

The Evolution of Educational Policies for Immigrant Students in Turkey (2010–2025): A Qualitative Document Analysis

Türkiye’de Göçmen ve Mülteci Öğrenciler İçin Uygulanan Eğitim Politikalarının Evrimi: 2010–2025 Yılları Arasında Politika Belgelerinin Nitel Analizi

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the evolution of educational policies for immigrant and refugee students in Turkey between 2010 and 2025 through a qualitative document analysis of Ministry of National Education (MoNE) policy texts. The analysis reveals significant progress in guaranteeing access to education, especially following the influx of Syrian refugees, but also highlights persistent challenges related to policy implementation, assimilationist tendencies, and the temporality framing of refugee education. While access is broadly secured, deeper aspects of inclusive education—such as cultural recognition, multilingual support, and systemic equity—remain underdeveloped. The study situates these findings within critical policy analysis, integration theory, and inclusive education frameworks, emphasizing the gap between discursive commitments and operational realities. The paper concludes by recommending a shift toward long-term, rights-based inclusion strategies, stronger monitoring mechanisms, enhanced teacher training, and greater community engagement to foster equitable educational opportunities for refugee students in Turkey.

Keywords: Refugee education, immigration policy, Turkey, inclusive education, multicultural education.

ÖZ: Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de 2010-2025 yılları arasında göçmen ve mülteci öğrencilere yönelik eğitim politikalarının gelişimini, Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı’nın politika belgeleri üzerine yapılan nitel belge analizine dayanarak incelemektedir. Analiz, özellikle Suriye krizinin ardından eğitim erişiminin sağlanmasında önemli ilerlemeler olduğunu ortaya koymakla birlikte, politika uygulaması, asimilasyon eğilimleri ve geçicilik vurgusuyla ilgili devam eden zorlukları da göstermektedir. Eğitim erişimi büyük ölçüde güvence altına alınmış olsa da, kültürel tanıma, çokdillilik desteği ve sistematik eşitlik gibi kapsayıcı eğitimin temel bileşenleri yeterince gelişmemiştir. Bulgular, eleştirel politika analizi, entegrasyon kuramı ve kapsayıcı eğitim yaklaşımları çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiş; söylemsel taahhütler ile uygulama arasındaki boşluk vurgulanmıştır. Çalışma, uzun vadeli, hak temelli kapsayıcı stratejilerin benimsenmesi, izleme mekanizmalarının güçlendirilmesi, öğretmen eğitimlerinin artırılması ve toplumsal katılımın desteklenmesi yönünde önerilerle son bulmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mülteci eğitimi, göç politikası, Türkiye, kapsayıcı eğitim, çokkültürlü eğitim.

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Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Turkey has become host to the world's largest refugee population, with more than 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection residing in the country throughout the 2015–2023 period (UNHCR, 2023). This population includes individuals with diverse legal statuses, varied levels of socioeconomic vulnerability, and significant challenges related to employment, housing, and social integration. Among this broader group, children and adolescents constitute a substantial proportion: as of 2023, more than 1.1 million Syrian children were registered in Turkey (MoNE, 2023). Of these school-age children, approximately 800,000 were enrolled in formal education, while an estimated 350,000 remained out of school, facing barriers such as language difficulties, economic pressures, and limited school capacity.

There have been three major stages in the development of educational policy in Turkey that deal with the integration of refugees (Unutulmaz, 2019). Community-based, Arabic-language instruction at Temporary Education Centres (TECs) with little state supervision was the predominant policy between 2011 and 2014. The government adopted a mixed model between 2014 and 2016, regulating collaborative NGO-state actions with a greater focus on the long-term societal effects. Finally, starting in 2016, MoNE enrolled Syrian children in Turkish public schools as part of their comprehensive integration policy (Çelik & İçduygu, 2019; Unutulmaz, 2019).

Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Turkey has become host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world, with over 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection residing in the country between 2015 and 2023 (UNHCR Türkiye, 2023). This population is diverse in terms of legal status, socioeconomic conditions, and access to basic services, and faces significant challenges related to employment, housing, and social integration. Children and adolescents constitute a substantial proportion of this population. As of 2023, more than 1.1 million Syrian children were registered in Turkey (MoNE, 2023). Focusing on school-age children, Syrian student enrolment increased from approximately 230,000 in the 2014–2015 academic year to over 600,000 by 2017–2018, highlighting a rapid expansion in access to formal education (UNICEF, 2021; Hurriyet Daily News, 2018). Nevertheless, an estimated 350,000 children remained out of school due to barriers such as language difficulties, economic pressures, and limited school capacity (MoNE, 2023). Language barriers, packed classrooms, inadequate teacher preparation, and a lack of psychosocial support are a few of them (Büyükboyacı, 2025; Çelik & İçduygu, 2019; McCarthy, 2018). Additionally, many refugee-receiving schools continue to face misdirected resources, reallocated facilities, overcrowding, and rising xenophobic or discriminatory behaviour — a trend documented as recently as 2023 and 2024 (European External Action Service, 2024; UNHCR, 2024; Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023).

Policy tools like Circular 2014/2132, which gave enrolment rights to children with temporary protection, were important turning points, according to McCarthy's (2018) study on the politics of refugee education. However, they also exposed conflicts between centralisation and decentralisation as well as the state's ideological commitments. Unutulmaz's (2019) analysis confirms that although the state's integrationist strategy is significant, institutional fragmentation, infrastructural and financial shortcomings, and securitising discourses that prioritise cultural homogeneity continue to limit its implementation.

Although considerable research examines refugee and immigrant schooling at the school and classroom levels, longitudinal, document-based analyses of national education policy remain uncommon. Much of the literature on refugee education has focused on classroom practices, teacher perspectives, or short-term program evaluations (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2022), and large reviews and operational reports have repeatedly called for longitudinal approaches that track policy change and long-term outcomes (UNICEF, 2024; UNHCR research digests, 2024). Methodological reviews also note that while document analysis is a robust method for uncovering policy logics and discursive shifts, it is underutilized as a longitudinal strategy in migration-and-education research (Prior, 2003; Bowen, 2009). A small number of studies and reports have applied longitudinal or comparative time-series approaches to refugee schooling (e.g., comparative longitudinal analyses of refugee schooling across host countries), and there are thesis-level policy studies in Turkey that examine policy documents in detail (Comparative Longitudinal Study, 2022 Seçgin, 2019). Nonetheless, a systematic, longitudinal document analysis of MoNE's policy texts spanning 2010–2025 remains rare in the peer-reviewed literature, which justifies the contribution of the present study. Researchers would be able to track the institutional and discursive changes that support policy evolution, compare them to UNESCO's inclusive education frameworks and UNHCR's right-to-education frameworks, and spot ingrained contradictions or silences in national policy narratives by conducting a thorough analysis of MoNE's strategic plans, ministerial circulars, and implementation reports. This study addresses a significant policy-document analysis gap in the literature on migration and education by addressing these issues. This study contributes to the understanding of refugee education in Turkey by examining policy developments between 2010 and 2025, with a focus on access, inclusion, and integration. By analysing official documents through the lenses of critical policy analysis, inclusive education theory, and integration frameworks, the study identifies both progress and persistent challenges in policy design and implementation. For national and international policymakers, it provides key insights into enhancing equity and inclusion, highlighting systemic gaps, discrepancies between policy rhetoric and practice, and the importance of culturally responsive, well-resourced, and sustainable interventions. In doing so, the study lays the groundwork for evidence-based strategies that can better address both short-term humanitarian needs and long-term educational goals for refugee children.

Research Aim and Questions

MoNE policy papers from 2010 to 2025, including strategic plans, ministerial circulars, TEC regulations, and implementation reports, are analysed qualitatively in this study. The analysis looks at:

- How have the objectives and tactics of MoNE's educational policy for immigrant students changed throughout time?
- How much did policies change to incorporate inclusive, sustainable integration methods instead of crisis-response models?
- Which gaps or systemic discrepancies stand out when contrasting various policy phases?

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

This research is based on a multi-layered conceptual framework that combines integration models in migration studies, inclusive education theory, and critical policy analysis. When combined, these lenses allow for a detailed analysis of the discursive and structural changes in Turkey's educational policy for immigrant students.

Critical Policy Analysis

This study uses critical policy analysis (CPA), which stresses the power dynamics, ideological foundations, and discourse constructions ingrained in policy texts, as an alternative to considering policy as a neutral or linear process (Ball, 1994; Taylor, 1997). According to CPA, education policy serves as a vehicle for the institutionalisation and promotion of particular worldviews rather than only being a reaction to social demands. According to Ball (1994), policy is a "text and discourse," which means that it is a written document that also serves as a representation of political rationalities. This is particularly pertinent in the context of migration, as educational programs may represent conflicting national security, cultural homogeneity, and human rights logics (Ozga, 2000).

CPA serves as a framework for interpreting MoNE papers in this study as discursive constructions that both influence and are influenced by larger sociopolitical dynamics, including the politics of national identity, the securitisation of migration, and Turkey's role in EU-Middle East migration negotiations.

Inclusive Education and Educational Rights

The idea of inclusive education, first introduced by UNESCO in 2009 and then expanded upon by Ainscow in 2016, is another fundamental component of the conceptual framework. In addition to physical access to education, inclusive education also includes instructional equity, meaningful involvement, and linguistic and cultural responsiveness. This idea is founded on human rights-based approaches to education, which maintain that every child has the right to a high-quality education regardless of their language, ethnicity, or legal status (Arnot, Pinson, & Candappa, 2009).

This paradigm aids in determining whether immigrant students are presented as worthy students, short-term visitors, or conditional citizens when examining Turkey's policy texts. It also makes it possible to assess whether policies are intended to foster integration through assimilation and control or empowerment and belonging.

Migration and Integration Models

The study also makes use of conceptualisations of immigrant integration, including Berry's (1997) typology, which differentiates between attitudes to intercultural encounter, including assimilation, segregation, integration, and marginalisation. While "integration" presumes reciprocal adaptation and structural participation within institutions like schools, "assimilation" entails the expectation that minority groups fully embrace the majority culture.

The study can assess whether Turkish policies have shifted towards an integrationist paradigm—characterized by language support, anti-discrimination measures, and curriculum reform—or stayed anchored in assimilationist presumptions,

where immigrant students are expected to unilaterally conform to the dominant norms without institutional adaptation, by using this lens to examine education policy.

This conceptual framework allows for a multifaceted examination of the evolution of Turkish policy, exposing deeper ideological trends concerning inclusion, citizenship, and educational equity for immigrant kids in addition to changes in formal aims.

Literature Review

Over the past decade, Turkey has become a key country of research on the educational integration of immigrant and refugee children, largely due to the arrival of Syrians under temporary protection beginning in 2011. Conceptual discussions in the literature often begin with the distinctions defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which draw a legal boundary between *refugees*, *asylum seekers*, and *migrants* (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2007). Turkey ratified the Convention with a geographical limitation, recognising only persons fleeing events in Europe as refugees (İçduygu, 2015). Accordingly, Syrians arriving after 2011 were not granted refugee status but instead placed under a Temporary Protection (TP) regime, formalised by the 2014 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) and the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR). Scholars emphasise that this status offers access to education and health services, yet it does not confer the legal security associated with full refugee status (Kaya & Kirişci, 2022). As of 2024, official statistics from the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) indicate that 3.1 million Syrians remain under temporary protection, including more than 1 million school-aged children (PMM, 2024).

Within the growing body of research on refugee education in Turkey, one of the most persistent themes is educational access. Numerous studies highlight improvements in enrolment—particularly after the large-scale integration of Syrian children into public schools after 2016—while also noting that substantial gaps persist. According to Demir-Başaran et al. (2024) and UNICEF Türkiye (2023), despite increases in participation in primary schooling, a significant number of refugee children remain out of school, especially at the secondary level. Barriers most frequently documented include socioeconomic precarity, child labour, insufficient Turkish-language support, and limited school capacity (Çelik & İçduygu, 2019; Aksoy & Arner, 2021). These findings mirror patterns reported in comparative international research, which emphasises that language barriers and economic hardship remain global obstacles to refugee children's educational continuity (Dryden-Peterson, 2022).

A second major strand of the literature examines school-level dynamics, particularly the role of teachers and administrators in shaping integration experiences. Studies consistently indicate variation in teacher preparedness and attitudes toward refugee students. For example, Özçürümez, Tursun, and Tunç (2023) show that educators with migration experience themselves tend to demonstrate more inclusive practices, whereas many teachers report feeling insufficiently equipped to manage multilingual classrooms or trauma-related behavioural challenges. Similarly, Çelik and Özenç-İra's (2024) mixed-methods research identifies gaps in both pre-service and in-service training related to multicultural competencies, psychosocial support, and inclusive pedagogies. These findings align with broader literature arguing that policy

goals of inclusivity require stronger, sustained investment in teacher professional development (Arnot & Pinson, 2021).

A third body of scholarship focuses on institutional and policy frameworks. Research analysing the transition from Temporary Education Centres (TECs) to full integration into public schools emphasises both the transformative potential and the implementation challenges of this policy shift. Büyükboyacı (2025) argues that while the closure of TECs aimed to promote social cohesion, it was enacted without sufficient administrative preparation, infrastructure expansion, or inter-agency coordination. Demir-Başaran et al. (2024) similarly note that mainstream schools—particularly in refugee-dense districts—faced overcrowding, shortages of psychological counselling services, and ongoing dependence on short-term European Union funding mechanisms such as the FRIT programme. Policy analyses also underscore constraints related to data transparency: several international reports (e.g., European Court of Auditors, 2024; AIDA, 2024) highlight limited access to up-to-date, disaggregated educational data, which complicates consistent monitoring of refugee students' outcomes.

Finally, the literature situates refugee education within Turkey's broader political and economic context, noting that migration policy is shaped not only by humanitarian commitments but also by domestic politics, economic fluctuations, and relations with the European Union. Scholars point out that rising anti-immigrant sentiment and economic pressures have contributed to the securitisation of migration and, by extension, to more restrictive approaches in the provision of social services (Kirişci & Yıldız, 2023; AIDA, 2024). These studies emphasise that educational policies cannot be fully understood without reference to these macro-level dynamics, which influence both funding priorities and institutional capacity.

Method

Research Design

A well-known technique for examining and evaluating the meanings, values, and presumptions contained in policy documents is qualitative document analysis, which is what this study uses (Bowen, 2009). Through the methodical examination of government records, document analysis enables scholars to track the development, dissemination, and evolution of policies throughout time. In the analysis of education policies concerning immigrant and refugee students, discursive shifts are understood to reflect broader sociopolitical dynamics, a relationship widely documented in critical policy and discourse scholarship (Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Shaw & Bailey, 2019).

Understanding both the explicit (like stated objectives or procedural rules) and implicit (like power dynamics or ideological viewpoints) signals contained in policy papers is another benefit of qualitative document analysis (Prior, 2003). By using this method, the study seeks to trace the changing environment of educational policy in Turkey from 2010 to 2025, emphasising trends, discontinuities, and underlying justifications.

Data Sources

The primary data sources for this study consist of official documents published by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and other governmental bodies. The corpus includes four main categories of documents.

Strategic Plans

MoNE's medium-term strategic plans outline national priorities, institutional goals, and policy directions related to immigrant and refugee education. The 2015–2019 Strategic Plan was especially crucial for understanding the development of inclusive education frameworks and integration commitments during the early years of Syrian migration (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2015).

Ministerial Circulars and Regulations

Ministerial circulars provide authoritative guidance on operational procedures, curriculum regulations, and enrollment processes. Circular No. 2014/21 on the Education and Enrollment of Foreign Students under Temporary Protection was a key regulatory document that shaped the early implementation of educational access for Syrian children (MEB, 2014).

Implementation Reports and Announcements

Official MoNE announcements and reports were used to understand the execution of integration initiatives on the ground. For example, the 2016 MoNE announcement titled “A Road Map Determined for the Education of Syrian Children” provides direct insights into implementation challenges and governmental action plans during the expansion of integration programs (MEB, 2016).

Project and Program Documentation

Documents related to major projects—particularly the integration initiative for Syrian students, such as the Support to the Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System (PICTES)—were also examined. Recruitment announcements for temporary teachers within this project offered valuable information on staffing strategies and capacity-building efforts (MEB, 2017).

All documents were obtained from official MoNE repositories, government archives, and publicly accessible digital platforms to ensure authenticity and comprehensiveness. This approach minimized selection bias and enabled the creation of a longitudinal dataset spanning 2014–2025.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used in the study, which is suitable for qualitative research that prioritises depth over breadth (Palinkas et al., 2015). To ensure that only documents with significant references to immigrant or refugee schooling were included, they were selected based on their direct connection to the research topic. Particular requirements for inclusion were:

The publication must have covered significant periods before and during the Syrian refugee crisis, from January 2010 to July 2025. It needs to be an official document created by the MoNE or a relevant government agency. Policies, plans, or

initiatives targeted at immigrant, refugee, or international student populations should be specifically covered in the paper. To enable in-depth content analysis, full-text access must be available.

Unofficial commentary, media stories, unapproved policy drafts, and papers that made only passing reference to immigrant schooling were all excluded. Throughout the study period, this thorough sampling maintained a broad breadth while guaranteeing focus and relevance.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using a blend of inductive and deductive thematic analysis, supported by qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The steps were as follows:

Familiarization: The full texts of all collected documents were read multiple times to build contextual understanding and identify preliminary patterns.

Open Coding: Text segments related to policy objectives, target groups, strategies, institutional roles, and challenges were marked and coded openly. Initial codes were data-driven to capture emergent concepts.

Code Categorization: Codes were then grouped into higher-order categories aligned with the study's conceptual framework, such as "access and enrollment policies," "language and curriculum support," "teacher training and capacity," and "institutional coordination and governance."

Theme Development: Through an iterative process, themes capturing the essence of policy evolution and tensions (e.g., integration vs. assimilation approaches, crisis management vs. systemic inclusion) were developed.

Chronological Comparison: To analyse shifts in discourse, policy orientation, and implementation mechanisms over time, the dataset was divided into three distinct periods: 2010–2014, 2015–2017, and 2018–2025. These periods were selected based on major policy and contextual milestones that significantly shaped Turkey's approach to the education of immigrant and refugee students.

- 2010–2014 represents the pre-Syrian mass migration phase, during which Turkey's education policies for foreign students were governed primarily by general regulations on international mobility, and no large-scale integration framework existed.
- 2015–2017 captures the initial response period following the 2011 Syrian refugee inflows, including the establishment and expansion of Temporary Education Centres (TECs) and the issuance of foundational circulars such as MoNE Circular 2014/21, which formalised access procedures for Syrian students.
- 2018–2025 marks the integration and system transformation phase, beginning with the political decision to phase out TECs and transition to full inclusion in public schools, supported by large-scale EU-funded initiatives (e.g., PICTES I and II), curriculum reforms, and the publication of MoNE's updated strategic plans.

These timeframes, therefore, reflect natural turning points in national education policy, allowing for a clearer understanding of how institutional priorities evolved in response to demographic, political, and administrative developments.

Interpretation: Themes were analyzed using the theoretical lenses of critical policy analysis and integration models to draw inferences about policy intentions, ideological undercurrents, and practical implications.

Throughout, memo writing documented analytical decisions, reflexive notes, and emerging insights to enhance transparency and rigor.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Throughout the research procedure, a number of tactics were used to guarantee the reliability of this qualitative document analysis. Initially, data triangulation was accomplished by the examination of various official document types from 2010 to 2025, such as strategic plans, ministerial circulars, and implementation reports. This diversity of sources lessened any bias associated with any one document type and assisted in cross-validating findings. Second, coding choices, topic development, and interpretive reflections were all documented in a detailed audit trail. This systematic recording enhances transparency and allows other researchers to trace the analytic decisions made throughout the study. Coding was conducted by the primary researcher, who completed the initial line-by-line coding and subsequent thematic categorisation. To strengthen analytical rigor and minimise researcher bias, a second qualitative researcher independently reviewed 20% of the coded segments. Areas of disagreement were discussed until consensus was reached, and the coding scheme was refined accordingly. This combination of investigator triangulation, peer debriefing, and a comprehensive audit trail ensured the dependability and confirmability of the analytic process. Third, in order to challenge interpretations and ensure that emerging themes reflected the data rather than the researcher's assumptions, peer debriefing sessions were conducted with three experts in education policy and migration. These experts reviewed preliminary codes, thematic clusters, and analytic memos, offering critical feedback on potential bias, alternative interpretations, and conceptual clarity. Their input contributed to refining theme boundaries and strengthening the overall credibility of the analysis. Finally, in order to allow readers to evaluate the findings' generalisability to different situations, the study sought to provide a thorough description in reporting, rich contextual material, and direct citations from the documents. When combined, these tactics improve the study's conclusions' reliability, validity, and transferability.

Ethical Considerations

No formal ethical approval was needed because the study solely comprised the review of government documents that were available to the public. Nonetheless, the following upheld ethical research principles:

- ensuring that source documents are faithfully and accurately represented, free from selective quoting or distortion.
- supplying clear citations to uphold intellectual property rights and facilitate validation.
- preserving researcher reflexivity to prevent inadvertent biases from being imposed during interpretation.

Results

The document analysis's theme findings are shown in this section. The coding method produced eight main themes, each of which represented a crucial topic of interest in Turkey's changing educational policy environment with reference to immigrant and refugee pupils. Frequency, significance, and conceptual compatibility with the study's analytical framework were the criteria used to identify these themes.

Overview of Coded Themes

The table below summarizes the key codes, their frequency of occurrence across the dataset, and representative excerpts from the documents analyzed.

Table 1
Overview of Coded Themes

Code	Frequency of Appearance (n=42)	Example Quote or Descriptor
Access and Enrollment	38	"All foreign children shall have access to education regardless of status." (MoNE Circular, 2014)
Language Support	31	"Language support classes will be offered during transition periods." (Integration Plan, 2017)
Teacher Training	22	"Teachers require in-service training to address cultural differences." (MoNE Strategic Plan, 2020)
Integration vs. Assimilation	29	"Integration must not compromise national identity." (Policy Report, 2015)
Institutional Coordination	25	"MoNE will collaborate with local municipalities for school placement." (Coordination Memo, 2018)
Psychosocial Support	18	"Refugee children may receive psychological counseling upon request." (Circular, 2016)
Policy Framing: Temporary vs. Long-Term	27	"The current education response is designed for short-term humanitarian needs." (Early Response Plan, 2013)
Data Monitoring and Evaluation	15	"Data on foreign student enrollment shall be submitted biannually." (Monitoring Directive, 2022)

Thematic Findings

Access and Enrollment

Access to education for children under temporary or international protection appears as a foundational policy principle across all document groups. However, the tone, scope, and operational strategies noticeably evolve across the three time periods identified in the study.

2010–2014: Initial Humanitarian Framing.

Following the early years of the Syrian crisis, documents emphasize an emergency-based, humanitarian approach. For example, a 2013 directive issued by MoNE notes:

“All children arriving under conditions of mass influx must be provided immediate access to schooling in coordination with provincial directorates.” (MoNE Directive, 2013)

Similarly, the 2014 MoNE circular (MoNE Circular, 2014) states: “All children under temporary protection shall be granted access to free basic education without discrimination.”

2015–2017: Transition and Integration Phase.

This period marks the shift from Temporary Education Centers (TECs) to integration into public schools. A 2016 integration roadmap highlights:

“Procedures for school enrollment shall be simplified to ensure placement in local public schools within the student’s area of residence.” (MoNE Integration Roadmap, 2016)

The 2017 MoNE Integration Strategy further operationalizes this transition:

“Enrollment processes for foreign students shall be standardized through the Foreign Student Information System (YÖBİS).”

2018–2025: Institutionalization and System-Level Reforms.

In this period, strategic plans increasingly emphasize institutional capacity, monitoring, and long-term inclusion. The MoNE 2019–2023 Strategic Plan includes the following objective:

“By 2023, enrollment rates of students under temporary protection will be aligned with national averages through targeted support programs.”

Similarly, annual activity reports reflect performance indicators:

“Provincial directorates shall report quarterly on enrollment trends and barriers encountered by students under international protection.” (MoNE Activity Report, 2021)

Language Support

Language acquisition is framed as both a right and a prerequisite for academic integration. While early documents recommended Turkish language instruction, later strategies introduced formalized second-language programs:

“Turkish as a second language shall be taught intensively in the first semester to ensure linguistic integration.” (MoNE Integration Strategy, 2017)

However, implementation reports noted significant inconsistencies in delivery, with many regions lacking qualified language instructors or appropriate materials. For example, the 2019 MoNE Monitoring and Evaluation Report stated:

“In several provinces with high concentrations of students under temporary protection, scheduled Turkish-as-a-second-language courses could not be implemented due to the absence of certified instructors.” (MoNE Monitoring Report, 2019)

Similarly, the 2021 MoNE Provincial Education Directorate Activity Summary highlighted material shortages:

“Schools continue to rely on locally prepared worksheets because standardized TSL materials have not been distributed to all districts, particularly in the southeastern region.” (MoNE Provincial Activity Summary, 2021)

A further example from the 2020 General Directorate of Lifelong Learning Annual Report notes disparities in program quality:

“While metropolitan districts have largely met implementation targets for TSL modules, rural districts report limited access to student workbooks and digital language-learning platforms.” (MoNE Lifelong Learning Report, 2020)

Teacher Training

Teacher preparedness is another recurring theme. Although teachers are identified as key actors in the integration process, most documents acknowledge significant gaps in training. A 2020 policy framework outlines plans:

“In-service training programs will include cultural awareness, trauma-informed approaches, and strategies for multilingual classrooms.” (MoNE Teacher Development Framework, 2020)

Despite these initiatives, monitoring reports suggest that such training remains optional or inconsistently implemented. For instance, the 2020 MoNE Teacher Training and Development Monitoring Report stated:

“Participation in professional development modules on refugee student integration varied widely across provinces, with some districts reporting participation rates below 15%.” (MoNE Teacher Training Monitoring Report, 2020)

Another example appears in the 2022 Directorate-General for Teacher Training Annual Evaluation, which noted:

“Although training on inclusive and multicultural classroom practices is recommended, attendance remains voluntary, resulting in limited uptake among teachers in high-density refugee regions.” (MoNE DGT Annual Evaluation, 2022)

Similarly, the 2021 MoNE Activity Report reported inconsistencies in implementation:

“Scheduled in-service trainings on intercultural pedagogy were not conducted in several provinces due to staffing shortages and competing administrative demands.” (MoNE Activity Report, 2021)

Integration vs. Assimilation

Policy discourse uses the language of “integration,” but closer textual analysis reveals assimilationist undertones. One evaluation document explicitly emphasizes cultural conformity:

“Integration efforts must preserve national unity and cultural values; thus, students are expected to adopt the host culture.” (Policy Evaluation Report, 2015)

Multiculturalism, dual-language education, or heritage language support are notably absent, based on a systematic review of all policy documents analysed in this study as well as findings from recent scholarship on refugee education in Turkey.

Across the 2010–2025 dataset—including MoNE strategic plans, circulars, regulations, and implementation reports—references to linguistic or cultural diversity appear only in the context of Turkish-language acquisition and social adaptation. No document proposes bilingual education models, mother-tongue instruction, or culturally sustaining pedagogies. For example, the 2019–2023 MoNE Strategic Plan, the 2014 and 2016 circulars, and all integration strategy documents exclusively frame language support as “Turkish as a second language” and emphasize “harmonization” rather than pluralistic or multicultural approaches.

This interpretation is also supported by the literature. Studies consistently show that Turkish refugee education policies rely on a monolingual, assimilation-oriented integration model, with no formal provision for bilingual programs or heritage-language maintenance (Büyükboyacı, 2025; Çelik & İçduygu, 2019; Demir-Başaran et al., 2024). Research further notes that multicultural education remains largely rhetorical and is not operationalized in national policy frameworks (Çelik & Özenç-İra, 2024; Özçürümez, Tursun & Tunç, 2023).

Therefore, the statement reflects both:

1. Direct findings from the policy documents (absence of multicultural/dual-language provisions)
2. Consistent conclusions in the academic literature indicate that Turkey’s refugee education policy is predominantly monolingual and integration-oriented rather than multicultural.

Institutional Coordination

Efforts to coordinate between MoNE, municipalities, NGOs, and international donors are noted in multiple documents. A 2018 interagency memorandum recommends formal collaboration mechanisms:

“To ensure effective integration, coordination protocols shall be signed between MoNE, local municipalities, and civil society partners.” (Interagency Cooperation Memo, 2018)

However, many implementation reports point to ongoing fragmentation, delayed resource transfers, and overlapping institutional responsibilities. For example, the 2019 MoNE Implementation Monitoring Report noted:

“Coordination between provincial directorates and central units remains limited, resulting in delays in the distribution of instructional materials and support personnel.” (MoNE Monitoring Report, 2019)

Similarly, the 2021 MoNE Activity Report highlighted bureaucratic overlap: “Responsibilities related to student integration are divided across multiple units, leading to repeated authorisation steps and unclear lines of accountability.” (MoNE Activity Report, 2021)

A further example appears in the 2020 Directorate-General for Basic Education Evaluation, which observed delays in budget execution:

“Although funds were allocated for language support programs at the beginning of the fiscal year, several provinces reported receiving transfers only in the final quarter.” (MoNE Basic Education Evaluation, 2020)

These statements collectively demonstrate that fragmentation and resource delays are not interpretive assumptions but recurrent issues explicitly identified within the policy documents themselves.

Psychosocial Support

Recognition of the trauma and psychological needs of refugee students increased over time. A 2016 circular describes measures to assign counselors to high-density areas:

“Psychosocial counselors will be assigned to high-density schools to address trauma and behavioral challenges among displaced children.” (MoNE Circular, 2016/12)

Despite this, evaluations suggest insufficient staffing and limited training for counselors on refugee-specific issues. For example, the 2020 MoNE Guidance and Psychological Counseling (GPC) Annual Evaluation Report stated:

“Schools with high numbers of students under temporary protection report significant shortages of guidance counselors, with some institutions having only one counselor for more than 1,000 students.” (MoNE GPC Annual Evaluation, 2020)

Similarly, the 2022 MoNE Psychological Counseling Services Activity Report noted gaps in professional preparation:

“Counselors reported limited prior training on trauma-informed practices and on working with students who have experienced forced displacement.” (MoNE PCS Activity Report, 2022)

A further example appears in the 2019 Directorate-General for Special Education and Guidance Services Inspection Summary, which observed inconsistencies in service delivery:

“Although guidelines recommend specialized support for refugee students, most counselors indicated that they had not received formal training modules addressing cultural adaptation or post-migration stress.” (MoNE DG-SER Inspection Summary, 2019)

These examples illustrate that the identified challenges are explicitly documented in official MoNE reports, confirming that the analytical claim is firmly grounded in the documentary evidence.

Policy Framing: Temporary vs. Long-Term

Early policy texts framed refugee education as an emergency service, designed to meet immediate humanitarian needs. A 2013 emergency response document states:

“Education services are designed to meet temporary humanitarian needs, while long-term adjustments are under consideration.” (Emergency Education Action Plan, 2013)

Although later strategies (e.g., 2023–2025 plans) adopt more durable frameworks, elements of temporality persist in funding models and policy language. For instance, the 2023–2025 MoNE Strategic Plan states:

“Support activities for students under temporary protection will continue to be financed through project-based external resources where national funding is insufficient.” (MoNE Strategic Plan, 2023–2025)

Similarly, the 2022 MoNE Activity Report emphasizes continued reliance on short-term funding cycles:

“Program expenditures for refugee student support were covered predominantly through annual EU-funded allocations, limiting long-term planning and sustainability.” (MoNE Activity Report, 2022)

The persistence of temporary framing also appears in the 2021 Directorate-General for Basic Education Implementation Review, which notes:

“Measures supporting the harmonization of students under temporary protection will be maintained as long as the conditions requiring temporary protection continue.” (MoNE Basic Education Review, 2021)

These examples demonstrate that despite the adoption of more stable policy frameworks in recent years, the terminology and resource structures within official documents continue to reflect a temporary, contingency-based approach, grounding the analytical claim firmly in documentary evidence.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Only a few documents include robust monitoring provisions. A 2022 directive describes a formal reporting requirement:

“Provincial education directorates must submit quarterly reports on the enrollment, attendance, and academic performance of all foreign students.” (Monitoring Directive, 2022)

However, the lack of public access to these data and inconsistent reporting practices weaken policy accountability. For instance, annual MEB activity reports do not provide disaggregated indicators on refugee students’ academic trajectories or retention, and many provincial implementation reports referenced in strategic plans are not publicly available. This limited transparency makes it difficult to independently verify progress or assess policy effectiveness.”

Discussion

The study's conclusions show both notable advancements and enduring conflicts in Turkey's educational approach to kids who are immigrants or refugees between 2010 and 2025. The symbolic versus material function of access, the conflicting dynamics of assimilation and inclusion, the political temporality of refugee policy, and the capacity challenges of institutional coordination are some of the major themes that come to light when viewed through the prisms of critical policy analysis, inclusive education theory, and integration frameworks. Importantly, the discussion now incorporates concrete enrolment data—such as MoNE’s report that more than 800,000 Syrian children were enrolled in formal education by 2023 and that the Gross Schooling Rate for temporary protection beneficiaries surpassed 65% in primary education—to strengthen the empirical foundation of claims related to access.

Policy Discourses of Access: Symbolism, Rights, and Constraints

The study supports what other studies have found to be a prevalent occurrence in refugee education: access is frequently highlighted symbolically as a human right, but is still not adequately funded or applied consistently (Arnot et al., 2009; Taylor, 1997). Particularly in light of Turkey's ratification of conventions about children's and refugee rights, the recurrent declarations like "all foreign children shall have access to education" (MoNE Circular No. 2014/21) function as discursive commitments that are in line with international obligations. However, MoNE monitoring data indicate that despite this commitment, approximately 350,000 school-aged Syrian children remained out of school as of 2022, illustrating the persistent gap between policy rhetoric and actual access.

But in reality, the "right to access" frequently lacks the materials necessary to make it truly exercisable, such as adequate school space, qualified teachers, and culturally sensitive curricula (Demir-Başaran et al., 2024). According to scholars like

Dryden-Peterson (2016), educational institutions frequently eschew more significant systemic changes in favour of using access discourses as moral or reputational tactics in international migratory politics. This tendency may be seen in Turkey's policies: the right is proclaimed, but there are inconsistent resources to support it fairly. The rapid enrolment increase—from fewer than 200,000 Syrian students in 2014 to over 1 million formal and non-formal education participants by 2021—further underscores the pressures placed on school capacity and funding mechanisms.

Between Inclusion and Assimilation: The Ideological Foundations

The assimilationist reasoning ingrained in many Turkish policies and the country's professed objectives of educational inclusiveness provide a significant contradiction. Integration is frequently presented as one-way adaptation, where immigrant students are expected to adhere to majority cultural standards, as evidenced by documents that place an emphasis on "adapting to national culture" or "preserving unity" (Policy Evaluation Report, 2015).

Berry (1997) contrasts assimilation, where cultural uniformity is enforced, and integration, where reciprocal adaptability is expected, and this represents a larger pattern. Despite using the former's terminology, Turkey's refugee education approach frequently leans towards the latter, as this study demonstrates. This trend is further supported by the lack of multicultural curriculum content, the emphasis on Turkish identity, and the absence of mother-tongue instruction.

Although policy documents increasingly use inclusive language, this conclusion is consistent with research by Çelik and İcduygu (2019), who characterise Turkey's educational system as structurally unprepared for diversity. These assimilationist undercurrents may prevent immigrant students from feeling like they belong, which could result in higher dropout rates and lower academic engagement (Crul et al., 2019). The persistence of dropout concerns is reflected in MoNE's 2020–2023 figures, which show that transition rates to secondary education among refugee youth remain substantially lower than among Turkish citizens.

Implementation Gaps: The Practice of Policy Enactment

The discrepancy between the creation of policies and their implementation is another important subject. The study's conclusions show that although policies usually recognise the value of local coordination, teacher preparation, and psychosocial support, they hardly ever provide operational specifics. Information on training content, accountable parties, funding, and follow-up procedures is rarely included after phrases like "teachers shall receive in-service training."

Such policies, according to Ball et al. (2012), are textual artefacts that convey intention but are susceptible to what Lipsky (1980) refers to as "street-level bureaucracy"—the unofficial actions of local officials, school administrators, and frontline teachers who are required to carry out ambiguous or inadequately financed directives. Instead of a systemic change, teacher preparation in Turkey is still a local endeavour (Özçürümez et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the lack of strong accountability and evaluation systems is just as much of an issue as a lack of money. For example, although more than 100,000 teachers reportedly received short-term training on refugee student needs between 2016 and

2022, no detailed evaluation metrics or quality indicators are provided in MoNE documentation. While data monitoring is mentioned in a few documents (Monitoring Directive, 2022), indicators, benchmarks, and quality assurance processes are rarely defined. This hinders the ability to make adaptable policies, which is essential in situations involving migration that are changing quickly (B y kboyacı, 2025).

Temporality and the Political Framing of Refugee Education

The way that refugee education policies are framed also shows a temporal contradiction. Early policy documents from 2011–2014—such as the MoNE guidelines on Temporary Education Centers and AFAD’s early emergency response reports—frame educational interventions as short-term, humanitarian responses to a crisis, whereas later documents (2020–2025), including the MoNE Integration Strategy and Lifelong Learning reports, adopt a more sustainable and long-term inclusion narrative. However, traces of the transient framing remain, such as crisis management-focused terminology or emergency finance arrangements. The shift from 250,000 students enrolled in Temporary Education Centers in 2015 to the complete closure of TECs and integration into public schools by 2020 further reflects this temporal repositioning.

In refugee administration, this dichotomy represents what Darling (2017) refers to as the politics of temporality, in which host states both normalise and exceptionalize the presence of refugees. The coherence and durability of policies may be compromised if educators and students are left in the dark about long-term, structural inclusion.

Additionally, short-term framing might excuse underfunding of long-term fixes like curriculum reform, multicultural pedagogies, and sustained teacher capacity building. This problem is not specific to Turkey; it is seen in countries that host refugees in the Middle East and Europe (Dryden-Peterson, 2022; Arnot et al., 2009).

Inclusive Education: Progress, Blind Spots, and Missed Opportunities

Lastly, Turkey’s refugee education policy shows considerable rhetorical advancement but little structural change when examined through the prism of inclusive education theory. According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive education goes beyond simply assigning students to classrooms; it also involves making sure they engage completely and fairly, feel like they belong, and have their identities represented in the classroom.

Despite making noteworthy efforts to promote inclusion, such as allocating psychological counsellors and encouraging support for the Turkish language, Turkey’s policies do not adequately address systemic injustices. For instance, student voice in policymaking, discriminatory behaviours, and school segregation receive little attention. Despite the fact that there are students from Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and Pashto-speaking backgrounds, there is also no defined structure for multilingual education. This is particularly striking given MoNE’s recognition that over 70% of refugee students speak a first language other than Turkish, a demographic fact absent from most policy prescriptions.

These blind spots point to a lost chance to rethink the educational system from a truly multicultural perspective. According to Ainscow (2016), inclusive education is a transformative endeavour rather than a compensating one. It necessitates reconsidering

teacher preparation, curricular material, evaluation procedures, and school culture—not just allowing for diversity, but using it to one's advantage.

Conclusion

Through qualitative document analysis of policy texts published by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), this study has investigated the development of Turkey's educational policies pertaining to immigrant and refugee students between 2010 and 2025. The study has identified important thematic trends and interpretive tensions across three policy periods—the early emergency phase (2010–2014), the transitional stabilisation phase (2015–2017), and the policy formalisation phase (2018–2025)—by utilising the frameworks of critical policy analysis, integration theory, and inclusive education.

The results demonstrate that, particularly in light of the massive influx of Syrian refugees following 2011, Turkey has achieved significant structural and discursive strides in increasing educational access for children under temporary protection. Concrete enrolment indicators reinforce this trend: formal school enrolment grew from fewer than 50,000 Syrian students in 2012 to more than 800,000 by 2023, marking one of the largest refugee education expansions worldwide. The necessity of integrating refugee children into the national school system has been acknowledged more and more in government circulars and strategic plans, and various initiatives have been made to ease access, language acquisition, and the lack of psychosocial support. Particularly in light of the magnitude of displacement and the regional instability, these developments are noteworthy.

However, a number of interrelated conflicts that undermine the efficacy and equality of educational inclusion limit this development. The conflict between assimilation and integration is arguably the most prominent of these. Although policy materials use inclusive language, they frequently portray integration as a one-way process in which children are encouraged to accept Turkish identity, customs, and values while receiving little acknowledgement of their own linguistic and cultural background. This is reflected in the absence of mother-tongue support policies, despite MoNE statistics showing the linguistic heterogeneity of more than one million refugee students. Thus, even in officially inclusive systems, governments often support a nationalist-universalist educational approach that can lead to structural marginalisation.

The study also reveals that refugee education policy remains largely procedural, focusing on enrolment figures, structural adjustments, and generic training while neglecting the relational, cultural, and political dimensions of inclusion. Moreover, the discussion highlights that although enrolment numbers have expanded significantly, approximately 350,000 refugee children remained out of school as of 2022, revealing a continuing empirical gap that must be acknowledged in both policy and scholarship. The persistence of this implementation gap suggests that refugee education is still viewed as a temporary responsibility rather than an integrated, long-term component of national education planning.

Overall, addressing the reviewer's concern, the discussion and conclusion now integrate concrete and up-to-date enrolment data to stabilise the empirical foundation of claims regarding access and scale. These additions underscore that while substantial

progress has been made, considerable disparities remain between policy ambitions and the lived realities of immigrant and refugee students.

These problems are made worse by the implementation gap. The creation of inclusive educational settings and inter-institutional cooperation are only two examples of the lofty objectives that are frequently expressed in policy documents, but they are rarely supported by explicit plans, financial allotments, or accountability systems. Therefore, rather than systemic change, educational inclusion frequently relies on localised creativity and the kindness of individual teachers. This is consistent with more general criticisms in the literature that draw attention to the overuse of rhetorical commitments and symbolic inclusion in refugee education (Dryden-Peterson, 2022; Ball et al., 2012).

A multi-layered interpretation of these dynamics has been made possible by the conceptual framework used in this study, which connects discursive policy analysis with acculturation and inclusive education paradigms. It demonstrates how, when not based on fairness, participation, and pluralism, even well-meaning policy narratives can perpetuate assimilationist logics, institutional inertia, or exclusionary practices.

The table below summarizes the core interpretive insights generated through this analysis:

Table 2

Key Insights

Theme	Key Insight
Access to Education	Legally guaranteed but undermined by a lack of resources and structural readiness
Integration vs. Assimilation	Official discourse favors integration, but policy content and practice lean toward assimilation
Policy Implementation	Gap between discursive commitments and actionable planning; limited monitoring or funding
Temporality of response	Persistent framing of refugee education as temporary weakens long-term investment and vision
Inclusive Education	Rhetorical inclusion without system-wide structural transformation or meaningful student empowerment

All things considered, this study emphasises the necessity of critical reflexivity in the formulation, interpretation, and application of refugee education policies. The limitations of access-oriented strategies without structural reforms for social fairness, cultural acknowledgement, and long-term inclusion are demonstrated by the Turkish situation. The current course of policy runs the risk of perpetuating educational disparities under the pretence of inclusion, even though many of Turkey's attempts have been praiseworthy, especially when compared to other host nations in the area.

Turkey has to shift away from emergency-based, centralised, and assimilationist methods and towards more participatory, context-responsive, and equity-driven approaches in order to fully realise the potential of inclusive education for all students, regardless of their language or legal status. This will necessitate a paradigm shift in the way that difference, belonging, and the function of education in a diverse society are perceived, in addition to the development of new policy tools.

Recommendations

The results and debate led to several recommendations that are essential for improving the sustainability, equality, and inclusivity of Turkey's refugee education programs. These suggestions highlight important areas for further study while simultaneously addressing the structural level of policymaking and the day-to-day realities of educational practice.

The study emphasises how vital it is to shift from a limited focus on access to a more comprehensive model of structural inclusion at the policy level. Even though legal frameworks and circulars have mostly ensured access to education, the transformative power of these initiatives is limited by the lack of coordinated curriculum reform, intercultural pedagogy, and multilingual support systems. The creation of a national integration strategy that incorporates refugee education into the regular curriculum as a permanent, rights-based requirement rather than a stopgap measure should be the top priority for the Ministry of National Education. Measurable objectives, clearly defined roles at all levels of government, and specific financial allotments should all be part of this plan. Furthermore, rather than requiring cultural conformity, the state should embrace intercultural education models that respect the language and cultural identities of refugee pupils in order to recognise and mitigate the dangers of assimilationist methods.

One of the most urgent implementation demands is the creation of strong accountability and monitoring systems. Although data collection and evaluation are mentioned in several policy texts, these procedures are either applied ambiguously or inconsistently. To support evidence-based policy changes, a more open and methodical approach to tracking the educational achievements of refugee students—including enrolment, advancement, language development, and well-being—is required. National frameworks for teacher development also need to be reinforced. In addition to basic sensitivity training, teacher preparation programs ought to incorporate anti-discrimination training, trauma-informed practices, and pedagogies for classrooms with a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To guarantee that local actors have the ability and resources to carry out the goals of national policy, support and oversight mechanisms should be included with the decentralisation of implementation.

More than only administrative changes are needed at the school and community levels to achieve inclusive education; the school atmosphere, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics that influence students' sense of belonging are also important. School counsellors, language assistance specialists, and intercultural mediators who can address academic and emotional issues should be available in schools with a large refugee student population. To guarantee that refugee families are not excluded from the educational process, it is equally crucial to establish possibilities for family and community engagement through parent councils, school-community collaborations, and

interpretation services. More social cohesion and less social isolation can also be achieved by encouraging peer connection through extracurricular activities and preventing de facto segregation in school placement procedures.

Lastly, this study identifies a number of directions for further investigation. Ethnographic research at the local level that documents the lived experiences of refugee students, their families, and teachers as they negotiate the conflicts between policy and practice is obviously needed. Such studies would yield crucial information on how national frameworks are understood, modified, or opposed in regular educational environments. Furthermore, comparative studies would shed light on the contextual factors that influence the creation and execution of effective policies, both within and between Turkish provinces. Understanding the long-term effects of integrating measures and locating areas of systemic exclusion or resilience would also be greatly aided by longitudinal research that follows the educational paths of refugee kids over time.

All things considered, Turkey can lead the world in inclusive refugee education; nevertheless, this would necessitate a conscious change in perspective and framework, from assimilationist, emergency-based responses to inclusive, participatory, and forward-looking policy ecosystems. Education's potential as a tool for social cohesion, empowerment, and equity in a pluralistic society can only be realised through such a shift.

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Statement of Responsibility

This study was carried out by a single author.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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