

## A Comparative Analysis of Immigrant Children's Educational Policies: Türkiye and the United States

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### ABSTRACT

This study critically compares immigrant and refugee education policies in Türkiye and the United States, integrating theoretical analysis with a policy review. While previous studies by OECD, UNESCO, and Suárez-Orozco have described immigrant student outcomes, few have systematically examined how governance structures and policy implementation shape educational experiences across contexts. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Berry's acculturation model, this study analyzes 30 core documents (12 peer-reviewed articles, 10 government policy texts, and 8 international reports) through a qualitative document analysis. Findings reveal that Türkiye's centralized education system enables rapid refugee inclusion and policy coherence at the macro level, but struggles with localized implementation, resulting in overcrowded schools, insufficient psychosocial support, and limited teacher training. Conversely, the United States' decentralized federal system enables state-level innovation, such as bilingual education programs, but creates sharp inequities between supportive and restrictive states, producing fragmented acculturation outcomes. Mapping these dynamics across macro (national policy), meso (regional/school governance), and micro (classroom) levels illustrates how structural misalignments affect immigrant students' integration. This study contributes to comparative education literature by moving beyond descriptive policy summaries and offering a theory-driven analysis linking governance, implementation, and acculturation outcomes. It concludes that both countries must align macro-level policies with meso- and micro-level supports through equity-focused funding, bilingual instruction, trauma-informed services, and teacher preparation to ensure the academic and social integration of immigrant children.

**Keywords:** Immigrant children, refugee education, Türkiye, United States, educational policies

### INTRODUCTION

Millions of children worldwide are impacted by the intersection of migration and education as key policy areas. There are many potential and complex structural issues associated with integrating immigrant and refugee students into the educational systems of their host nations. Life events that children may be exposed to after forced migration can endanger their psychological well-being (Başar & Aytar, 2021). Despite being influenced by quite distinct migration patterns, Türkiye and the US have both become important venues for researching the education of immigrant children in recent decades. The main host nation for Syrian refugees under temporary protection, many of whom are school age, is Türkiye, for instance. In contrast, the United States oversees a more varied and

dispersed educational system that serves both recently arrived immigrants and children of immigrants born in the country through 50 state systems.

Immigrant and refugee children's education has become an urgent global concern, given that over 36 million displaced children worldwide face barriers to schooling (UNESCO, 2023). Existing research has explored challenges such as language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and social-emotional development (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). Newcomer refugee families in pandemic contexts also found that access to culturally relevant and digital learning resources significantly mediates these challenges (Al & Akay, 2024). However, most studies remain either single-country analyses or descriptive overviews, lacking a theory-driven, systematic comparison of how national education systems respond to immigrant students.

Immigrant and refugee children's education has become an urgent global concern, given that over 36 million displaced children worldwide face barriers to schooling (UNESCO, 2023). Prior research has examined a range of challenges for immigrant students, including language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and social-emotional development (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2023; OECD, 2023; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). However, these studies often focus on single-country contexts or provide descriptive overviews, limiting understanding of how national policies, institutional structures, and classroom practices collectively shape educational experiences. For instance, OECD (2023) and UNESCO (2023) provide benchmarking data on enrollment and access but do not analyze how governance systems, resource allocation, and implementation mechanisms interact to influence outcomes. Similarly, studies on Turkish refugee education (Özer, 2021; Kaya & Kirac, 2020) and U.S. immigrant education (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) highlight critical barriers and programmatic approaches, yet few examine these countries comparatively or link findings systematically to theoretical frameworks.

By synthesizing these findings and identifying gaps in cross-national and multi-level analyses, this study situates itself within ongoing debates on educational equity, policy centralization, and acculturation strategies, providing a clearer rationale for why a comparative, theory-driven approach is needed.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of immigrant education policies in Türkiye and the United States—two nations with markedly different migration histories and governance models. Türkiye, hosting over 3.6 million Syrian refugees under temporary protection, has pursued centralized, refugee-specific education reforms (Özer, 2021; Kaya & Kirac, 2020; Čičgoj et al., 2025). In contrast, the U.S. educates over 13 million immigrant-origin students within a decentralized federal framework, where policies vary widely across states (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Although prior research has examined refugee education in Türkiye and immigrant education in the U.S. separately, few studies have conducted a systematic cross-national comparison. Existing analyses often focus on descriptive overviews or single-level policy reviews, leaving unanswered questions about how governance structures and classroom practices intersect across contexts. By situating this study within the broader academic debates on policy centralization, language acquisition strategies, and integration pathways, it seeks to contribute novel insights into multi-level policy implementation and its impact on immigrant children's educational outcomes. This study seeks to answer two questions:

1. How do Türkiye and the United States differ in the design and implementation of educational policies for immigrant and refugee children?
2. What structural factors, resources, and barriers influence immigrant students' academic and social integration in each country?

By drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory—which conceptualizes education as shaped by macro (national policies), meso (school-community relationships), and micro (classroom practices) systems—and Berry's Acculturation Theory, which explains pathways of integration, assimilation, or marginalization, this study examines how policies operate across levels and influence immigrant children's experiences. Through qualitative analysis of policy documents, scholarly literature, and international reports, this study aims not only to identify policy deficiencies but also to provide evidence-based insights for designing inclusive, equitable education systems in increasingly diverse societies

## **Conceptual Framework and Key Terms**

To ensure analytical clarity and consistency, this study draws upon the following key concepts:

**Immigrant vs. Refugee:** An "immigrant" means an individual who voluntarily moves to another country for various reasons, such as employment, education, or family reunification. In contrast, a "refugee" has been forced to flee their country due to conflict, persecution, or violence and is granted protected status under international law (UNHCR, 2023). In the Turkish context, most immigrant children are Syrian refugees under temporary protection. In the U.S., immigrant children may be recent arrivals, undocumented, or U.S.-born children of immigrant parents.

**Integration:** The complex process through which immigrant and refugee students actively participate in the social, cultural, and academic life of their host country is known as integration. This includes access to quality

education, language acquisition, social belonging, and equal opportunities for success (Berry, 1997; OECD, 2015). Successful integration techniques take into account the child's overall development in addition to academic participation.

**Educational Equity:** Educational equity entails ensuring that all students have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to achieve academic success, regardless of their background or circumstances (Nieto & Bode, 2018). In the context of immigrant education, equity means addressing language barriers, socioeconomic disadvantage, and cultural dissonance through inclusive policy and practice. These conceptual definitions serve as analytical anchors throughout the study, enabling a more precise examination of how Türkiye and the United States construct and operationalize immigrant education within their national policy environments.

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Berry's Acculturation Theory, which together provide a multi-layered lens to analyze immigrant children's educational experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory has been applied in prior research to examine policy implementation gaps and classroom outcomes for immigrant children (Smith & Xie, 2018; Lee, 2020). In this study, it conceptualizes child development as influenced by nested, interacting environmental systems:

- **Macrosystem:** National-level education policies, governance structures, and funding mechanisms. For example, Türkiye's centralized Ministry of National Education (MoNE) shapes uniform refugee education policy nationwide (Kaya & Kirac, 2020), while the U.S. federalist system devolves authority to states, resulting in policy fragmentation (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010).
- **Mesosystem:** The interactions between schools, communities, and local agencies that influence policy implementation. Previous studies highlight how mesosystem-level coordination affects integration outcomes (Lee, 2020; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2023). In Türkiye, this includes provincial education directorates administering refugee integration programs, while in the U.S., it reflects district-level disparities in English Learner (EL) services and community partnerships.
- **Microsystem:** The immediate classroom environment, including teacher practices, peer relationships, and access to social-emotional supports. Research demonstrates that gaps between macro policies and classroom practices can lead to marginalization or inconsistent integration experiences (Smith & Xie, 2018).

Berry's Acculturation Theory (1997) has been widely used to interpret immigrant students' educational experiences in different national contexts (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). In this study, it complements Bronfenbrenner's framework by examining how immigrant students navigate educational environments through four pathways:

- **Integration:** Policies that combine linguistic and cultural inclusion (e.g., U.S. dual-language programs).
- **Assimilation:** Monolingual or uniform approaches that prioritize dominant language and culture (e.g., Türkiye's Turkish-only immersion).
- **Separation:** Segregated programs that limit interaction with host communities (e.g., former Temporary Education Centers in Türkiye).
- **Marginalization:** Systemic exclusion due to resource gaps or legal barriers (e.g., U.S. undocumented students facing higher education access restrictions).

By referencing these prior applications of Bronfenbrenner and Berry, this study situates itself within current academic debates while extending the literature through a comparative, multi-level analysis of Türkiye and the U.S., highlighting how structural, institutional, and classroom-level factors jointly shape immigrant children's educational trajectories.

In this study, these frameworks are analytically integrated: Bronfenbrenner structures the analysis of policy design and implementation across levels, while Berry's model interprets the resulting acculturation outcomes. For instance, mismatches between Türkiye's macro-level centralized policies and under-resourced micro-level classrooms help explain why many refugee students experience marginalization despite formal inclusion. Similarly, U.S. state-level variability (mesosystem) shapes whether immigrant students encounter integration-supportive bilingual programs or restrictive assimilationist environments.

By embedding findings within these interconnected frameworks, this study moves beyond descriptive summaries of policy and instead illuminates how structural, institutional, and classroom-level factors jointly shape immigrant children's educational trajectories.

## Immigrant Children's Education and Policies in Türkiye

Türkiye's approach to educating immigrant children, particularly Syrian refugees under temporary protection, reflects an urgent response to a large-scale humanitarian crisis. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's framework, national policies (macrosystem) have aimed to integrate refugee children into Turkish public education, replacing earlier parallel structures such as Temporary Education Centers (TECs). By 2020, most TECs were closed, and nearly one million refugee children were enrolled in the national school system (Joint Data Center, 2023).

## **Policy and Institutional Frameworks**

Türkiye's commitment to integrating Syrian refugee children into the national education system is evident through various initiatives. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE), in collaboration with international partners like UNICEF and the EU Facility for Refugees in Türkiye (FRIT), has developed policies aimed at facilitating the inclusion of these children into public schools. These policies have led to the establishment of Temporary Education Centers (TECs) and the adaptation of curricula to accommodate the needs of refugee students. However, the implementation of these policies has faced challenges, particularly in rural and less developed regions where resources are limited, and access to trained educators is scarce (World Bank, 2023).

Despite these efforts, disparities persist in the quality of education provided to refugee children. A study by Koç (2021) highlights that while some regions have successfully integrated refugee students, others continue to face significant obstacles, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and a lack of specialized support services. These challenges underscore the need for a more equitable distribution of resources and targeted interventions to address the specific needs of refugee students in underserved areas.

## **Language and Academic Integration**

Language acquisition remains a critical barrier to the academic success of refugee children. While preparatory language programs have been implemented, their effectiveness is often compromised by limited duration and inconsistent delivery. Many refugee students struggle to comprehend lessons delivered in Turkish, leading to delays in academic progress and increased dropout rates. The absence of bilingual support and culturally responsive teaching methods exacerbates these challenges, leaving students at risk of marginalization and academic failure (Sabancı University, 2023).

To address these issues, it is essential to expand and enhance language support programs. This includes providing intensive Turkish language courses, employing bilingual educators, and integrating cultural competency training for teachers. Such measures can facilitate smoother transitions for refugee students and promote a more inclusive learning environment.

## **Social-Emotional and Cultural Supports**

The psychosocial well-being of refugee children is a critical component of their overall development and educational success. Many refugee students have experienced traumatic events, including displacement and loss, which can manifest as behavioral issues, anxiety, and depression. However, schools often lack the necessary resources to provide adequate psychosocial support. The shortage of trained mental health professionals and the absence of structured referral systems hinder the ability of schools to address these needs effectively (Forced Migration Review, 2023).

To improve the psychosocial support available to refugee students, it is crucial to invest in training school counselors and mental health professionals, establish clear referral pathways, and incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum. These initiatives can help create a supportive school environment that fosters resilience and emotional well-being among refugee students.

Başay and Aytar (2021) also highlight practical school-level practices that made a measurable difference: systematic psychosocial screening upon school entry, brief evidence-based classroom interventions (e.g., structured group activities that build social skills and emotional regulation), and formalized referral links to community mental-health services. These interventions were most effective when combined with teacher training that increased educators' ability to identify trauma symptoms and use simple in-classroom supports. The APJES findings, therefore, reinforce our argument about ecological alignment—without resourced micro-level practices that translate macro intentions into classroom care, national policies will fail to secure immigrant students' well-being and learning.

## **Equity and Systemic Challenges**

Resource disparities between host communities and refugee populations exacerbate existing inequalities in education. Refugee students often attend schools that are overcrowded and under-resourced, lacking basic facilities and learning materials. Additionally, logistical challenges, such as inadequate transportation and limited access to school supplies, further impede their ability to succeed academically (OECD, 2023; Politics Today, 2023).

Addressing these systemic challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes equitable funding allocation, infrastructure development, and community engagement. By ensuring that all students have access to quality education, regardless of their background, Türkiye can promote social cohesion and long-term integration for refugee populations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, while Türkiye has made significant strides in integrating Syrian refugee children into the national education system, substantial challenges remain. To build upon existing efforts, it is essential to adopt a more holistic approach that encompasses language acquisition, psychosocial support, and equitable resource distribution. By aligning national policies with local capacities and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, Türkiye can create an inclusive educational system that supports the academic, social, and emotional development of all students, including those from refugee backgrounds.

## Immigrant Children's Education and Policies in the USA

In the United States, immigrant-origin children account for over a quarter of the K–12 student population, encompassing recent arrivals, undocumented youth, and U.S.-born children of immigrant parents. Unlike Türkiye's centralized refugee response, U.S. education policy operates through a decentralized federal structure. This leads to wide variations in how immigrant students experience access, inclusion, and academic opportunity.

### Policy and Institutional Frameworks

In the United States, immigrant-origin children constitute over a quarter of the K–12 student population, encompassing recent arrivals, undocumented youth, and U.S.-born children of immigrant parents. This demographic shift underscores the need for inclusive educational policies that address the diverse needs of these students.

Federal mandates, such as Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provide funding for English Learner (EL) services. However, the decentralized federal structure leads to significant variations in how resources are allocated and instructional models are implemented across states and districts. For instance, states like California and New York support bilingual and dual-language programs, while others emphasize English-only instruction. This decentralization generates disparities in access to quality education for immigrant students (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). Recent policy shifts have further complicated the landscape. In August 2025, the U.S. Department of Education rescinded a 2015 federal guidance that directed schools on how to support English learners, raising concerns about the potential reduction in services for the estimated 5 million ELs in U.S. schools (Washington Post, 2025).

### Language and Academic Integration

Language acquisition remains a critical barrier to the academic success of immigrant children. Most immigrant-origin students are classified as ELs, which often narrows their educational identity to language proficiency. Achieving academic fluency typically takes five to seven years, during which students may be tracked into remedial or under-resourced programs. The lack of culturally responsive curriculum and inconsistent reclassification policies risks reinforcing educational marginalization (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023).

The rescission of federal guidance on EL services has raised concerns about the future of bilingual education programs. Educators and advocates worry that without clear federal directives, states may reduce support for ELs, exacerbating existing disparities (Washington Post, 2025).

### Social-Emotional and Cultural Supports

Many immigrant children experience trauma from migration and acculturation stressors. Yet, few schools integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) with academic supports. The availability of bilingual counselors, trauma-informed teaching, and culturally competent school staff is limited and varies by locality. While some districts have invested in immigrant-friendly practices, others remain "immigrant-oblivious" or even hostile, as noted by Suárez-Orozco (2023).

In response to rising immigration enforcement actions, some cities have taken steps to protect immigrant students. For example, Chicago has distributed "know your rights" leaflets and conducted classroom sessions on legal protections to alleviate anxiety among immigrant families (Reuters, 2025). Additionally, California has enacted new privacy protections to prevent federal immigration agents from accessing personal information of students and families (AP News, 2025).

### Equity and Systemic Challenges

Structural inequities manifest in immigrant students' assignment to underfunded schools, exposure to discriminatory practices, and exclusion from college pathways, especially if undocumented. Policies regarding enrollment, identification, and support differ widely, contributing to unequal educational trajectories. The

disconnect between federal goals and state-level implementation echoes Bronfenbrenner's concern with alignment across ecological systems (Giving Compass, 2024).

Recent federal policy changes have further complicated the landscape. In July 2025, a rule change barred many immigrant families from enrolling in Head Start programs, leaving an estimated 115,000 children and families vulnerable to losing early education, health, and nutritional services (Brookings, 2025).

## Conclusion

The U.S. education system contains both promising practices and deep inequities in immigrant education. The variability across states creates opportunities for innovation but also exacerbates access gaps. To achieve educational equity, immigrant students need consistent, trauma-informed, and culturally sustaining supports at every level of the system.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) to systematically examine and compare educational policies for immigrant and refugee children in Türkiye and the United States. Document analysis is a rigorous research method that allows scholars to interpret and contextualize policy content, identify patterns, and assess the alignment between policy goals and practical implementation. It is particularly well-suited for comparative studies, as it enables the investigation of policy design across multiple jurisdictions and governance frameworks without relying on primary data collection that may be constrained by access or ethical considerations.

The analysis integrated both deductive and inductive approaches to coding. Deductive codes were informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which considers policy effects at macro (national policy), meso (regional or school governance), and micro (classroom practices) levels, as well as Berry's acculturation model, which identifies pathways such as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Berry, 1997). Inductive coding allowed emergent themes to surface, capturing context-specific challenges such as resource inequities, teacher training gaps, language support barriers, and psychosocial service deficiencies.

Thirty core documents were analyzed, including 12 peer-reviewed articles, 10 government policy texts, and 8 international reports. Each document was reviewed systematically to extract relevant information related to governance structures, policy objectives, implementation strategies, and observed outcomes for immigrant children. Coding was performed iteratively, with initial themes refined through constant comparison across documents and between the two national contexts. This approach ensured both analytical rigor and sensitivity to context-specific nuances.

By triangulating data across different document types and integrating theoretical frameworks with policy content, the study provides a multi-layered understanding of how immigrant education policies operate in practice. This method also allows for the identification of systemic misalignments between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities, as well as the mapping of policy effects across ecological levels and acculturation pathways. Overall, qualitative document analysis offered a structured yet flexible framework to examine the complex interplay between governance, policy implementation, and immigrant student experiences in Türkiye and the United States.

## Document Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify 30 core documents (15 from Türkiye and 15 from the U.S.) published between 2018 and 2024. These included:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles (12): Six focused on Türkiye (e.g., refugee integration, teacher preparedness) and six on the U.S. (e.g., English Learner policies, immigrant student outcomes).
- Government and policy documents (10):
  - *Türkiye*: Ministry of National Education (MoNE) directives, integration circulars, and national refugee education strategy reports.
  - *United States*: Federal Title III guidelines, state-level English Learner (EL) policy documents (e.g., California, Texas, Arizona).

International and NGO reports (8): OECD's *Education at a Glance* (2023), UNESCO's *Global Education Monitoring Report* (2023), World Bank's Türkiye refugee education review (2023), and Migration Policy Institute (MPI) briefs on U.S. immigrant education.

## Selection Criteria

Documents were included if they:

1. Focused explicitly on K–12 immigrant or refugee education.

2. Contained policy design, implementation, or equity analysis.
3. Were published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable policy/international organizations.
4. Represented a balance between national (macro), regional (meso), and school/classroom-level (micro) perspectives.

Excluded were opinion pieces, news reports, and outdated pre-2018 sources lacking direct policy relevance.

### Balance and Transparency

The final set was balanced both geographically (15 Türkiye, 15 U.S.) and by source type:

- Peer-reviewed academic studies: 12 (40%)
- Government/policy documents: 10 (33%)
- International and NGO reports: 8 (27%)

This ensured representation of both scholarly analysis and official policy texts.

### Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to examine the complexities of immigrant education policies in Türkiye and the United States. This approach integrated both deductive and inductive coding strategies. Deductive codes were derived from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, encompassing macro (national policy), meso (school-community), and micro (classroom) levels, and Berry's acculturation model, which includes integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization outcomes. These frameworks provided a structured lens to examine how policies were designed and implemented, while inductive coding allowed for the emergence of themes such as resource inequities, teacher training gaps, language barriers, and psychosocial challenges faced by immigrant students.

At the macro level, Türkiye's centralized policy approach aimed to integrate Syrian refugee children into the national education system. However, challenges in implementation were evident. For instance, the 2023 earthquake in Türkiye repurposed several schools as shelters, disrupting education for many children, including refugees (Broken Chalk, 2023). Additionally, the Joint Data Center (2023) reported that, despite efforts, a significant number of refugee children remained outside the formal education system, highlighting gaps between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities.

In the United States, the decentralized federal structure led to significant variations in how immigrant students experienced access, inclusion, and academic opportunity. Federal mandates, such as Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provided funding for English Learner (EL) services. However, state and district policies greatly influenced how resources were deployed and which instruction models were adopted. For example, some states emphasized English-only instruction, while others, like California and New York, supported bilingual and dual-language programs. This decentralization generated disparities in how immigrant education was conceptualized and implemented, leading to inequities in educational outcomes for immigrant students (Migration Policy Institute, 2023).

At the meso and micro levels, both countries faced challenges in translating policy into practice. In Türkiye, provincial disparities and overcrowded classrooms were prominent, showing that even well-designed macro-level policies could fail to translate effectively when local resources were constrained. Similarly, in the United States, state and district-level variations led to inconsistent experiences for immigrant students. Some districts provided bilingual programs and culturally responsive teaching, while others offered minimal support. This highlighted the critical role of meso-level governance in shaping the practical realization of macro policies.

The comparative synthesis of these themes across both countries revealed that while Türkiye's centralized approach allowed for rapid policy responses to refugee inflows, limitations at the meso and micro levels hindered effective integration. In contrast, the United States demonstrated innovation at local levels, such as dual-language programs and targeted social-emotional interventions, but faced structural inequities due to fragmented governance and inconsistent resource allocation. These findings underscore the importance of aligning national policies with local capacities and adopting a holistic, trauma-sensitive model of inclusivity that considers the complex realities of immigrant children.

### Trustworthiness and Limitations

To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was employed by analyzing a range of document types from multiple sources. Analyst triangulation was applied through peer debriefing of emerging codes and themes. However, the study is limited by reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture evolving policy developments or on-the-ground implementation realities. Future studies could incorporate interviews with stakeholders to enrich these findings.

This method allows for a nuanced understanding of immigrant education policy landscapes in Türkiye and the United States, grounded in theory and informed by multiple sources of evidence.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study is based exclusively on publicly available policy documents, academic publications, and institutional reports; therefore, it did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data. As such, formal ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, all materials were analyzed with respect to intellectual property and research integrity principles. Sources were accurately cited, and interpretations were presented objectively in accordance with qualitative research ethics.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study's findings demonstrate how Türkiye and the United States differ not merely in their immigrant education policies but in the systemic logics that underpin them, and how these differences manifest across Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels and Berry's acculturation outcomes. Rather than presenting two parallel national profiles, this discussion explicitly contrasts how centralization versus decentralization shapes educational responses, highlighting policy trade-offs, structural constraints, and theoretical implications.

### **Centralization vs. Decentralization**

Türkiye's centralized Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has enabled rapid, nationwide responses to large-scale refugee inflows, such as the closure of Temporary Education Centers and the integration of Syrian students into public schools (World Bank, 2023). This centralized framework aligns at the macro level of Bronfenbrenner's model, producing policy coherence and unified directives. However, it struggles at the meso level: local schools and provincial directorates often lack the resources or autonomy to adapt policies to regional contexts, leading to overcrowding and uneven service provision (OECD, 2023). In some multilingual education literature, researchers have shown that when school-level actors are empowered to enact localized curriculum adaptations (e.g. translanguaging strategies), even centralized systems can allow more responsive instruction (Setyaningrum, 2022). For example, in a study published in EU-JER, a primary school used scaffolded translanguaging in content and language integrated learning, dynamically shifting between students' home language and the target language to maintain comprehension and engagement.

In contrast, the U.S. federalist model disperses authority, enabling states and districts to tailor immigrant education to local needs. For instance, California has leveraged its autonomy to expand bilingual programs and equity-based funding, reflecting integration-supportive approaches at both **meso** and **micro levels** (MPI, 2023). Yet decentralization also creates stark inequalities: restrictive states like Arizona impose English-only instruction, effectively mandating assimilation and limiting immigrant students' access to higher-level content (Flores et al., 2018).

Thus, while Türkiye's centralized structure fosters uniformity but limits local flexibility, the U.S. decentralized system promotes localized innovation but perpetuates "postcode lottery" disparities. This illustrates a core trade-off: coherence versus equity.

### **Language Policy and Acculturation Pathways**

Language policy is where these governance differences become most pronounced. Türkiye's Turkish-only immersion programs prioritize rapid linguistic assimilation, assuming language acquisition is the primary vehicle for integration. Yet this **macro-level** focus ignores the **micro-level** realities of classrooms where students receive insufficient scaffolding, resulting in lower achievement and social isolation—a clear pathway toward *marginalization* under Berry's model (Sabancı University, 2023). Conversely, the U.S. supports multiple models, from dual-language immersion (integration) to English-only (assimilation). Here, decentralization creates fragmented acculturation outcomes: while bilingual districts foster integration, restrictive states exacerbate segregation, reflecting meso-level policy autonomy overriding federal integration goals.

By linking Berry's acculturation theory with ecological layers, these findings show that language policies are not merely pedagogical choices but structural determinants of immigrant students' positioning within host societies. This aligns with studies in multilingual education that argue policies must permit flexibility in classroom language use, such as translanguaging or scaffolded bilingualism, to support integrative acculturation pathways.



## Social-Emotional Supports and Micro-Level Gaps

At the micro level, both systems underperform in addressing immigrant students' psychosocial needs, but for different reasons. Türkiye's MoNE-led policies prioritize enrollment targets and macro-level integration metrics, yet invest minimally in school-based mental health infrastructure, leaving trauma-exposed refugee students underserved (World Bank, 2023). Many Syrian refugee children have experienced displacement, exposure to conflict, and family separation, which significantly affect their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Despite national policy rhetoric promoting inclusivity, schools frequently lack trained counselors, psychologists, or referral mechanisms, limiting the capacity to address post-traumatic stress, anxiety, or depression among students (Joint Data Center, 2023). In addition, large class sizes, limited classroom resources, and insufficient teacher training in trauma-informed pedagogy exacerbate these challenges, leaving refugee students at risk of social isolation and disengagement.

In the United States, although social-emotional learning (SEL) has been increasingly recognized as a critical component of holistic education, many schools serving high proportions of immigrant children remain under-resourced. Bilingual counselors and culturally competent mental health staff are often scarce, particularly in low-income districts, creating inequities in access to support (Harvard GSE, 2023; Giving Compass, 2024). The decentralized federal system allows for local innovation—such as SEL programs integrated into dual-language classrooms—but state and district disparities produce uneven outcomes. For example, districts in California may implement multi-tiered trauma interventions, while others in restrictive states provide only basic English instruction without social-emotional support, illustrating how mesosystem-level policies shape micro-level realities.

Recent qualitative research offers insight into how resilience operates among immigrant students facing psychosocial stress. For example, Peña et al. (2018) conducted a case study of unaccompanied immigrant children in Texas, finding that internal protective factors — such as self-motivation and peer support — and external factors — including mentoring and safe school environments — significantly contribute to academic success despite trauma and displacement. Similarly, “Bridging the Cultural Divide” (Acar, 2021) shows that immigrant students in Florida identify supportive teacher relationships and culturally inclusive school climates as critical to their sense of belonging and emotional well-being. These findings suggest that policies should not only provide macro-level provisions for inclusion but also bolster micro-level resilience through school-based relational supports.

These deficiencies are further compounded by the intersection of immigration status, language barriers, and socioeconomic disadvantage. In both Türkiye and the U.S., undocumented students or those with limited Turkish or English proficiency often face additional hurdles in accessing counseling services, participating in enrichment programs, or connecting with peers (Sabancı University, 2023; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2023). The cumulative effect of these gaps can hinder both academic and social integration, reinforcing cycles of marginalization. Moreover, the lack of culturally responsive approaches in classroom interactions and teacher-student relationships may prevent students from feeling understood, respected, and motivated, which is critical for engagement and learning (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Addressing these micro-level gaps requires systemic alignment between macro policy ambitions and classroom-level supports. Evidence from recent studies suggests that integrating trauma-informed pedagogy, bilingual counseling, SEL frameworks, and teacher professional development can significantly improve refugee and immigrant students' well-being and academic outcomes (OECD, 2023; Harvard GSE, 2023). Furthermore, fostering partnerships with local NGOs, community organizations, and families can strengthen mesosystem connections, creating supportive environments that extend beyond the classroom. By explicitly linking policy intent to practical resources and culturally competent practices, education systems in both countries can better fulfill the promise of inclusion and integration.

## Teacher Preparation and Structural Equity

Teacher readiness reflects another critical divergence. In Türkiye, centralized teacher training sessions are uniformly mandated but often superficial, with limited follow-up or classroom coaching (OECD, 2023). In the U.S., teacher preparation varies widely: states with strong immigrant populations may integrate coursework on multicultural pedagogy, while others omit it entirely. This meso-level variability aligns with broader inequities in school funding—provincial disparities in Türkiye mirror district-level inequities in the U.S.—revealing how governance structures embed structural inequality into classroom realities.

Recent systematic reviews of bilingual education teacher competencies (Scherzinger et al., 2023) indicate that effective bilingual instruction requires not only linguistic fluency but pedagogical skills in scaffolding, translanguaging, and sociocultural responsiveness—skills that are often underdeveloped in both centralized and decentralized teacher training regimes. Embedding such training into continuous professional development is thus essential to translate policy intentions into classroom change.

Recent validation work on language-learning affect (Orakçı, 2018) underscores the importance of preparing teachers not only in pedagogy but in recognizing and reducing language anxiety in immigrant students. Orakçı's study on the English Listening Anxiety Scale highlights how listening anxiety can undermine classroom participation and long-term language development; teacher training programs that include strategies for lowering listening anxiety—such as incremental comprehension scaffolds, low-stakes oral practice, and culturally familiar listening materials—can directly improve newcomer students' engagement and progress. Embedding such affect-sensitive language pedagogy into continuous professional development would therefore help translate national policy goals into more effective micro-level practice.

Recent evidence from Lectito journals reinforces the need for teacher professional development that bridges content and language. For example, Smit et al. (2023) evaluated a professional development program in multilingual STEM classrooms and found that when teachers engaged in scaffolding strategies and used multilingual resources during STEM instruction, student participation and language growth improved significantly. This suggests that teacher training, which combines content knowledge with language-support practices, is crucial for both academic and linguistic integration of immigrant students.

### **Theoretical Integration**

These contrasts map directly onto Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. Türkiye's strong macrosystem design suffers from weak vertical linkages to meso and micro levels, while the U.S. exhibits robust meso-level local autonomy but lacks cohesive macro-meso integration. Berry's acculturation theory further clarifies how these dynamics produce divergent outcomes: Türkiye's uniform language policies push toward assimilation, risking marginalization when support is insufficient, whereas U.S. policy pluralism creates parallel tracks of integration in supportive contexts and segregation in restrictive ones.

This analysis thus moves beyond descriptive summaries of "what" policies exist to explain "how" governance structures interact with ecological levels to shape immigrant children's acculturation pathways.

### **Critical Engagement with Prior Literature**

These findings challenge existing literature. OECD's (2023) benchmarking underreports psychosocial supports in Türkiye, and UNESCO's (2023) equity-oriented recommendations remain aspirational in U.S. contexts where state autonomy undermines federal goals. Suárez-Orozco et al. (2023) highlight immigrant students' resilience but less often connect it to policy-level determinants. This study contributes by bridging that gap: linking policy design to classroom realities through an ecological-acculturation lens.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings from both Türkiye and the United States, the following recommendations are organized by level of action—policy-level (macro) and practice-level (meso/micro)—to enhance coherence and clearly link recommendations to structural and classroom realities.

### **Policy-Level Recommendations (Macro)**

1. Strengthen national language policies to support integration:
  - In Türkiye, expand intensive Turkish language programs for refugee students to complement enrollment-focused policies.
  - In the U.S., extend dual-language and bilingual education initiatives nationwide, ensuring equitable access across states.
2. Standardize teacher preparation and professional development requirements:
  - Türkiye should implement nationwide training in multicultural pedagogy, intercultural education, and trauma-informed practices.
  - U.S. federal guidelines should require teacher training on immigrant education, including cultural competency and SEL integration.
3. Ensure equitable funding and resources for immigrant education:
  - Türkiye should reduce disparities between schools with high refugee populations and others, providing financial and logistical support to families and schools.
  - The U.S. should reinforce federal oversight to reduce inequities caused by state-level variation, prioritizing funding for immigrant-serving districts.
4. Institutionalize support for social-emotional well-being:

- Both countries should invest in school-based mental health infrastructure and recruit culturally competent counselors to address the psychosocial needs of immigrant students.

#### 5. Improve data collection and monitoring systems:

Comprehensive data on student outcomes beyond language proficiency is needed in both Türkiye and the U.S. to inform policy adjustments and targeted interventions.

### Practice-Level Recommendations (Meso/Micro)

#### 1. Implement culturally responsive teaching methods:

- Teachers should receive ongoing professional development to address linguistic diversity, acculturation challenges, and inclusive classroom practices.

#### 2. Expand classroom-level programs that support integration:

- In Türkiye, integrate trauma-informed mental health supports and differentiated instruction for Syrian refugee students.
- In the U.S., strengthen bilingual and dual-language classrooms to foster integration while mitigating state-level disparities.

#### 3. Develop bridging and accelerated programs:

- In Türkiye, offer targeted programs for older refugee students to help them catch up academically and socially.
- In the U.S., implement supplementary support programs for students at risk of falling behind due to state-level policy gaps.

#### 4. Align macro policies with classroom practices:

- Both countries should ensure that national or state-level policy goals are reinforced through school-level implementation, minimizing ecological misalignment between policy intentions and student experiences.

By structuring recommendations in this way, the study provides a coherent, actionable roadmap that addresses both systemic policy needs and practical educational interventions. This unified approach clarifies the rationale behind the recommendations, demonstrates cross-context relevance, and aligns with theoretical frameworks highlighting ecological and acculturation dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis underscores the critical need for cohesive, equity-driven, and culturally responsive educational policies for immigrant children in both Türkiye and the United States. While Türkiye's centralized approach facilitates swift national responses to refugee crises, it often lacks the flexibility required to address local challenges effectively. Conversely, the U.S. federalist system allows for localized innovation but can result in significant disparities between states and districts.

Recent studies highlight the importance of integrating multilingual education practices to support immigrant students' academic success and social integration. A systematic review by Veerman (2025) emphasizes that multilingual pedagogies, when implemented effectively, can enhance both cognitive and socio-affective outcomes for primary education students. Similarly, research by Calafato (2025) underscores the role of self-development in enhancing language teaching ability, which is crucial for instructional effectiveness in multilingual classrooms.

Advancements in technology offer new avenues for supporting multilingual education. The EdUKate project, as detailed by Poláková et al. (2025), developed multilingual digital learning materials using machine translation, addressing language barriers in Czech primary and secondary schools. Such initiatives demonstrate the potential of digital tools in bridging language gaps and supporting diverse learners.

Furthermore, trauma-informed practices are essential in addressing the psychosocial needs of immigrant students. Pejic et al. (2025) discuss how trauma-informed educational practices can guide instructional choices, fostering strong student-teacher relationships and creating a classroom climate that cultivates safety, belonging, and resilience. These practices are particularly pertinent for students who have experienced displacement and trauma.

Inclusive pedagogy, rooted in human rights and social justice, is vital for creating equitable educational environments. The Dream Squads Initiative in New York City exemplifies how school-based teams can serve as multilingual and immigrant advocates, ensuring practices, policies, and programs are inclusive of the needs of immigrant students (Blanco, 2025). Such initiatives highlight the importance of collaboration across policy levels—national, local, and school-based—to sustain reforms.

In light of these findings, it is evident that both centralized and decentralized education systems must prioritize the development of policies that are not only linguistically inclusive but also adaptable to local contexts.

Incorporating multilingual education strategies, leveraging technological innovations, and embedding trauma-informed practices can play a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive educational environment for immigrant students.

Ultimately, effective immigrant education depends on moving beyond surface-level inclusion toward systemic reform: aligning governance structures, embedding culturally responsive teaching, funding equity-driven reforms, and institutionalizing psychosocial supports. These steps are critical if both Türkiye and the United States are to transform their educational systems into engines of integration and opportunity for immigrant children rather than mechanisms of stratification and exclusion.

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