugees (Khalfaoui et al., 2021). The effects of culture and ethnicity become evident early in a person's growth and development and continue throughout their life (Gay, 1994). Culture provides the lens through which meaning is constructed and communicated, thereby influencing interactional styles among different ethnic groups and their children (Gay, 2018). While secondary elements of culture may change through experience, its core features remain a fundamental basis of identity across the lifespan (Gay, 1994). For this reason, it is essential for students to understand the significance of their own cultural heritage and values (Salgur & Gursoy, 2015), as culture informs and shapes all dimensions of teaching and learning (Gay, 1994).

Multicultural education has emerged as a pedagogical response to such diversity. Banks (2010, 2015) conceptualizes it as both an idea and a reform movement aimed at ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, or culture. Originating in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, multicultural education has since been implemented with varying degrees of success across different national contexts, including Canada, the United States, and Australia (Reitz et al., 2009; Grant, 2014; Logvinova & Ivanova, 2016). One of its central aims is to equip students with the attitudes, skills, and competencies required to engage effectively in diverse cultural environments, while also restructuring school environments to promote equality of opportunity (Banks, 1979; Gay, 2013). In early childhood, multicultural education seeks to foster children's positive identity development, broaden their perspectives on human diversity, and encourage critical reflection on social inequalities (Ramsey, 2009).

Peer relationships, which become increasingly significant during the preschool years, constitute a critical developmental context for social, emotional, and cognitive growth. As children spend more time in group settings, patterns of interaction shaped by friendships, gender norms, and hierarchies emerge, sometimes giving rise to difficulties in peer acceptance (Hay et al., 2004). Such interactions, while central to development, can also expose children to rejection, peer pressure, and bullying (Hartup, 1992; Rubin et al., 2006). Bullying behaviors in early childhood often manifest through exclusion, name-calling, or threats during play (McGoey et al., 2023). These experiences may have enduring academic, emotional, and psychological consequences (Ismailli et al., 2024). Given that cultural values and social norms influence the acceptability of behaviors within peer groups (Chen & French, 2008), children from immigrant backgrounds may be especially vulnerable to bullying due to communication barriers, prejudice, and cultural differences.

Peer bullying is considered a significant social problem affecting children worldwide (Cui & To, 2019). Immigrant children's experiences of peer bullying can be influenced by numerous contextual and structural factors, such as teacher attitudes, school environment, prejudices, and poverty. The attitudes and reactions of teachers, who are important authority figures for children, in the face of peer bullying can directly affect the likelihood of bullying occurring and the way it is perpetuated (Veenstra et al., 2014). However, the school environment is considered a critical contextual factor in understanding immigrant children's experiences of bullying (Caravita et al., 2021). Social prejudices against immigrants are also among the important factors that fuel peer bullying (Graham et al., 2009). Furthermore,

economic disadvantage stands out as a key risk factor that increases immigrant children's vulnerability to peer bullying. The fact that immigrant families have higher poverty rates compared to other families can lead to children being stigmatized and excluded more by their peers in the classroom (Maniatis, 2025).

Today, forced displacement worldwide has reached unprecedented levels, and Türkiye stands out as the country hosting the largest refugee population globally (UN Refugee Agency, 2024). As a historical crossroads of civilizations, Türkiye's strategic geographic location has long positioned it as a hub of migration and cultural diversity (Doğan et al., 2023). It has witnessed repeated waves of mass asylum movements, hosting millions of migrants across centuries (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2025). As of 2023, Türkiye is home to 3.2 million refugees (UN Refugee Agency, 2024). Recent statistics from the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) further indicate that more than 1,006,821 refugee children under temporary protection have access to education at pre-school, primary, and secondary school levels in Türkiye. The overall enrollment rate for these children reached 76.44 percent, the highest it has been in years (MoNE, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory places the individual at the center of environmental systems, facilitating an understanding of the multi-layered environmental influences on development (Jones & Park, 2015). According to the theory, children are in a reciprocal and dynamic interaction with their environment. It posits that changes in the environment, the child's growth, and the responses of these two elements to each other's changes shape the developmental process (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This theoretical approach consists of five nested environmental systems, starting with the immediate environment in which the individual interacts directly and extending to broader social and cultural structures. These systems are defined as the microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological systems theory provides a functional theoretical framework that allows for a comprehensive understanding of factors related to peer bullying by addressing social phenomena within a multi-layered context (Huang et al., 2013).

The microsystem consists of the child's immediate environment, such as home, classroom, school, playgrounds, and neighborhood, where the child interacts directly (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). This level involves interactions and activities in the child's life and is crucial for understanding bullying behaviors. Socio-demographic characteristics within the microsystem, such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status, are considered important determinants of bullying behavior (Espelage, 2014; Hong & Espelage, 2012). In addition, micro-system actors such as parents, peers, and teachers can be directly influential in the emergence of bullying behavior or in preventing it (Huang et al., 2013). The mesosystem encompasses the interactions and connections between two or more microsystems (e.g., home, school, neighborhood) in which the developing individual is actively involved (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Berk, 2012). In this system, the relationships between children, teachers, and school administrators play an important role in understanding peer bullying (Analisah & Indartono, 2019). Teacher-child interactions have the power to profoundly influence children's peer relationships and experiences of bullying (Bouchard & Smith, 2017). The exosystem consists of interactions between two or more contexts that include at least one environment in which children do not interact directly. Events occurring here indirectly influence

the processes in the microsystem in which the individual is directly involved (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Mass media are among the elements at the exosystem level and, even if the individual does not participate directly in these environments, they can have indirect and negative effects on the social interactions children establish with their peers (Huang et al., 2013). The macrosystem refers to the broader environmental context encompassing the social, political, and cultural norms within which the individual exists (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Cultural values, gender roles, and socioeconomic conditions indirectly influence how bullying behaviors are perceived and to what extent they are tolerated. Furthermore, macrosystem elements such as educational policies and state ideology shape attitudes and intervention approaches towards bullying in schools (Analisah & Indartono, 2019). The final level, the chronosystem, encompasses the continuities and changes that occur in both the individual and the environment throughout the individual's life (Edwards et al., 2017). It is noted that parent-child interactions are particularly strong during early childhood, which can cause children to be negatively affected by changes in the family structure, such as divorce and death, and that this situation can also increase the risks associated with peer bullying (Hong & Espelage, 2012).

Problem Situation

The rising school attendance of immigrant children has rapidly intensified cultural diversity within classrooms. In multicultural classrooms, immigrant children may experience difficulties in communicating with their peers and teachers. Such communication challenges, together with existing prejudices among other children, may increase immigrant children's vulnerability to peer bullying. A review of the literature indicates that research has largely focused on the problems faced by immigrant children. Various studies emphasize that language deficiencies constitute a decisive problem area in the integration of migrant children into education (Dere & Demirci, 2023; Doğan & Avcıoğlu, 2022; Mercan Uzun & Bütün, 2016; Seymen et al., 2024). In addition, adaptation problems and peer relationships experienced by migrant children are among the key issues addressed in the literature. For instance, Özger and Akansel (2019) report that language emerges as a prominent factor in the challenges Syrian children encounter in their school experiences and peer cultures. Migrant children's proficiency in Turkish has been shown to facilitate school adjustment and support effective communication with peers; conversely, children with limited language proficiency are more likely to experience social exclusion. Regarding peer bullying, the literature reveals that most studies address bullying in school settings within a general framework, while research specifically focusing on migrant children remains limited (Özgöker & Gürşimşek, 2023; Yıldız et al., 2024; Ural et al., 2022; Von Grünigen et al., 2010). One of these limited studies, conducted by Karataştan and Akcan (2023), found that migrant children are subjected to bullying by their peers. The authors further concluded that such bullying behaviors stem from language-related communication difficulties, the transmission of parents' prejudiced attitudes to their children, and the challenges migrant children face during the adaptation process. As Türkiye's schools already reflect a multicultural structure, there is a growing need for research that addresses the educational experiences, integration processes, and challenges faced by immigrant children in this unique context. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore immigrant children's experiences with peer bullying and to examine teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding this issue.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Despite increasing recognition of multicultural education's importance, limited research (Pistella et al. 2020; Von Grünigen et al. 2010; Zhu et al. 2023) has specifically addressed peer bullying among immigrant children in early childhood classrooms. To address this gap, this study aims to comprehensively examine preschool teachers' perceptions and experiences of peer bullying. The study also aims to investigate how teachers identify and interpret peer bullying behaviors in multicultural classroom settings, as well as the contextual factors that shape these experiences. Furthermore, by highlighting teachers' perspectives, this study aims to contribute to existing literature by providing empirical insights into a topic that has been limitedly researched in the preschool period. The findings are expected to help fill an important gap in the literature and provide a conceptual foundation for future research, contributing to the development of preventive and intervention-focused practices in multicultural early childhood settings and subsequent studies. This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1) How do preschool teachers perceive and report peer bullying experiences involving immigrant children?
2) How do immigrant children respond to peer bullying, as perceived and reported by preschool teachers?
3) What strategies do preschool teachers employ to prevent and intervene in peer bullying involving immigrant children?
4) What factors do preschool teachers identify as contributing to immigrant children's involvement in peer bullying, both as victims and perpetrators?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological design, a qualitative research approach that seeks to capture the essence of a phenomenon through the perspectives of those who experience it (Teherani et al., 2015). Phenomenology is widely recognized as a valuable method in educational and social sciences, as it provides an authentic representation of participants' lived realities (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). In this study, the phenomenological approach was used to explore preschool teachers' perceptions and experiences of peer bullying among immigrant children.

Participants

Participants were selected using convenience sampling, which allows researchers to access participants who are readily available and willing to participate. This method focuses on gathering information-rich cases for in-depth study by recruiting individuals who possess specific status, experience, or specialized knowledge that can provide valuable insights for the research (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Thirteen preschool teachers working in public schools in Burdur City Center participated in this study. The participants' genders, graduation degrees, years of experience, and number of immigrant children in their classes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Preschool teachers' demographic characteristics

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	13	100
Graduation Degree	Bachelor's Degree	10	79,90
	Master's Degree	2	15,40
	Doctorate	1	7,70
Years of Experiences	0–5 years	2	15,40
	6–10 years	7	53,80
	11–15 years	3	23,10
	16 years and over	1	7,70
Number of Migrant Children in the Class	1-3	4	30,80
	-3-5	6	46,20
	5 or more	3	23,10
Total		13	100

All 13 teachers participating in the study are female. Most of the teachers have a bachelor's degree and their professional experience is mostly between 6 and 10 years. It is seen that there are between 3-5 immigrant children in the classrooms of the participants.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher. The questions were designed based on a review of the literature and were reviewed by three experts in the field of early childhood education to ensure clarity and relevance. Following expert feedback, necessary revisions were made before finalizing the form. The interview form consists of open-ended questions related to peer bullying. In this context, teachers were asked questions about whether immigrant children in their classes engage in peer bullying or are subjected to peer bullying, the strategies teachers use to prevent peer bullying, and the possible causes of peer bullying. During the data collection process, face-to-face interviews were conducted with preschool teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. It was ensured that the environment in which the interviews were conducted was free from distracting stimuli. The interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes with each teacher.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, a systematic approach that examines both explicit and implicit meanings within the data (Kuckartz & Radiker, 2023). Content analysis emphasizes data reduction, categorization, and abstraction, allowing the researcher to move beyond individual statements to identify overarching themes (Schreier, 2013).

Validity and Reliability

In this study, different strategies were employed to ensure validity and reliability. One of these strategies is member checking. Member checking refers to the process whereby the researcher submits their transcripts or interpretations derived from the data to all participants or selected participants for evaluation of accuracy and consistency (Varpio et al. 2017). Member checking can be used to ascertain the accuracy of qualitative findings, either by presenting the final version of the report or specific statements or themes back to participants and asking them to determine whether they are accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Another validity strategy used in research is the use of detailed descriptions of the research. These descriptions make the results more realistic and richer. Rich descriptions were used throughout this study.

In this study, inter-coder agreement was checked to ensure reliability. Inter-coder agreement is based on determining whether two or more coders agree on the codes they use for the same passages in the text. Instead of coding the same text passage directly, the coders observe whether another coder codes the same passage with the same or a similar code (Creswell & Clark, 2017). To ensure internal reliability in the study, the inter-coder agreement coefficient proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. In this context, reliability was calculated using the formula [Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) × 100]. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), there must be at least 80% agreement between coders. In this study, the inter-coder agreement coefficient was calculated as 94%, indicating that reliability was achieved.

Ethical Issues

Ethical principles were strictly followed. First, approval was obtained for the study with the decision of Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee numbered GO 2025/1257. Participation was voluntary, and all teachers were informed about the purpose of the study. Written consent forms were obtained, and participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential, with pseudonyms used in place of real names. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Findings

Teachers' Perceptions of Peer Bullying

As a result of the content analysis, three main themes were identified regarding preschool teachers’ perceptions of peer bullying and their observations of migrant children: (1) Perceptions of peer bullying, (2) Bullying experiences of migrant children, (3) Time and context.

Table 2

Preschool teachers' perceptions of peer bullying and migrant children's bullying-related experiences

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Perceptions of peer bullying	Types of bullying	Physical and verbal violence, Pressure, Causing trouble, Exclusion
	Causes of bullying	Lack of social skills, Poor communication, Egocentrism
Bullying experiences of migrant children	Exposure to bullying	Misunderstandings, Language barrier, Exclusion
	Engaging in Bullying Behavior	Excessive mobility, Feeling that they are different, Not being understood, Incompatibility
Time and context	Changes by Term	Beginning of the semester, Daily
	Environment impact	Free time, Areas without teacher supervision

Perceptions of Peer Bullying

Preschool teachers conceptualized peer bullying primarily in terms of its types and underlying causes. Their definitions emphasized behavioral and psychological forms of violence, with frequent references to exclusion, ridicule, and physical aggression. For example, T5 stated, "*I think peer bullying is when children behave badly toward each other in classrooms. Children may hit each other, use violence, or insult one another.*" Similarly, T12 explained, "*I think peer bullying occurs when one or more children in the same class target a particular child and cause psychological or physical harm. In other words, these children may exclude the targeted child from games or ridicule him/her.*"

In addition to describing bullying behaviors, teachers also discussed its possible causes. They frequently attributed bullying to difficulties in communication and deficits in social skills. As T9 noted, "*Children do not know how to communicate. I think peer bullying stems from children's lack of skills in doing the right thing, playing games, and communicating.*" In a similar vein, T13 highlighted changes in children's social tendencies in recent years, remarking, "*I think peer bullying has become more prevalent in the preschool period in recent years. Children today do not want to share, and I believe they are more self-centered.*"

Bullying Experiences of Migrant Children

Teachers' observations indicated that migrant children could be both victims and perpetrators of peer bullying. Several teachers noted that migrant children were often victimized due to language barriers. For example, T13 remarked, "*Yes, I observed. Immigrant children are exposed to peer bullying more because they do not speak the language.*" Similarly, T1 explained that peers often complained about a migrant child's behavior, interpreting misunderstandings as disobedience: "*When I tell everyone to sit at the table and the migrant child does not respond, classmates say, 'teacher, he doesn't listen to you.' The same happens*

when it is time to pick up toys. Since the child cannot understand me, peers assume he/she ignores instructions."

At the same time, some teachers described migrant children as engaging in bullying themselves. T5 stated, "*"I don't see them being subjected to peer bullying, but sometimes I see them doing it. My migrant student is a girl and she is very active. Sometimes I see her bully her other girl friends."* Likewise, T3, "*I have witnessed such behaviors in some immigrant students in past years. Some become aggressive because they feel excluded or misunderstood.*"

Time and Context

Teachers emphasized that bullying incidents varied across time and settings. They reported that bullying occurred most often during free play and in situations lacking direct teacher supervision. As T13 explained, "*I observed bullying behaviors more during free time when there was no teacher supervision, rather than during structured activities.*" Similarly, T1 observed, "*It happened more when the child first joined the class and had just begun to understand me.*"

Reactions of Migrant Children to Peer Bullying

When the preschool teachers' views on the reactions of immigrant children to peer bullying were analyzed, four themes emerged: (1) emotional reactions, (2) behavioral reactions, (3) telling the adult, and (4) adaptation/defense.

Table 3

Preschool teachers' views on the reactions of migrant children to peer bullying

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Emotional reactions	Staying passive	Being upset, Remaining silent, Crying
Behavioral reactions	Becoming physical	Hitting, Aggression
Telling an Adult	Disclosure to the Teacher	Feeling comfortable and a sense of belonging, Ability to communicate, Body language, Fairness, The child's personality, Reassurance
Defense	Trying to protect oneself	Standing up for one's rights, Joining forces

Emotional Reactions

Teachers reported that migrant children often respond to bullying with sadness, withdrawal, or crying. They also emphasized the role of children's individual traits in shaping these reactions. For example, T1 noted, "*It is more related to children's characters. One of my*

students is quieter, more withdrawn, and often tearful when upset." Similarly, T12 stated, "*They may resort to physical violence, but more often they sulk and cry quietly. Migrant children in my class prefer to remain silent.*"

Behavioral Reactions

Several teachers observed that migrant children responded with physical aggression, such as hitting, pushing, or retaliating. T4 explained, "*They defend themselves by showing violence and hitting.*" Likewise, T2 remarked, "*In the garden, I observe they are more aggressive, hitting and swearing—sometimes even using Turkish swear words unknown to local children.*" T8 added, "*They can be more aggressive because they instinctively try to protect themselves.*"

Telling an Adult

Teachers reported that many migrant children attempted to inform adults about bullying incidents, often using body language due to language barriers. T5 shared, "*My student could say, 'Teacher, Cemil hit me,' even with limited Turkish. Over time, he expressed himself better as his language skills improved.*" Similarly, T10 explained, "*Although they do not speak much Turkish, they can communicate through signs or with the help of older siblings.*"

Teachers emphasized that teacher attitudes strongly influence whether migrant children feel comfortable sharing their experiences. T12 noted, "*If the teacher gives children confidence and listens, they will come and tell. I always try to listen and understand.*" Likewise, T3 highlighted, "*As long as teachers adopt a positive approach, children can express their problems more easily.*"

Defense

Some teachers observed that migrant children sometimes defend themselves collectively. T9 stated, *"I think immigrants are more rule oriented. They know how to defend their rights, they know how to protect themselves.*" T6 added, "*They can unite with other migrant children and join forces against peers.*"

Teachers' Strategies and Coping Methods

When the strategies and coping methods used by the teachers to prevent peer bullying were analyzed, four themes emerged: (1) Strategies to Prevent Bullying, (2) Ways to Detect Bullying, (3) Methods of Coping with Bullying, and (4) Support Mechanisms and Collaboration.

Table 4

Strategies and coping methods used by teachers to prevent peer bullying

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Strategies for preventing bullying	Empathy development	"What would you do if you were (in that situation)?" questions, Empathy through drama and stories
	Setting and following the rules	Setting classroom rules at the beginning of the school year, "We are a family" mindset
	Collaboration and inclusive activities	Group games Task -pairings, Mixed seating arrangement
	Use of drama and visual expression	Storytelling, Animations Supporting with visuals
	Education on respect and Acceptance of diversity	Disability week activities, Creating cultural awareness
Ways to detect bullying	Continuous observation	Observation in free time activities, Observing in silence
	Understanding through indirect signs	Seeking help from the teacher, Being alone Exclusion from the play
Methods for dealing with bullying	Reflection and modeling	The teacher reflects the behavior back to the child, Empathic questioning
	Verbal solution to problem behavior	Face-to-face conversation, Establishing reason-consequence,
	Using positive role models	Involving popular children, Seeking support from outgoing children
Support mechanisms and collaboration	Accessing counseling services	Forwarding to a counselor, RAM cooperation, Limited support
	Cooperation with school management	In some cases, the principal briefing, Individual solution
	Parent-teacher conferences and communication	Parent meetings, Individual feedback,
	Parental awareness efforts	Book recommendations, Providing information to families about peer bullying

Strategies to Prevent Bullying

Teachers reported using various preventive strategies, with an emphasis on developing empathy. T1 described activities that encouraged perspective-taking through drama, stories, and discussions, while T4 stated, "*Empathy… is very effective. When children start to understand each other, they act with more consideration.*"

Another common strategy was establishing classroom rules, particularly at the beginning of the school year. T2 emphasized rules based on inclusion and respect: "*In my class, the motto is 'we are a family.' We set rules early, such as no exclusion or harm. Once children adopt them, they follow them all year.*" Similarly, T9 noted "*We talk more about rules in class to prevent peer bullying. We try to establish rules to be followed at the beginning of the semester. These rules are established most of the time. It may take time for some children, but they accept them over time*." Teachers also highlighted cooperative activities such as group

work, stories, and drama to promote social integration. As T12 explained, "*With small and large group activities, I ensure that children cooperate and integrate.*" Additionally, T11 stated, "*I tell stories about peer bullying to children, especially through stories that can attract children's attention. In these stories, children can put themselves in the shoes of the heroes and empathize. I also like to use the drama method, which helps us in problem situations in the classroom."*

Ways to Detect Bullying

Teachers primarily relied on observation to detect bullying. They reported monitoring free play as a key context for identifying exclusion and victimization. T1 stated, "*Observation is our biggest tool… free time is very good for us to see which children play together and which are excluded.*" Similarly, T7 noted that "*If the child is bullied by his/her peers, he/she does not want to sit next to him/her while doing activities, avoids them, does not want to hold their hand while playing games. If the child tries to approach the teacher for no reason, if the child distances themselves from the activities, it means that there is something that makes him/her uneasy in that environment*."

Methods For Dealing with Bullying

Coping strategies included modeling positive behavior, problem-solving through discussion, and peer support. Teachers stated that they received support from other children both in the seating arrangement in the classroom and during activities in order to reintegrate children who were thought to be victims of peer bullying back into the classroom. T10 stated, "*We always try to make the children socialize. However, after a while, friend groups can form among children. In order to prevent these groupings, for example, I usually seat the children in a mixed group during activities. Or, if a task is to be assigned together, I pair children who do not communicate much with each other. In this way, I can say that I try to ensure that children communicate."* Teachers often paired migrant children with socially skilled or popular classmates to foster inclusion. For instance, T12 remarked, "*I usually pair immigrant children with more moderate and harmonious children. I also get help from popular students in the class.*"

Support Mechanisms and Collaboration

Teachers reported limited collaboration with school administrations and guidance services. In some schools, counseling units were absent, and teachers felt unsupported. T13 explained, "*We don't have a school counselor, and this is our biggest deficiency… the administration does not have a good understanding of such issues.*" Teachers generally attempted to manage problems independently, seeking counseling support only in serious cases. For example, T2 noted "*We haven't had any cooperation with school counseling yet. I don't need to go to the administration or counseling services because I usually solve the problems with my own methods*."

Family cooperation was also limited. It was stated that cooperation with families was generally limited to parent-teacher meetings, and in some cases, one-on-one meetings were held. While teachers provided information during parent-teacher meetings, they emphasized

that parents often struggled to acknowledge bullying. T13 stated, "*These issues are sensitive… people do not want to talk about them. We try to talk with families more individually*." Nevertheless, some teachers engaged families individually to address problematic behaviors, as T9 noted: "*When I see problematic behaviors, I contact families to inform them and cooperate on solutions.*"

Factors Influencing Migrant Children as Victims and Perpetrators

When preschool teachers' views on the victimization of migrant children in the peer bullying process were examined, five themes emerged: (1) Communication Barriers and Language Barrier, (2) Social Exclusion and Perception of Difference, (3) Family and Social Prejudices, (4) Cultural Adaptation Problems and (5) Economic Reasons.

Table 5

Preschool teachers' views on victimization of migrant children in peer bullying

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Communication and language barriers	Inability to express oneself Not being understood	Not knowing the language, Not being able to communicate, Not being able to make sense of behavior
Perception of diversity	Perception of "not one of us" Exclusion based on appearance	"He/she is different", "He/she is not like us", Different outfits,
Family and social prejudices	Negative indoctrination from the family The general view of society	Parents who say, "Don't play with them." Negative attitudes towards immigrants
Economic reasons	Lack of materials and clothing Poverty-related stigmatization	Worn out clothes, Perception of "'unclean'"

Communication and Language Barriers

Teachers emphasized that language difficulties strongly affect migrant children's interactions with peers. Limited Turkish proficiency can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and exclusion. As T7 noted, "*It is not because they are foreigners, but because children cannot express themselves, misunderstandings occur. Young children may hit others if they cannot communicate their needs.*" Similarly, T13 stated, "*Communication is very important in preschool. Migrant children have more difficulty expressing themselves and interpreting their peers' behaviors.*"

Perception of Diversity

Teachers reported that perceived differences contribute to peer exclusion. T3 explained, "*If a child is seen as different in a negative way, they are more easily excluded. Children may think, 'he/she is not one of us.*'" T2 added that minor differences in appearance or hygiene, such as untied hair or clothing, can trigger exclusion. "*Sometimes immigrant*

children come to school looking untidy. In such cases, my female students say things like, "Teacher, she never ties her hair. She never combs her hair."

Family and Social Prejudices

Negative attitudes from families and society were identified as key contributors. T9 noted, "*Children cannot accept immigrant peers because they are considered foreigners. Turks and foreigners rarely accept each other.*" T12 and T4 highlighted that children often adopt prejudices observed in adults, reinforcing exclusion and bullying behaviors. T12 said "*I can say that this risk was higher when the first immigrants came to our country. However, we can still see the effects of the negative thoughts that some parents have instilled in their children against foreigners*." and T4 said "*Actually, the main source of this is adults. Children accept those who think like them. They do not accept those who are not like them. Prejudice is a particularly important factor. Children who encounter these prejudices in their families apply what they see.*"

Economic Factors

Teachers also observed that economic disparities increase bullying risk. According to the teachers, migrant children with low family income may be subjected to exclusion by other children because of their school supplies and appearance. T12 stated, "*Immigrant children's difficulties affect their appearance and possessions. Peers may judge them, asking, 'Why are you dressed like that?' or excluding them from games.*" T8 added, "*Children start categorizing people from a young age and may mock peers' clothing or belongings, which increases the risk of bullying.*"

Factors Influencing Migrant Children as Perpetrators

When the preschool teachers' views on migrant children's perpetration of peer bullying were analyzed, three themes emerged: (1) Communication problems and misunderstanding, (3) Family and cultural influences and (4) Socioeconomic psychological reactions.

Table 6

Preschool teachers' views on migrant children's perpetration of peer bullying

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Communication problems and misunderstanding	Not knowing the language Not being able to express	Play Exclusion, "They don't understand me" reaction, Outburst of rage in the classroom
Family and cultural influences	Violent parental behavior Cultural norm of violence	Growing up with violence, Problematic family life, "doing at school what you see at home"
Socioeconomic psychological reactions	Anger because of humiliation The effort to say "I'm here too"	Feeling oppressed due to poverty, Displaying power

Communication Problems and Misunderstanding

Teachers highlighted that language barriers and resulting misunderstandings often lead migrant children to engage in bullying. T10 explained, "*Limited language skills prevent children from communicating with peers. Misunderstandings and exclusion can cause anger outbursts in the classroom.*" Similarly, T1 noted, "*When children cannot express themselves and feel excluded, they may behave aggressively.*" T12 added, "*Feeling excluded or despised by others may prompt such behaviors.*"

Family and Cultural İnfluences

Teachers emphasized the role of parental role modeling and cultural background in immigrant children's peer bullying behaviors. T6 stated, "*If there is violence in their families, children may replicate it in the classroom. This may relate to the family's culture.*" T12 noted, "*Immigrant children, children of families who grew up in different cultures, even if they were born here, the cultures of families raising children differ. Culturally, some behaviors are more tolerable for them, so these behaviors may be seen as normal. If the child is exposed to violence, ridicule or other negative behaviors at home, the same behaviors may be applied at school."*

Socioeconomic and Psychological Factors

Economic disadvantage was identified as another contributor. Teachers noted that migrant children may bully to assert power or respond to perceived social inferiority. T2 explained, "*Other children come with nicer clothes or supplies; this may influence migrant children to act aggressively.*" T9 added, "*Feeling economically inferior can lead children to interpret peers' behaviors negatively and resort to bullying.*"

Discussion

Increasing migration has intensified cultural diversity in educational settings, exposing both children and schools to new challenges, including peer bullying, even at the preschool level. This study examined preschool teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding peer bullying involving migrant children.

The findings revealed that teachers perceive peer bullying primarily as physical and psychological aggression. However, they also recognized indirect forms, such as social exclusion and teasing. This suggests that teachers do not only see peer bullying as limited to direct aggression behaviors but are also aware of more implicit forms such as social exclusion. Our research results are similar to various research findings (Ey & Campbell, 2022). For example, the teachers who participated in Swit's (2018) study stated that they believe that preschool children may resort to peer bullying and that these bullying behaviors can take the form of physical, relational and verbal aggression. Awareness of these behaviors is crucial for early detection and intervention (Goryl et al., 2013).

Preschool teachers reported that migrant children can be both victims and perpetrators of peer bullying. These dual roles are influenced by factors including age, gender, socioeconomic status, and minority status (Parviainen et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020). Prior

research also highlights higher victimization rates and lower social acceptance among immigrant children compared to non-immigrant peers (Alivernini et al., 2019; Pistella et al., 2020; von Grünigen et al., 2012). For example, Pistella et al. (2020) reported that second-generation immigrant children experience more peer bullying than their native peers. In another study, Von Grünigen et al. (2010) examined peer acceptance and victimization levels among immigrant and local children in kindergarten and addressed the role of language proficiency in this process. The findings showed that immigrant children were less accepted by their peers and experienced victimization more frequently, while local language proficiency increased peer acceptance among immigrant children. Additionally, prejudice from non-immigrant children can contribute to social exclusion and conflict (Brown, 2011; Hartley et al., 2021), while some migrant children may display aggressive behaviors themselves (Jansen et al., 2016).

Peer bullying was reported to occur most frequently during free play and low-supervision periods, suggesting that contextual and structural factors are as influential as individual characteristics. Similar to our findings, Tanrıkulu (2018) reported that peer bullying in preschool mostly occurred during free play. According to the researcher children can exhibit peer bullying behaviors in times and places where there is no supervision. Likewise, Bayrak et al. (2018) emphasized that weak teacher supervision may increase bullying behaviors. Limited teacher supervision can amplify power imbalances among children.

Teachers noted that migrant children exhibit emotional and behavioral responses to bullying. Emotional reactions include withdrawal, sadness, and crying, whereas behavioral reactions can include aggression or violent responses. These reactions are influenced by children's individual characteristics and their sense of belonging. Several studies in the literature indicate that immigrant children experience difficulties in adapting to school (Alemin & Bekce, 2021; Özcan & Gül, 2023; Zhu et al. 2023). In a study conducted by Çarkıt and Bacanlı (2020) with primary and secondary school teachers, teachers reported that children responded to bullying by remaining silent, becoming upset, crying, and reporting the incident to the teacher. Even with language barriers, migrant children were able to communicate experiences to teachers through gestures, body language, or gradual acquisition of Turkish. This finding suggests that migrant children are able to express their feelings and thoughts within a safe social environment, even in the presence of language barriers. When teachers listen attentively to children's narratives without judgment or premature intervention and pose probing or clarifying questions when appropriate, children are more likely to feel accepted, supported, and emotionally safe (Beauregard et al., 2024).This underscores the importance of trust-based teacher-child relationships in encouraging children to express sensitive issues (Benhorin & McMahon, 2008; Murray & Greenberg, 2000).

Teachers reported employing various prevention strategies, emphasizing the development of empathy, establishment of classroom rules, and the promotion of cooperation through group activities. In fact, various studies in the literature report that teachers found empathy training to have positive effects on reducing problem behaviors (Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2020; Kayıran, 2023). Nikolaou and Markogiannakis (2017) found that preschool teachers perceived strategies aimed at fostering empathy development as effective in promoting the acceptance of differences among children. These findings highlight the importance of integrating empathy-based intervention programs into bullying prevention initiatives in preschool settings, particularly in classrooms characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. The role of classroom rules in the prevention of peer bullying was particularly emphasized by

the teachers participating in the study. In line with the findings of the present study, previous research suggests that teachers tend to adopt similar intervention strategies in response to peer bullying. Small et al. (2013) reported that one commonly used strategy involved discussing classroom rules collectively with students. Classroom rules clearly delineate acceptable behavior and contribute to positive social interactions (LeMaster, 2010). The findings also revealed that teachers used cooperation-oriented activities as a preventive approach to peer bullying. Group activities contribute to the development of social skills such as empathy, taking turns, and compromise. They also pave the way for children to establish healthier relationships with their peers. In fact, studies show that collaborative activities can effectively reduce problem behaviors in children (Choi et al., 2011; Jin et al., 2017; Wolfe et al., 1983).

Observation was the primary method teachers used to detect bullying, especially important for identifying issues among children with language barriers. This approach allows for early recognition of subtle social conflicts (Sheridan et al., 2004). When incidents occurred, teachers preferred communication-based problem-solving, often involving one-on-one discussions, peer support, and cooperative activities to integrate affected children. Similar to the results of this study, Balcı and Kishalı (2024) emphasized that preschool teachers address bullying behaviors through both preventive and intervention-oriented strategies, such as family collaboration, individual child interviews, guidance service support, and developmentally appropriate activities including games, stories, and drama. In this study, the findings indicate that teachers cope with peer bullying by seeking support from children they perceive as more outgoing and popular. Similar to the findings of the present study, Neitzel et al. (2019) found that teachers in participating classrooms often assigned non-migrant preschoolers with high English proficiency to mentor migrant children. Engaging popular or outgoing children to facilitate inclusion was particularly effective for migrant children, enhancing social integration and well-being (Neitzel et al., 2019; Çelik et al., 2024).

The study revealed limited use of school administration and guidance services in managing peer bullying. Absence of dedicated counseling units and lack of clear anti-bullying policies may leave teachers and parents without adequate support, highlighting the need for systematic, school-based interventions (Taşkın & Erdemli, 2018). The absence of a counseling unit is an important deficiency in preventing peer bullying. Additionally, the absence of a defined policy on peer bullying may cause teachers and parents to feel more alone in such situations, which can hinder the resolution process. Consistent with our research results, teachers who participated in the study by Taşkın and Erdemli (2018) also reported receiving insufficient support from the school or the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). In this study, the findings show that preschool teachers typically use the beginning-of-the-year meetings to inform families about peer bullying. According to teachers, family involvement was often restricted to initial meetings, constrained by language barriers and the sensitivity of the topic. Literature indicates that family-focused interventions can positively impact bullying prevention (Healy & Sanders, 2014; Lester et al., 2017).

Language barriers, perceptions of difference, family and social prejudices, and economic disadvantages were identified as key risk factors for migrant children's exposure to peer bullying. Existing research emphasizes language barriers as a central challenge in the education of immigrant children (Dere & Demirci, 2023; Doğan & Avcıoğlu, 2022; Mercan Uzun & Bütün, 2016). Consistent with these findings, Ünsal and Baskan (2021) reported that the most significant difficulty teachers encounter in educating immigrant students is language

related. Their findings further indicate that students who are integrated into the education system without first acquiring proficiency in Turkish experience a range of academic and social difficulties. Language difficulties impede communication and social integration, increasing the likelihood of victimization. Social exclusion, perceived difference, and prejudices internalized from families further exacerbate these risks (Aydın & Kaya, 2017, 2019; Gür et al., 2022).

Preschool teachers reported that Turkish children often perceive immigrant children as different, which results in their exclusion from peer groups. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies. For example, in a study conducted in Russia, some schools were labeled as "migrant schools," and Russian children distinguished themselves from migrant children (Demintseva, 2020). Some believe that children's awareness of race, gender, and diversity does not emerge in the early years. However, research shows that children have racial awareness from an early age (Hirschfeld, 2008; Park, 2011). Participating teachers emphasize that family and social prejudices play an important role in forming this perception. Prejudice against immigrants, defined as "foreigners" in society, can affect young children's attitudes and behaviors.

According to the teachers, economic disadvantage is a significant factor increasing migrant children’s vulnerability to peer bullying. Participants reported that prejudices toward immigrant children -particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds- are widespread. Jansen et al. (2012) emphasized that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are at a higher risk of being bullied than children who attend schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In Gür et al.'s (2022) study, teachers stated that the different culture, language, and dress of Syrian immigrant children can affect the attitudes of other children and their families. According to Telsaç et al. (2022), the different clothing and appearance characteristics of migrant students that are traditionally or culturally accepted in their countries of origin can lead to prejudice in the school environment. A lack of access to materials that other children have and poor hygiene are salient factors that increase the risk of peer bullying.

Teachers indicated that migrant children may resort to bullying as a result of communication barriers and misunderstandings. Limited language proficiency was found to hinder children’s ability to express themselves and to understand their peers, thereby increasing the risk of peer conflict and bullying behaviors. Teachers also noted that family structures and cultural contexts play an important role in migrant children's tendency toward peer bullying. Violence and problematic behaviors can be perceived differently across cultures. Additionally, teachers emphasize that children who witness violence or bullying in their family environment may transfer these attitudes and behaviors to school. Studies have found an association between witnessing violence in the family environment and the maintenance of bullying behaviors at school (Baekd, 2024; Lee et al., 2022; Perren et al., 2009). Children not only witness violence within their families, but they can also be direct victims of this violence. Families' understanding of discipline can differ culturally. While some families may view violence as an acceptable disciplinary method, others find it completely unacceptable. In fact, studies show that physical violence against children varies across cultures (Bornstein, 2013; Naudin et al., 2023). Teachers also cited the fact that children think they are socioeconomically despised as one of the reasons why immigrant children resort to bullying. Examining the literature reveals that similar answers were obtained in studies with teachers. In Gürbüzer's (2021) study, teachers cited factors such as language problems, exclusion, marginalization,

domestic violence, family structure, ethnic and cultural differences, adaptation problems, and financial difficulties as reasons for the bullying behaviors of foreign children.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that preschool teachers are aware of the prevalence of peer bullying and recognize that migrant children can be both victims and perpetrators. Effective prevention requires empathy development, classroom management strategies, observation, teacher-child communication, peer support, and collaborative activities. Limited institutional support and family engagement highlight areas for policy and practice improvement. Additionally, addressing language barriers, economic disparities, social prejudices, and cultural differences is essential to reduce the risk of bullying among migrant children in preschool settings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- Research findings indicate that migrant children are not only victims of peer bullying but can also take on the role of bullies. Future studies could examine the developmental, contextual, and familial reasons for these dual roles among migrant children in greater detail using qualitative or mixed methods.
- The findings show that peer bullying most frequently occurs during free play and when teacher supervision is limited. Future research could examine the effects of classroom organization, the structure of play areas, teacher-child ratios, and forms of supervision on peer bullying using experimental or observational methods.
- The study determined that immigrant children respond to bullying with both emotional and behavioral reactions. Subsequent studies could examine how these reactions change over time and their long-term effects on children's social-emotional development.
- The findings reveal that factors such as language barriers, family attitudes, economic disadvantages, and cultural differences are significant risk factors for peer bullying. Future research could examine the interactive structure of these factors in depth.
- Teachers have been observed to use strategies such as developing empathy, establishing classroom rules, and conducting collaborative activities. In future research, the effectiveness of these strategies in reducing peer bullying can be evaluated through experimental studies.
- The study determined that school administration and counseling services were used to a limited extent in combating peer bullying. Therefore, future studies could examine institutional collaboration in depth.

Limitations

Despite providing valuable insights into preschool teachers' experiences with peer bullying among migrant children, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was relatively small and selected through convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, all participants were employed in public schools, whereas private school contexts were not represented, further constraining the applicability of the results to the broader educational system in Turkey.

Second, the data on bullying experiences were limited to incidents that teachers were able to observe and report, which may not capture all occurrences. Future research could

employ systematic observation methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of peer bullying.

Additionally, this study was conducted with 13 teachers, and data was collected solely from teachers. This situation may prevent the findings from reflecting the views of different stakeholders. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the findings in terms of revealing temporal changes and cause-and-effect relationships.

Finally, the study was conducted in a single region, restricting its geographical representativeness. Conducting research across multiple regions with varying socioeconomic conditions in future studies would allow for broader and more generalizable insights into the experiences of migrant children and peer bullying in preschool settings.

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