

Article

The Role of Religion and Religious Education in Refugee Students' Social Integration, Belonging, and Identity Construction

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Abstract

This study explores the educational experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee students in higher education in Türkiye, with particular emphasis on social integration, belonging, and identity construction in relation to religion and religious education. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 19 participants and analyzed through content analysis, leading to the development of thematic categories. The findings indicate that these experiences constitute a non-linear, multi-layered, and dynamic process shaped by temporal and contextual influences. Language proficiency, social interaction, and the educational environment are identified as key determinants of social integration, which emerges as a fragile and reversible rather than linear process. The sense of belonging develops through individual experiences and does not necessarily align with social acceptance, pointing to a distinction between its internal and external dimensions. Identity construction is characterized as flexible, hybrid, and continuously negotiated. The study's primary contribution lies in revising the initial conceptual model. While the mediating role of social integration is supported, religion and religious education are shown to function as context-dependent and ambivalent factors. Although religion may promote meaning-making, social connection, and belonging, it may also contribute to exclusion depending on the context. Its influence is largely indirect, operating through social integration. Overall, the study offers a more nuanced and dynamic model for interpreting refugee students' educational experiences.

Keywords: migration; Syria; refugee students; higher education; integration; social integration; identity; belonging; religion; religious education



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1. Introduction

Forced migration is a phenomenon that exerts transformative effects on the demographic structures, social institutions, and education systems of countries. In recent years, escalating regional conflicts, political instability, and humanitarian crises have displaced millions of people worldwide. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR 2025](https://www.unhcr.org/)), approximately 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2025. Large-scale forced migration reshapes demographic balances and directly affects the social, cultural, economic, and institutional structures of host societies, thereby necessitating the development of comprehensive policies and regulatory frameworks ([Efe et al. 2022](#)).

Following the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye has emerged as a major host country in the forced migration process, hosting approximately 2.26 million registered Syrian refugees

(Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) 2026). This situation has required the development of comprehensive policy regulations and integration strategies within the Turkish education system. Initially implemented through Temporary Education Centers (TECs), these practices have gradually evolved into an inclusive model aimed at integrating Syrian students into public schools (Akar and Erdoğan 2019). Children and young people constitute one of the groups most affected by migration. In Türkiye, approximately 1 million refugee children are enrolled in formal education, while around 58 thousand young people are pursuing higher education. These developments have generated both direct and indirect effects on the Turkish education system (MoNE 2025; UNHCR 2026). In this context, Türkiye provides a significant research context for examining multidimensional issues such as refugees' access to education, educational experiences, social integration, sense of belonging, and identity development.

Educational institutions are not merely sites for the transmission of academic knowledge but also constitute primary institutional spaces where refugee individuals establish systematic contact with the host society, shape their social adaptation processes, and encounter new social values (Dryden-Peterson 2016; Radhouane 2021). These environments function as critical arenas in which refugees develop social relationships and reposition themselves within the broader social structure.

The literature indicates that refugee students' experiences in educational institutions are shaped by multidimensional challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, economic constraints, and traumatic past experiences (Emin 2016; Aydin and Kaya 2019; Cerna 2019; Öz 2022). The traumatic effects associated with war and forced migration may adversely affect learning processes and motivation, leading to difficulties in academic adaptation, experiences of exclusion in peer relationships, and challenges in developing a sense of belonging (Madziva and Thondhlana 2017; Erdem 2017; Şimşek and Kula 2018). Comparative research conducted with Syrian refugee students and their parents in Türkiye further indicates that, despite persistent adaptation challenges, educational experiences in Türkiye are generally perceived more positively than those in Syria due to more inclusive school environments, stronger guidance services, and improved educational infrastructure (Karagöz and Dilekli 2022).

Within the context of social integration, it is emphasized that experiences of peer bullying, exclusion, and discrimination in educational settings weaken refugee students' sense of belonging (Koehler and Schneider 2019). However, evidence also suggests that, over time, refugee students improve their language proficiency, expand their social networks, and enhance their social visibility. In contexts where inclusive school climates, teacher support, and opportunities for social interaction are provided, the integration process is significantly facilitated (Sheikh and Anderson 2018; Cerna 2019). Recent evidence from South Korea similarly demonstrates that structural barriers (e.g., language support, educational access, and institutional procedures) and relational barriers (e.g., discrimination, limited peer relationships, and weak school belonging) continue to hinder refugee students' educational integration despite inclusive policy frameworks (Jeong and Cha 2025).

Studies conducted in Türkiye similarly indicate that the primary challenges faced by refugee students include language insufficiency, curriculum mismatch, and limited pedagogical preparedness (Altıntaş 2018; Demir and Okşar 2018; Baltacı et al. 2019). A systematic review of refugee education research in Türkiye further demonstrates that language barriers, cultural adaptation challenges, psychosocial difficulties, and insufficient teacher preparedness are the most consistently reported barriers to refugee students' educational integration (Kardeş and Akman 2022). These factors are reported to directly influence students' academic achievement, social relationships, and sense of belonging. Additionally, refugee students in Türkiye are found to expect religious education not only

to provide cognitive knowledge but also to offer moral guidance, foster belonging, and address psychosocial needs (Tosun et al. 2018). Recent research also emphasizes that fostering inclusive school environments and strengthening students' sense of belonging are essential for supporting refugee students' educational participation and long-term social integration in Türkiye (Erden Basaran 2023). Recent research further argues that refugee students' educational inclusion is strengthened when schools adopt trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches that validate students' cultural identities, support their psychological well-being, and foster meaningful participation and belonging within educational communities (Boukhari 2025).

The incorporation of refugee individuals into new social structures is shaped by multidimensional variables, including social integration, religious and cultural adaptation, and processes of belonging and identity construction (Crul et al. 2019). Social integration refers to the relationships that migrants establish with the social, economic, cultural, and institutional structures of the host society. It encompasses not only migrants' adaptation but also the extent to which the host society accepts them, thus constituting a field of mutual interaction (Cerna 2019). Within this framework, social integration can be understood as a shared experience of coexistence shaped by common values, norms, and mutual interdependence (Berry 1997; Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016).

Migration is conceptualized as a dynamic process through which refugees continuously redefine and negotiate their identities. In this process, identity and belonging emerge as central variables. Refugee individuals construct multilayered and continuously negotiated identities between their culture of origin and the new social structures they encounter (Crul et al. 2019). The sense of belonging occupies a central position in identity construction and directly influences experiences of social integration (Dryden-Peterson 2016).

Religion constitutes another significant variable influencing refugees' incorporation into new social structures. The literature emphasizes that religion functions as a mechanism for identity and meaning-making (Peek 2005) and plays a decisive role in fostering belonging and social ties beyond its role as a belief system (Foner and Alba 2008; Connor 2010). In this regard, religion is often considered to facilitate social integration. Religious education, representing the institutional dimension of this function, assumes a critical role within multicultural education contexts. Research suggests that, under appropriate conditions, religious education strengthens refugees' sense of belonging, supports social bonding, and enhances psychological resilience (Tekin and Ay 2024; Gül and Ay 2024). However, persistent challenges related to language, curriculum, and teacher competencies may limit its effectiveness (Demir and Okşar 2018; Baltacı et al. 2019).

Forced migration should be understood not only as a humanitarian crisis but also as a complex social phenomenon that provides a deeper analytical lens for examining social integration processes (Cerna 2019). Particularly in contexts such as Türkiye, where religion is visible in social life, the perspective that shared religious identity facilitates social cohesion underscores the importance of examining the role of religion in shaping cultural proximity, belonging, and identity formation. In this regard, such contexts offer a strong analytical basis for exploring these relationships.

Although recent scholarship has increasingly examined refugee integration from different perspectives, research specifically addressing the role of religion in refugee integration remains comparatively limited and fragmented. Existing studies have primarily focused on the effects of shared religious identity on helping intentions and perceived similarity, as well as on religious solidarity discourses surrounding refugees, rather than examining how religion and religious education mediate refugee students' social integration, belonging, and identity construction (Foner and Alba 2008; Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs 2024; Çoban 2024).

This study aims to make an original contribution by examining the role of religion in integration processes through a comparative perspective between the Turkish and European contexts. While the Turkish context is characterized by relative religious proximity, as both the host society and the majority of Syrian refugees are predominantly Muslim, integration experiences in many European countries are more frequently shaped by religious differences, particularly between predominantly Christian host societies and predominantly Muslim refugee populations. Within this comparative framework, the study addresses the question of whether religion functions as a “bridge” facilitating integration or as a “boundary” reinforcing division, thereby addressing an important theoretical and empirical gap in the literature.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Section 3 describes the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and qualitative content analysis. Section 4 presents the empirical findings. Finally, Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, introduces the revised conceptual model, and concludes with the study’s implications, limitations, and recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework

The educational experiences of refugee students cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical perspective. Rather, they emerge from the interaction of multiple social, cultural, educational, and psychological processes that evolve throughout forced migration and settlement. Building on this premise, the present study conceptualizes refugee students’ experiences as a dynamic and multidimensional process in which religion, religious education, social integration, belonging, and identity construction are interconnected rather than independent phenomena.

The theoretical framework proposed in this study positions social integration as the central mediating mechanism through which religion and religious education influence belonging and identity construction. At the same time, the framework recognizes that these relationships are shaped by broader contextual conditions, including shared religious identity, cultural proximity, educational environments, and everyday social interaction. Accordingly, refugee students’ educational experiences are interpreted as a context-dependent and temporally evolving process in which individual agency and structural conditions continuously interact.

2.1. Multidimensional Adaptation Process and Social Integration as a Mediating Mechanism

Social integration represents one of the central concepts for understanding refugee students’ educational experiences. Rather than referring solely to adaptation to the host society, social integration encompasses a multidimensional process through which individuals establish meaningful participation in social, cultural, educational, and institutional life. It is therefore better understood as a dynamic and reciprocal process involving both refugees’ participation and the host society’s acceptance (Alrawadie et al. 2021).

Within Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework, this process is reflected in the strategies of assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. However, contemporary integration research emphasizes that these outcomes are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by structural opportunities, institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and the willingness of the receiving society to facilitate participation (Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010; Phillimore 2021).

Ager and Strang’s (2008) integration indicators model conceptualizes social integration through dimensions such as access to core services, social bonds and bridges, facilitating factors (e.g., language, security), and rights/citizenship. Accordingly, social integration

encompasses not only the internalization of social norms and the establishment of social relationships but also processes of mutual interaction and societal acceptance (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson 2019). In this study, social integration is conceptualized both as a process shaping individuals' participation in social life and as a transitional space through which meaning-making and identity development are configured.

Educational institutions constitute the primary contextual foundation of this process. Schools function as key sites of adaptation where language acquisition and cultural codes are learned, as social environments in which peer relationships develop, and as arenas of identity construction where individuals redefine themselves (Block et al. 2014; Dryden-Peterson 2016). While language proficiency, peer relationships, and school climate are among the primary determinants of social integration, teacher attitudes and levels of institutional support directly shape the nature of this process (Kazu and Deniz 2019; Topaloğlu and Özdemir 2020).

2.2. Religion and Religious Education as a Determinant and Indirect Mechanism of Social Integration

Religion constitutes an important source of meaning-making, psychological resilience, and social connectedness in the lives of forcibly displaced individuals. Beyond functioning as a system of beliefs, religion provides moral frameworks through which refugees interpret traumatic experiences, maintain continuity between past and present, and reconstruct their lives in unfamiliar social environments (Park 2005; Connor 2010). In this respect, religion represents both an individual coping resource and a social institution that facilitates adaptation.

Within the context of forced migration, religion and religious education are conceptualized in this study as key factors that contribute to social integration. Shared religious beliefs, practices, and moral values create opportunities for social participation by strengthening interpersonal trust, encouraging mutual support, and facilitating the formation of social relationships (Hirschman 2004; Açıkgöz and Yemenici 2022). Religious education further reinforces these processes by providing common ethical references, fostering intercultural understanding, and supporting refugees' psychological and social adjustment.

However, the contribution of religion to social integration should not be understood as universal or unconditional. Previous research demonstrates that religion may function both as a source of inclusion and as a source of exclusion depending on the broader social and political context (Foner and Alba 2008). While shared religious traditions may strengthen solidarity and cooperation, visible religious differences or conflicting religious identities may increase social distance and weaken integration. The influence of religion therefore depends not only on religious belief itself but also on the social conditions under which religious identities are experienced and interpreted.

Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes religion and religious education as indirect mechanisms operating through social integration rather than as direct determinants of belonging or identity construction. More specifically, religion influences integration by generating social relationships, shared meanings, and value systems that facilitate participation in the host society. The contextual conditions under which religious identity contributes to social integration—particularly through cultural proximity and shared religious identity—are discussed in the following subsection.

2.3. Religious Identity and Cultural Proximity

Religious identity constitutes more than an expression of individual belief; it also functions as a social identity through which individuals define group membership, establish trust, and interpret their relationships with others. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, and

shared group identities facilitate cooperation, solidarity, and mutual recognition (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In forced migration contexts, where uncertainty and vulnerability are particularly pronounced, shared religious identity may therefore reduce perceived social distance and encourage refugees to engage with members of the host society.

Beyond its symbolic dimension, shared religious identity also generates social resources that facilitate integration. Putnam (2000) argues that shared identities strengthen bonding social capital by fostering trust, reciprocity, and access to informal support networks. For refugee populations, religious institutions, places of worship, charitable organizations, and faith-based communities frequently provide the first opportunities for establishing social relationships in the host country. These networks not only offer emotional and practical support but also create culturally familiar environments that encourage participation in everyday social life. Consequently, shared religious identity contributes to the development of cultural proximity, defined as the perception that the host society shares similar moral values, cultural practices, and social norms.

The relevance of cultural proximity becomes particularly evident in the case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Although the Syrian conflict initially emerged from political demands, it gradually acquired a pronounced sectarian dimension, transforming religious identity into a significant marker of political loyalty, security, and collective belonging (van Dam 2011, pp. 23–33; Balanche 2018; Smyth 2015). Within this context, many Syrian refugees perceived Türkiye not only as a geographically accessible destination but also as a culturally and religiously familiar society. Historical interaction between Anatolia and Bilad al-Sham, together with shared Sunni religious traditions and similar social practices, reduced perceived cultural distance and strengthened expectations of social acceptance during the initial stages of migration.

Within the conceptual framework proposed in this study, religious identity and cultural proximity are not conceptualized as direct determinants of belonging or identity construction. Rather, they represent contextual conditions that strengthen the relationship between religion, religious education, and social integration. Shared religious identity facilitates trust, expands opportunities for social interaction, and encourages participation in educational and community settings. These processes, in turn, reinforce social integration, which subsequently contributes to the development of belonging and the reconstruction of identity. Accordingly, the effect of religion on refugee students' educational experiences is understood as context-dependent and mediated through cultural proximity and social integration rather than operating as a direct causal force.

2.4. Belonging and Identity Construction as Outcomes of Social Integration

Having established the role of religious identity and cultural proximity in facilitating social integration, the next step is to examine how these processes contribute to the development of belonging and identity construction. While social integration primarily reflects participation in social life, belonging refers to the subjective experience of being accepted, recognized, and emotionally connected to the host society. Identity construction, in turn, denotes the ongoing process through which individuals define themselves in relation to both their personal experiences and the social environments in which they live (Erikson 1968; Hall 1990).

Within the conceptual framework proposed in this study, belonging and identity construction are understood as interconnected outcomes of social integration rather than as immediate consequences of migration itself. As refugees participate in educational settings, establish interpersonal relationships, and experience recognition within the host society, they gradually develop a stronger sense of belonging. This emerging sense of acceptance provides the social and psychological foundation upon which identity is continuously

negotiated and reconstructed. Conversely, evolving identities also influence how individuals interpret their social experiences and strengthen or weaken their sense of belonging, indicating a reciprocal relationship between these two processes.

Forced migration further transforms identity construction into a continuous process of negotiation between past experiences and present social realities. Refugee students must reconcile memories, cultural traditions, and religious values associated with their country of origin with the norms, expectations, and opportunities encountered in the host society. This dynamic process corresponds closely to Hall's (1990) understanding of identity as an evolving rather than fixed construct and is further reflected in Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space", where new and hybrid identities emerge through intercultural interaction. Rather than replacing previous identities, refugees often integrate elements of both societies into new forms of self-understanding.

Accordingly, belonging and identity construction should be viewed as dynamic outcomes that emerge through socially meaningful participation rather than as automatic consequences of displacement. Within the conceptual framework proposed in this study, social integration functions as the principal mediating mechanism through which religious identity and cultural proximity are translated into enduring feelings of belonging and the continuous reconstruction of identity. As social integration develops through shared participation, trust, and cultural proximity, refugee students become more likely to perceive themselves as accepted members of the host society while maintaining continuity with their cultural and religious backgrounds.

2.5. Social Interaction as the Operational Mechanism of Social Integration

Social interaction represents the operational mechanism through which social integration is translated from a conceptual process into everyday lived experience. While religious identity and cultural proximity create favourable conditions for integration, it is through continuous interaction with peers, teachers, and members of the host society that these conditions become socially meaningful. Social integration therefore develops not merely through shared values but through repeated interpersonal encounters that foster trust, cooperation, and mutual recognition.

Educational settings constitute one of the primary environments in which these interactions occur. Peer relationships, teacher support, and inclusive school climates enable refugee students to participate actively in school life, establish meaningful social relationships, and experience acceptance within the host community (Dryden-Peterson 2016). Through these interactions, students gradually internalize social norms, expand their social networks, and develop confidence in their ability to participate in broader society.

However, social interaction is not inherently positive. Experiences of discrimination, exclusion, prejudice, or social isolation may disrupt the integration process by weakening trust and limiting opportunities for participation (Nwosu and Barnes 2014). Conversely, sustained positive interactions strengthen social integration by reinforcing perceptions of acceptance and reciprocity. In this respect, social interaction constitutes the principal mechanism through which the facilitating effects of religious identity and cultural proximity are transformed into meaningful experiences of belonging and identity construction.

2.6. Retrospective Process and Conceptual Model

Refugee students' experiences of social integration, belonging, and identity construction are dynamic processes that evolve over time. A retrospective perspective enables individuals to reinterpret past experiences in light of present circumstances, revealing how forced migration, educational participation, and social relationships interact throughout the integration process (Creswell and Poth 2018). Accordingly, refugee students' educational

experiences should be understood within a broader temporal and contextual framework in which past experiences, present opportunities, and future expectations continuously shape one another.

Within this conceptual framework, social integration functions as the central mediating mechanism linking religion and religious education to belonging and identity construction. Religious identity and cultural proximity provide the contextual conditions that facilitate social integration by strengthening trust, reducing perceived cultural distance, and encouraging participation in educational and community life. Social interaction serves as the operational mechanism through which these contextual conditions are translated into meaningful social experiences. As refugee students become increasingly integrated into the host society, they gradually develop stronger feelings of belonging and continuously reconstruct their identities through ongoing interaction between their cultural heritage and new social realities.

Overall, the proposed framework conceptualizes refugee students' educational experiences as a dynamic, context-dependent, and multidimensional process in which religion, religious identity, cultural proximity, social interaction, social integration, belonging, and identity construction mutually reinforce one another across time and social contexts. Based on this theoretical synthesis, the author developed the original conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

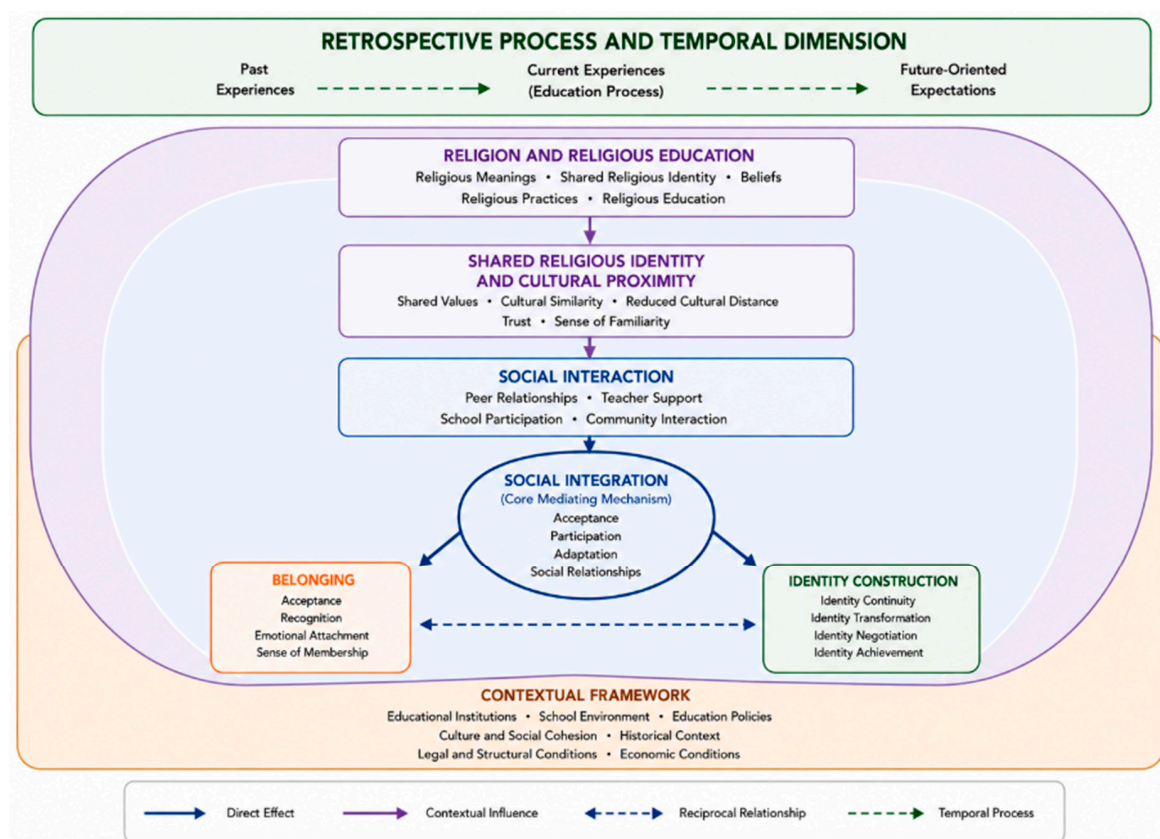


Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the role of religion in shaping the temporal transformation of refugee students' experiences of social integration, belonging, and identity construction throughout their educational trajectories in Türkiye. Qualitative research enables an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences within

their specific contexts and prioritizes the production of meaning-oriented data (Padgett 2016; Creswell and Poth 2018).

A retrospective approach, which allows individuals to reinterpret past experiences from their present perspectives, was employed. This approach offers a methodological advantage by enabling a process-oriented analysis of refugee students' experiences as they evolve over time (Riessman 2008; Ho 2021). In line with the research objective, the study was designed within a narrative research framework. Narrative research focuses on how individuals make sense of their life experiences through storytelling and provides a suitable analytical framework for examining the transformation of identity, belonging, and social processes over time (Gaudet and Robert 2018).

3.2. Participants

The sample consists of 19 Syrian refugee students currently enrolled in higher education in Türkiye. Criterion sampling, a purposive sampling strategy, was employed in selecting participants. This method allows the inclusion of information-rich cases that provide in-depth insights into the research phenomenon (Creswell and Poth 2018).

Accordingly, the following criteria were established for participant selection:

- (i) Having refugee status;
- (ii) Having completed primary, secondary, and high school education in Türkiye;
- (iii) Residing in the province of Kilis;
- (iv) Being enrolled in a faculty of theology.

These criteria ensured that participants had longitudinally experienced the educational process. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Years in Türkiye	Pre-School	Primary	Middle	High School	University	Graduate
P1	Female	43	13				● *	●	
P2	Female	18	12	●	●	●	●	●	
P3	Male	35	12				●	●	
P4	Male	27	12				●	●	●
P5	Male	21	10			●	●	●	
P6	Female	20	10			●	●	●	
P7	Female	19	12		●	●	●	●	
P8	Female	23	14		●	●	●	●	
P9	Female	21	10			●	●	●	
P10	Female	21	12			●	●	●	
P11	Male	20	9			●	●	●	
P12	Female	24	13			●	●	●	
P13	Female	22	14		●	●	●	●	
P14	Male	19	11		●	●	●	●	
P15	Male	34	11				●	●	●
P16	Male	20	9			●	●	●	
P17	Male	21	9			●	●	●	
P18	Male	21	10			●	●	●	
P19	Female	30	12			●	●	●	

* ● Indicates the level of education received in Türkiye.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

In this study, a semi-structured interview form was employed as the primary data collection instrument. Semi-structured interviews provide a structured framework while allowing participants to express their experiences in a detailed and flexible manner (Creswell and Poth 2018).

In developing the interview form, the relevant literature was first reviewed, followed by the preparation of a draft instrument. This draft was evaluated by three academic experts in the field, and necessary revisions were made in line with their feedback. Based on expert recommendations, probing follow-up questions were incorporated into selected items. For instance, in addition to the question “*When and under what conditions did you feel closer to this society?*”, participants were also asked follow-up questions such as “*Was there a significant event that influenced this process?*” and “*Did any changes occur over time?*”. Following a pilot application, the interview form was finalized, and the final instrument consisted of 29 open-ended questions, which served as the primary data collection instrument in this study.

3.4. Data Analysis

The research data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participants. With participants’ consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, and each interview lasted approximately 40–75 min. The shortest interview lasted 40 min, while the longest lasted 75 min. The collected data were transcribed verbatim and prepared for analysis. Qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. This inductive analytical approach involved the systematic coding of the data, the development of categories based on similarities and differences, and the identification and interpretation of overarching themes emerging from participants’ narratives (Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 2002). The analysis proceeded in four stages:

- (1) Coding the data;
- (2) Categorizing the codes;
- (3) Generating and organizing themes;
- (4) Interpreting the findings.

During this process, codes were grouped based on patterns of similarity, difference, and relationships, and were organized under nine main themes. To ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity, codes such as P1, P2, . . . , P19 were used.

3.5. Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity and reliability, the study adopted the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

To enhance credibility, consistency was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis processes, and interview transcripts were shared with participants for member checking. Efforts were made to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process.

To ensure transferability, the research process was described in detail, and the findings were supported by direct participant quotations. In terms of dependability, analyst triangulation was employed, and the data were independently reviewed by an expert researcher to ensure inter-coder agreement.

For confirmability, the research process was reported transparently, and the relationship between the data and the findings was explicitly demonstrated. Additionally, records related to the dataset and analysis procedures were systematically preserved to ensure auditability.

4. Findings

In this section, the findings derived from the content analysis of qualitative data obtained through interviews with refugee students are thematically structured. The analysis yielded nine main themes: (i) educational process and social integration, (ii) the effect of religious education on identity, (iii) the relationship between religion and belonging, (iv) cultural and religious differences, (v) social environment and interaction, (vi) continuity and disruption in educational processes, (vii) religion, belonging, and perceptions of social acceptance, (viii) change over time, and (ix) general evaluation. Each theme is presented with supporting participant quotations to enhance the credibility of the findings.

4.1. Educational Process and Social Integration Experience

The findings indicate that refugee students' experiences of social integration within educational processes exhibit a multilayered, fragile, and evolving structure over time. This process is primarily shaped by language proficiency, educational stages, and social interactions.

Language proficiency emerges as the most decisive factor in social integration. Limited language skills lead to isolation by negatively affecting both academic performance and social relationships: *"I didn't know Turkish... I was alone"* (P2). Conversely, improved language proficiency facilitates social engagement and strengthens the sense of belonging: *"When my Turkish improved, I felt closer"* (P6). This suggests that language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a constitutive element of identity and belonging.

Integration experiences vary across educational levels. While middle school represents a period in which language-related adaptation difficulties intensify, high school is characterized by increased academic demands and shifts in the social environment. At the university level, issues of belonging and identity become more salient. This finding underscores the contextual and developmental nature of social integration.

In terms of social interaction, peer relationships serve as the primary carriers of integration. Initially, participants tend to prefer ethnically homogeneous social environments; over time, however, a transition toward more heterogeneous networks is observed. Participants reported that this transition was related to their social skills and available opportunities. In this sense, social integration emerges at the intersection of individual agency and structural conditions. The findings further indicate that perceptions of belonging are reshaped through experience. While some participants define belonging through religious and cultural similarity, others describe it as a process that develops over time. As one participant explained: *"Over time, I came to understand Turkish culture and values much better. Eventually, I no longer felt like an outsider but rather as a natural part of this society"* (P4). This quotation illustrates that sustained interaction and familiarity with the host culture gradually transformed participants' sense of belonging. Conversely, some experience dual alienation, e.g., *"I don't feel that I belong either to Türkiye or to Syria"* (P13), reflecting hybrid and "in-between" identity formations.

The findings also reveal the coexistence of social acceptance and discrimination. While positive experiences facilitate integration, experiences of discrimination weaken the sense of belonging. Overall, the process follows a three-stage trajectory: initial foreignness, subsequent adaptation efforts, and eventual development of belonging.

4.2. The Effect of Religious Education on Identity

The findings indicate that religious education produces diverse orientations in refugee students' identity construction processes. These effects can be categorized as reinforcing, transformative, and limited. The impact of religious education is closely associated with participants' motivations for pursuing theological education, which vary across intrinsic

(religious interest), environmental (family influence), and structural (institutional constraints) factors. This diversity suggests that the impact of religious education on identity is heterogeneous.

The reinforcing effect is more evident among individuals with strong prior religious backgrounds. For this group, religious education deepens rather than transforms identity: *“It did not create a radical change. . . it increased my knowledge”* (P4). In contrast, for some participants, religious education leads to intellectual transformation. As one participant explained, *“Previously I held rigid assumptions, but this education helped me develop a broader academic perspective”* (P3). This quotation illustrates how religious education contributed not only to knowledge acquisition but also to changes in participants’ interpretative perspectives, fostering a more critical and analytical understanding of religion.

A key effect of religious education is its epistemological transformation. Participants report evaluating religious knowledge within a more critical and academic framework. Additionally, religious education operates at affective and existential levels, providing opportunities for meaning-making, psychological support, and the development of social responsibility.

However, for some participants, the impact of religious education remains limited, largely depending on their prior knowledge and identity structures. Overall, religious education exerts a multidimensional influence on identity construction, encompassing cognitive, affective, and meaning-related dimensions.

4.3. The Relationship Between Religion and Belonging

The findings indicate that religion plays a central role in shaping refugee students’ sense of belonging by reducing feelings of foreignness through a supra-identity that transcends cultural differences.

A shared religious identity constitutes a primary reference point for belonging: *“Being with people who share the same religion did not make me feel like a stranger”* (P1). Religious practices, such as attending mosques and engaging in worship, further reinforce this sense of belonging. Moreover, shared beliefs facilitate the formation of social bonds as one participant noted, *“Religion became the bridge that reduced cultural differences and strengthened my sense of belonging”* (P4). This statement illustrates how shared religious identity functioned as a mechanism of social connectedness and mutual trust.

However, the effects of religion are not uniformly positive. In some contexts, visible religious identities may lead to exclusion: *“I did not feel that I belonged because of my niqap”* (P2). This indicates that the role of religion varies across social contexts.

In the construction of belonging, religion operates in conjunction with cultural and social factors; nevertheless, for many participants, religious belonging appears to be primary. It is also notable that religion influences migration-related preferences. Overall, religion functions as a dynamic mechanism of belonging that can be both integrative and contextually constraining.

4.4. The Impact of Cultural and Religious Differences

Some participants adopt strategies aimed at preserving their cultural and religious identities, reflecting efforts to maintain their values while adapting to a new social context: *“I held on to my own culture”* (P2). In contrast, a significant group develops more flexible and inclusive orientations over time; one participant reflected: *“Initially these differences surprised me, but over time I became more flexible and no longer evaluated them through rigid assumptions”* (P3). This quotation illustrates the gradual transformation of identity negotiations through everyday intercultural experiences, with exposure to difference fostering more pluralistic and critical perspectives. *“I became more open to accepting others”* (P7). A third group adopts

situational and selective adaptation strategies, balancing adaptation and preservation depending on context, which points to the emergence of hybrid identity formations.

Religious differences are generally interpreted at a conceptual level, with a dominant perception of similarity in core beliefs. In contrast, cultural differences are more visible in everyday practices and may initially generate a sense of foreignness; however, these are largely mitigated over time.

Overall, cultural and religious differences emerge not as a unidirectional process of adaptation or conflict but as a multidimensional experience characterized by identity negotiation and transformation.

4.5. Social Environment and Interaction

The findings demonstrate that the social environment plays a decisive role in refugee students' social integration processes. Peer relationships, instructor attitudes, and language proficiency constitute the core components of this process.

Peer relationships emerge as the most significant carriers of social integration. Friendships strengthen the sense of belonging and facilitate adaptation: *"Thanks to my friends, I felt like I was part of society"* (P4). This suggests that integration is largely constructed through everyday interactions. As another participant explained, *"These friendships greatly facilitated my social integration. Even after graduation, I still maintain close relationships with many of my university friends"* (P4). This quotation highlights the long-term contribution of peer relationships to social integration.

Instructor attitudes also represent a critical factor. While many participants report supportive approaches, some describe experiences of exclusion, indicating that the academic environment may function as both a facilitating and constraining force.

Language proficiency remains the primary determinant of social interaction. While limited proficiency leads to isolation, improved language skills enhance social relationships. The coexistence of social acceptance and exclusion further indicates that integration is context-dependent. Overall, the social environment emerges as a central factor shaping belonging, self-confidence, and perceptions of social acceptance.

4.6. Continuity and Disruption in Educational Processes

The findings indicate that refugee students' educational experiences are characterized by the coexistence of continuity and disruption. This process is shaped primarily by language, age at migration, and differences between educational systems.

Participants report substantial differences between the educational systems of Türkiye and Syria, particularly at the higher education level, leading to strong perceptions of disruption. One participant described this experience: *"Although I experienced a clear discontinuity between the two educational systems, this ultimately enriched my identity by allowing me to build bridges between different worlds"* (P4). This statement demonstrates that discontinuity may also contribute positively to identity reconstruction. Language emerges as the most decisive factor, as differences in language create experiential discontinuity even when content remains similar.

Conversely, perceptions of continuity are more pronounced among individuals who migrated at an early age. Continuity is also more evident in religious content. Some participants simultaneously experience continuity and disruption: *"Continuity in content, but disruption in language"* (P7).

These dynamics also influence identity construction, with participants exhibiting diverse orientations, including stability, enrichment, and transformation. This indicates that the impact of educational experiences on identity is not linear.

4.7. Religion, Belonging, and Perceptions of Social Acceptance

The findings suggest that while religion strengthens the sense of belonging, perceptions of social acceptance are more variable.

Participants report that religion and religious education enhance their sense of belonging: *“Religious education increased my sense of belonging”* (P1). Shared religious identity fosters social closeness and trust, thereby reinforcing belonging. However, one participant also emphasized the fragile nature of belonging: *“Whenever I experienced discrimination, I felt less connected to society. When people treated me with kindness, I truly felt I belonged here”* (P2). This quotation illustrates that belonging is continually negotiated through everyday social experiences.

However, belonging and social acceptance do not always coincide. Some participants report feeling a sense of belonging while simultaneously perceiving limited societal acceptance. This indicates that belonging operates as an internal process, whereas acceptance is externally mediated.

Experiences of discrimination and exclusion negatively affect perceptions of social acceptance, suggesting that religion alone does not guarantee acceptance.

4.8. Change over Time

The findings indicate that social integration and identity construction are dynamic processes that evolve over time. These processes are non-linear and vary depending on individual experiences.

In the initial phase, participants report feelings of foreignness, insecurity, and adaptation difficulties. Over time, as language skills and social relationships develop, adaptation improves. In later stages, increased belonging and self-confidence are observed. One participant summarized this transformation: *“Looking back. I changed from a frightened child into someone with three university degrees who now feels a strong sense of belonging”* (P4). This quotation vividly reflects the retrospective and developmental nature of refugee students' educational experiences. However, this transformation is neither uniform nor stable; it remains fragile and, at times, reversible. Broader social and political developments may also influence perceptions of belonging and acceptance.

Social relationships deepen and diversify over time, contributing significantly to the development of belonging. Identity construction exhibits multiple trajectories, including stability, flexibility, and hybridity. Time thus emerges as a key determinant in these processes.

4.9. General Evaluation

The findings demonstrate that refugee students' educational experiences constitute a multidimensional process encompassing academic development, social integration, belonging, and identity construction.

Social integration is a non-linear process shaped by language proficiency, social interaction, and the educational environment. Belonging is dynamically reconstructed through experience, while identity develops in a flexible and multilayered manner.

Religion and religious education play a significant facilitating role in these processes; however, their effects are context-dependent. As one participant concluded, *“This educational journey reconstructed me. It provided not only academic knowledge but also confidence, resilience, and the ability to establish a meaningful life in another society”* (P4). This statement summarizes the multidimensional character of refugee students' educational experiences. Additionally, temporal dynamics constitute a key factor in shaping these transformations.

Overall, refugee students' experiences reflect a process-oriented structure shaped by the interaction of individual and societal dynamics, indicating that educational processes cannot be evaluated solely in terms of academic achievement.

4.10. Relating Findings to the Model

When the findings of this study are evaluated in relation to the theoretical model developed within the framework of the literature, a substantial degree of consistency is observed between the empirical results and the model's predictions. However, certain findings also reveal dynamics that extend beyond or partially diverge from the initial assumptions of the model.

In particular, the central role of language proficiency, the context-dependent potential of religious identities to generate exclusion, and the insufficient consideration of heterogeneity among students point to outcomes that are not fully captured by the model. These findings suggest the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive interpretation of the relationships proposed in the model.

Table 2 presents a systematic comparison between the empirical findings and the predictions of the conceptual model (Figure 1).

Table 2. Comparing the study findings with theoretical model predictions.

Findings	Model Predictions and Consistency
It was found that the social integration process does not follow a linear trajectory but is cyclical and multi-staged.	The model predicts that integration is a multi-stage, feedback-based process. Therefore, this finding is consistent with the model.
It was determined that belonging is formed through negotiation within the process.	The model considers belonging as an outcome of integration and, with its emphasis on the retrospective process, also incorporates the time dimension. It is consistent.
It was found that identity construction is staged and multilayered, and is continuously reproduced.	In the model, identity construction is conceptualized as a process dependent on integration and is implied to have a multilayered structure. Therefore, it can be considered consistent.
It was observed that religion and religious education facilitate integration and are supportive for refugee students.	The model predicts that religion has a direct effect on integration. Therefore, it is fully consistent.
Visible religious identity may lead to exclusion. For some students, explicit religious identity hindered belonging.	The model generally assumes a positive effect of religion. This finding is inconsistent with the model's predictions and requires the addition of new mechanisms to the model.
Peer and teacher relationships play a critical role in integration.	The model identifies social interaction as the main mechanism. The finding is consistent with the model.
High language proficiency increases belonging.	The language factor is not explicitly included in the model. The clear role of language has not been incorporated into the model. This is a missing aspect.
Although students experienced disruptions over time, the process progressed continuously.	The model emphasizes the time dimension but does not explicitly specify the "continuity-disruption" dynamic. It can be considered partially consistent.
Integration should not be evaluated solely based on exam success.	The model conceptualizes integration as multidimensional and does not reduce it to academic achievement alone. It is consistent.

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that refugee students' educational experiences cannot be adequately explained through a single determinant but instead emerge from the interaction of linguistic, religious, educational, and social factors operating within broader institutional and cultural contexts. Consistent with the conceptual framework proposed in this study, social integration functions as the central mediating mechanism through which these interconnected factors shape refugee students' sense of belonging and processes of identity construction. Rather than representing a linear process of adaptation, integration appears as a dynamic, context-dependent, and reciprocal process that evolves through

everyday educational experiences, interpersonal relationships, and changing social conditions. This interpretation extends previous research by demonstrating that religion and religious education influence refugee students' educational experiences primarily through shared religious identity, cultural proximity, and social interaction, rather than through direct causal pathways. The findings therefore support a multidimensional understanding of refugee integration in which individual agency, educational environments, and contextual factors continuously interact throughout the integration process.

Language proficiency emerged as the most influential factor shaping refugee students' social integration, confirming previous research that identifies language as the primary facilitator of participation in educational and social life. Consistent with the literature (Ager and Strang 2008; Dryden-Peterson 2016), participants described language not merely as a communication tool but as a prerequisite for establishing peer relationships, engaging in classroom activities, accessing institutional resources, and developing a sense of belonging within the host society. Conversely, limited language proficiency restricted social participation, reinforced feelings of isolation, and reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction. These findings further support the conceptualization of language as a facilitating condition that strengthens social integration rather than as an outcome of integration itself. Within the conceptual framework proposed in this study, language creates opportunities for social interaction, enabling refugee students to participate more actively in educational settings and gradually develop the trust, recognition, and reciprocal relationships that underpin social integration.

The finding that social environment and peer relationships function as primary carriers of social integration strongly resonates with previous research. More importantly, these findings reinforce the conceptualization of social interaction as the operational mechanism through which social integration is enacted. While shared religious identity and cultural proximity create favourable conditions for integration, it is repeated interaction within educational settings that transforms these conditions into meaningful experiences of trust, participation, and social acceptance. Refugee students initially tended to establish co-ethnic or culturally familiar social networks before gradually expanding their relationships toward more heterogeneous peer groups, highlighting the relational and interactional nature of integration (Boda et al. 2023). At the same time, participants' accounts revealed that social integration remained highly context-dependent, as positive experiences of friendship and acceptance coexisted with episodes of exclusion and discrimination (Antony-Newman and Niyozov 2023). These findings further suggest that integration is not achieved through structural opportunities alone but through sustained interpersonal engagement within schools, where everyday interactions with peers and teachers gradually foster recognition, reciprocity, and mutual trust. This interpretation is also consistent with studies conducted in Türkiye, which emphasize that educational environments and religious education can contribute to students' sense of belonging by strengthening meaningful social relationships (Tosun et al. 2018). Beyond interpersonal relationships, however, the findings also indicate that religion and religious education shape integration by creating a shared cultural and moral framework that facilitates these interactions.

The findings further demonstrate that the contribution of religion and religious education to refugee students' social integration extends beyond personal belief or individual religiosity. Rather, religion appears to facilitate integration by providing a shared religious identity and a culturally familiar framework through which refugee students interpret their new social environment. In the Turkish context, participants frequently associated common religious values and practices with feelings of trust, safety, and social acceptance, suggesting that shared religious identity reduced perceived cultural distance during the early stages of adaptation. These findings support the argument that religion does not

directly produce social integration; instead, it creates favourable conditions for integration by fostering cultural proximity and encouraging interpersonal trust. This interpretation is consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which emphasizes the role of shared group identities in promoting cooperation and mutual recognition, and with Putnam's (2000) concept of bonding social capital, whereby common identities strengthen trust and reciprocal support. At the same time, the findings also indicate that the integrative role of religion is context-dependent rather than universal. While shared religious identity facilitated inclusion in the Turkish context, participants also reported experiences suggesting that religious identity may become a source of social distance or exclusion under different social and political conditions. Accordingly, the findings refine previous research by demonstrating that religion and religious education influence refugee students' educational experiences primarily through shared religious identity, cultural proximity, and social interaction, with social integration functioning as the principal mediating mechanism linking these processes to belonging and identity construction.

The findings further indicate that belonging and identity construction emerge as developmental outcomes of successful social integration rather than as immediate consequences of forced migration. Participants' narratives suggest that feelings of acceptance, recognition, and emotional attachment gradually developed through sustained participation in educational and social life. These findings support the conceptualization proposed in the theoretical framework, in which belonging represents the subjective experience of social acceptance, while identity construction reflects an ongoing process of negotiating personal, cultural, and social identities. Consistent with Hall's (1990) understanding of identity as a dynamic and evolving process, refugee students continuously reinterpreted their identities in response to changing educational experiences, peer relationships, and broader societal expectations. Likewise, Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space" helps explain how participants combined elements of their Syrian cultural heritage with new social experiences in Türkiye, giving rise to hybrid and contextually negotiated identities rather than replacing one identity with another. These findings therefore suggest that identity reconstruction is neither linear nor predetermined but develops gradually through meaningful participation, reciprocal relationships, and sustained experiences of social inclusion. Within the proposed conceptual framework, social integration serves as the principal mediating mechanism through which these experiences are translated into enduring feelings of belonging and the continuous reconstruction of identity.

The findings also highlight the temporal and developmental nature of refugee students' integration experiences. Participants' reflections indicate that social integration, belonging, and identity construction are not static outcomes achieved immediately after migration but processes that evolve through continuous reinterpretation of past experiences in light of present educational and social realities. As students acquire language proficiency, establish social relationships, and participate more actively in school life, earlier experiences of displacement, uncertainty, and exclusion are gradually reassessed and assigned new meanings. This retrospective process illustrates that integration is neither linear nor irreversible; rather, it is shaped by the cumulative interaction of past experiences, present opportunities, and future aspirations. These findings are consistent with the retrospective perspective adopted in this study (Creswell and Poth 2018), which emphasizes that individuals continuously reconstruct the meaning of earlier life events through their current social experiences. Accordingly, refugee students' educational trajectories should be understood as dynamic and evolving processes in which identity, belonging, and social integration are continuously negotiated across time rather than achieved at a single point in the resettlement process.

Overall, the findings not only support the theoretical framework proposed in this study but also refine existing understandings of refugee students' social integration. *Rather*

than conceptualizing religion as a direct determinant of belonging or identity construction, the findings demonstrate that its influence operates indirectly through shared religious identity, cultural proximity, and sustained social interaction, with social integration functioning as the principal mediating mechanism linking these processes. The proposed framework therefore advances the literature by integrating religious, educational, and social dimensions into a single explanatory model that captures the dynamic and context-dependent nature of refugee students' educational experiences. More broadly, the study highlights that successful integration is shaped not by isolated individual or structural factors but by the continuous interaction of shared meanings, interpersonal relationships, educational environments, and broader social contexts across time. This multidimensional perspective offers a more comprehensive explanation of how refugee students develop belonging and reconstruct their identities within host societies and provides a conceptual foundation for future research examining refugee integration in different cultural and educational contexts.

In light of these findings, the conceptual model was revised to better reflect the dynamic and context-dependent nature of refugee students' educational experiences (Figure 2). The revised model positions language proficiency as a facilitating condition, social interaction as the operational mechanism, and social integration as the principal mediating process linking religion and religious education to belonging and identity construction. It further reconceptualizes religion as a context-dependent factor that may facilitate or constrain integration depending on broader social conditions. By incorporating the reciprocal relationships among belonging, identity construction, and social integration, together with the temporal continuity of refugee experiences, the revised framework provides a more comprehensive and flexible explanation of refugee students' educational integration. The revised framework therefore provides a more comprehensive theoretical explanation of how religion, social interaction, and educational experiences jointly shape refugee students' social integration, belonging, and identity construction across time.

Recent scholarship also suggests that religion and religious education are increasingly shaped by digital technologies, online learning environments, social media, and AI-supported communication platforms. These digital environments may influence refugee students' access to religious knowledge, their opportunities for maintaining transnational social and religious networks, and their processes of belonging and identity construction (Quirós-Fons 2025). Since the present study focused on participants' face-to-face educational experiences within higher education institutions, these emerging digital dimensions were beyond its empirical scope. Future research may therefore examine how digital religious learning environments and AI-mediated communication interact with refugee students' social integration, belonging, and identity construction across both physical and virtual contexts.

In addition, future studies may benefit from adopting participatory or community-based research approaches in which refugee students contribute not only as participants but also as collaborators in the interpretation and validation of research findings. Such approaches may strengthen the practical relevance of research by incorporating community perspectives into knowledge production and by supporting the development of educational policies and practices that are more responsive to the lived experiences of refugee populations (Quirós-Fons 2025). Drawing on the empirical findings of this study, the author developed the original conceptual model presented in Figure 2 to illustrate the relationships identified among the main themes.

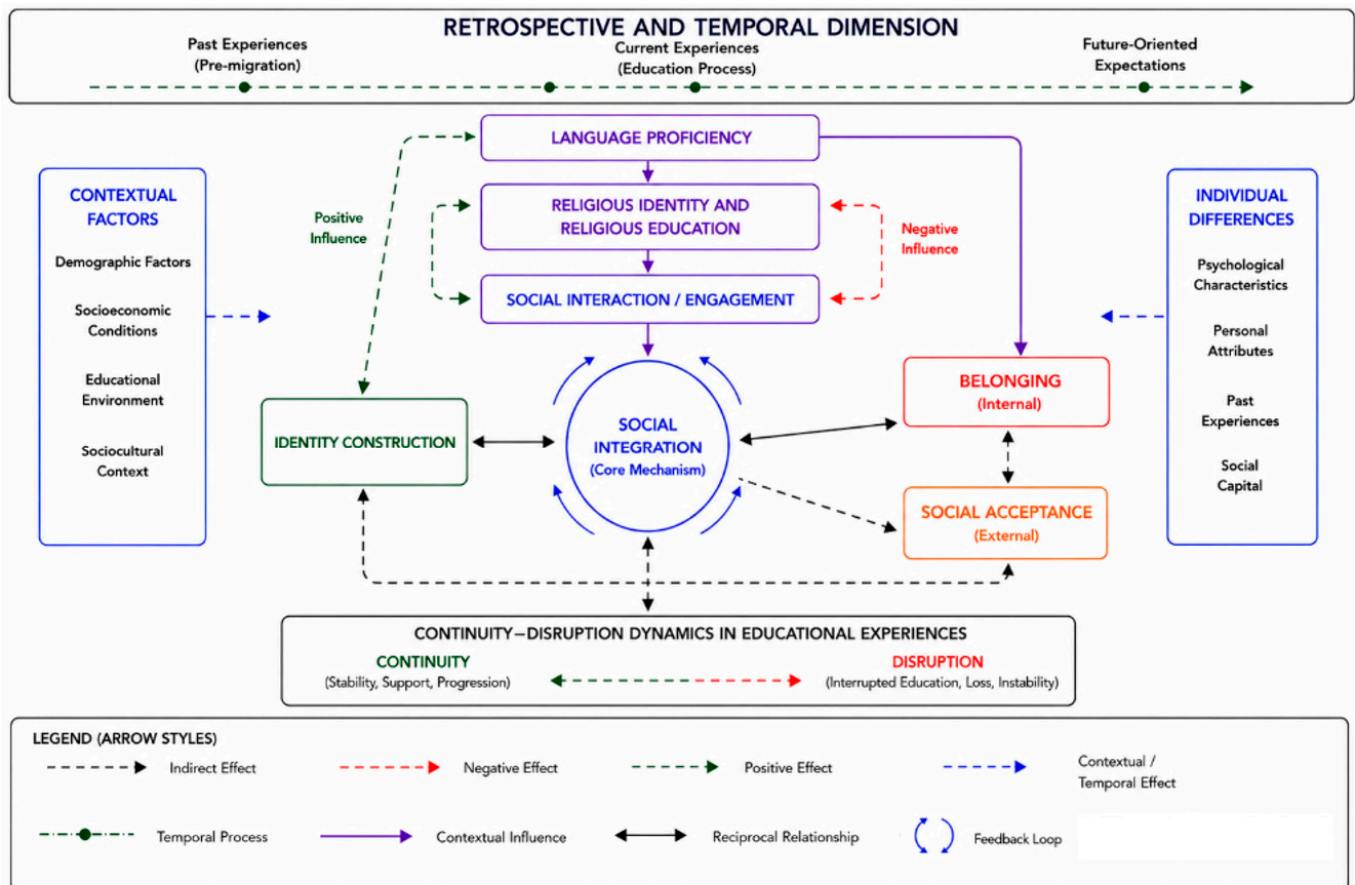


Figure 2. Revised model after the findings.

5.2. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of religion and religious education in refugee students' social integration, belonging, and identity construction. The findings demonstrate that these processes are multidimensional, context-dependent, and dynamic, emerging through the interaction of linguistic, educational, social, and religious factors rather than through any single determinant.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in the development of a multidimensional conceptual framework in which social integration functions as the central mediating mechanism linking religion and religious education to belonging and identity construction. Rather than conceptualizing religion as a direct determinant of integration, the findings indicate that its influence operates primarily through shared religious identity, cultural proximity, and sustained social interaction. This framework offers a more context-sensitive explanation of refugee students' educational experiences and extends existing theories of refugee integration by incorporating reciprocal relationships and temporal dynamics.

The findings also carry important implications for educational policy and practice. Strengthening language education, fostering inclusive school climates, supporting meaningful peer interaction, and promoting culturally responsive educational practices may enhance refugee students' opportunities for social integration. Religious education may contribute positively to this process when it promotes mutual understanding, shared values, and social cohesion within inclusive educational environments.

This study is limited to Syrian refugee students living in Türkiye and therefore reflects a context characterized by considerable religious and cultural proximity between refugees and the host society. Comparative studies conducted in different cultural, religious, and

educational contexts are needed to examine the generalizability of the proposed conceptual framework. Longitudinal research following refugee students over time would also contribute to a deeper understanding of how social integration, belonging, and identity construction evolve throughout the resettlement process.

Ultimately, refugee students' integration should be understood not as a linear outcome of migration but as a dynamic process shaped through the continuous interaction of education, religion, social relationships, and broader contextual conditions across time.

5.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to 19 refugee students studying in a single city (Kilis), which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the use of a qualitative research design, while allowing for in-depth exploration, limits the ability to make broader generalizations across different contexts. Third, the findings are based on retrospective accounts, which may be subject to recall bias and reinterpretation over time. Finally, the study focuses on a specific educational and cultural context (Türkiye), and therefore, the findings may not be directly transferable to contexts with different sociocultural and religious dynamics.

5.4. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and researchers:

Given that language proficiency constitutes the primary determinant of social integration, language education should be positioned at the core of integration policies, and comprehensive, sustainable language programs should be expanded.

Opportunities for social interaction should be systematically increased, and inclusive practices that promote peer engagement within educational settings should be strengthened.

Considering the significant role of school climate, teachers should be supported through training in multicultural education, and institutional practices aimed at preventing discrimination should be further developed and implemented.

Given that religion may function as both an integrative and a divisive factor, it should be addressed through a contextual and inclusive approach, and pedagogical processes should be designed with sensitivity to its dual nature.

Integration policies should address both the sense of belonging and social acceptance, incorporating strategies that not only foster individual belonging but also enhance broader societal acceptance.

Continuity in education should be supported through the development of targeted mechanisms, particularly during transitional periods, in order to minimize disruptions in students' educational trajectories.

For researchers, comparative studies—particularly within the European context—are recommended to examine the role of religion in integration across diverse socio-cultural settings.

Further research focusing on returning refugees is also needed; longitudinal studies examining the educational, identity, and belonging processes of individuals returning to Syria are expected to make significant contributions to the field.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that refugee students' integration processes are multidimensional, context-dependent, and dynamic. Within this framework, the role of religion cannot be reduced to either an integrative "bridge" or a divisive "boundary"; rather, it functions as a context-dependent mechanism capable of serving both roles under different social conditions.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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