

## Research Article

# Perceptions of otherness among Syrian refugee and Turkish children in an intercultural context

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This study aims to explore perceptions of *otherness* among primary school children, focusing on 4th-grade students in the southern region of Türkiye. The study group consists of 48 Turkish and Syrian students selected through criterion sampling, a purposive sampling method. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study utilized a case study design, specifically the embedded single-case design. A semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers served as the primary data collection tool. Turkish and Syrian children's perceptions of otherness were examined through concepts of foreigner, differences, and similarities. Findings indicate that students generally associate differences with physical characteristics, while factors such as play, success, talent, sympathy, and friendship also shape perceptions of otherness. Notably, Turkish children's perceptions of the other were generally negative, whereas Syrian children under temporary protection tended to view the other more positively.

Keywords: Otherness perception; Intercultural perception; Refugee integration

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## 1. Introduction

'Otherness' is a concept frequently used in daily life to refer to those who are not like us. It plays a role in helping individuals define themselves by contrasting their identities with how they perceive others. In the literature, otherness is often described as that which is outside of 'me' or 'us' (Brons, 2015; Dervin, 2015; Mountz, 2009; Staszak, 2008; Zevallos, 2011). Furthermore, Bauman and May (2019) define otherness as representing people who are outside of the 'me/us' group but who share similarities among themselves.

'Otherness' is a multifaceted concept encompassing structures like empathy, multiculturalism, alienation, self-perception, tolerance, prejudice, similarity, and differentiation, which individuals or societies adopt to define themselves (Kanatlı Öztürk, 2018). Sociologically, it is rooted in differences (Şengül, 2007) and framed within the dimensions of 'me,' 'us,' and 'others' (Nahya, 2010). Symbolic 'otherness' emerges as a societal construct, where the concept shifts from an individual 'me' to a collective 'us.' As individuals see themselves as part of society, they set aside personal distinctions and define 'otherness' based on social differences (Şengül, 2007).

Often invoked when one feels a lack of belonging, otherness represents those perceived as different (Dervin & Risager, 2014; Powell & Menendian, 2016). It also relates to the idea of

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similarity, as people distinguish themselves from those outside their in-group (Gillespie et al., 2012; Todorov, 2018). Overall, as highlighted in the literature, 'otherness' is a concept that we use to identify those outside the 'me' or 'us' in both personal and social contexts, helping to shape our sense of identity (Çapar, 2021).

### **1.1. The Development of Otherness in Children**

Children become aware of diversity and social categories from a very young age. By the time children enter primary school, they have already begun to form perceptions about those who are considered as "others", i.e. those that are different from the majority in various dimensions such as race, gender, religion or disability (Killen et al., 2002). Through others, children define themselves and construct many things about life. While forming his/her self-concept, he/she learns what he/she should or should not do according to the reactions of others (Bauman, 1993). The concept of "social self" expressed by Mead (1934) in the social self theory explains this situation. According to Mead, "generalized others", namely the others that the child considers important, help the child to regulate his/her behaviors. However, not every "other" is generalized or meaningful for the child. In this process, some of the people with whom the child communicates are selected by the self. It is seen that the feedback given by the selected others has a great impact on the child (Bauman, 1993). The child, who develops various feelings towards the other, may sometimes identify with them him/her and adopt their roles and attitudes. The child may internalize these roles and attitudes and consider them his/her own. In this way, it is accepted that the child recognizes himself/herself and begins to have a coherent and favorable identity. This process consists of the "other" recognizing the child and the child recognizing himself/herself (Berger & Luckman, 1967).

Developmental theorists have frequently included the concept of "otherness" in their discussions about children's cognitive and affective development. In particular, Margaret Mahler called the process in which children recognize their own selves and become individuals as the "Separation-Individuation Period". Mahler tried to explain that "other people" are important in the process starting from the primitive behaviors when children cannot make the distinction between self and other until their individualization. In this period, it is seen that the child begins to distinguish between mother and baby and starts to make inferences about who the others/strangers are (Mahler et al., 1975).

The ability to consider alternative perspectives is largely developed between the ages of 5 and 12. Perspective-taking skills developed during primary school allow children to move beyond rigid "us and them" thinking and better understand experiences outside of their own (Rutland et al., 2005). Allport et al. (1979) stated that children begin to understand their own group at the age of five, but it is only at the age of 9 to 10 that they understand exactly what their own group means in an ethnic context. In this recognition stage, he stated that the behavior of others towards the child shapes the child's sympathy, interest and loyalty to his/her own group. It was stated that the child's attachment to his/her own group affects the relationships he/she will establish with strangers/others. It was emphasized that the more devoted the child is to his/her own group, the more difficult the relationship will be. Primary school children still tend to prefer some children to others in their friend groups, judge them according to certain characteristics and have prejudices. Moreover, elementary school children discover their differences and similarities by comparing themselves with other children and thus learn racial stereotypes (Bigler & Liben, 1993). Two main theoretical frameworks, namely social identity theory and developmental intergroup theories, shed light on how children's social identity concepts and prejudices emerge.

### **1.2. Theoretical Frameworks on the Development of Otherness**

According to social identity theory, individuals classify themselves and others into social categories and identify more with their "in-group" identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As children begin to assimilate social messages about differences in status and power, their awareness of broad social categories such as gender, race and social class begins to develop (Bigler & Liben, 2007). By

the age of 5-6, children develop basic concepts of social identity related to salient differences, such as gender and race (Quintana, 1998). However, the formation of more meaningful social identities based on "perspective-taking" skills is not possible until middle to late childhood.

According to developmental intergroup theory, as "perspective-taking" matures, children become less devoted to rigid social categories and increasingly skilled at recognizing diversity (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). However, it is important to note that in-group privileges are still influential and therefore intergroup prejudices are easily formed. Experiments with small groups have shown that even when children are randomly divided into groups, they quickly begin to prefer their own group over other groups (Nesdale, 2004). Children do not perceive the behaviors of other children individually, but evaluate them according to the group they belong to. They attribute the characteristics of the group to which they belong and overgeneralize "others" by considering the dominant characteristics of the group (Gash, 1992, 1993). Over time, stereotypes formed through experience begin to differentiate and are shaped by the child's experiences (Bigler & Liben, 2007; McKown, Weinstein, 2003; Nesdale, 2004; Verkuyten, 2018).

### 1.3. The Impact of School and Family Environments on Perceptions of Otherness

Children's school and classroom experiences also affect their perceptions of diversity. Teachers serve as models through their communication styles, problem-solving behaviors, teaching practices, and the way they approach problems between children. At times, they may unwittingly support cultural elements that reinforce unconscious prejudices against children who are different in terms of ethnicity, religion, etc. (Bryan, 2012).

In addition to teacher influence, schools can also influence attitudes towards inclusion through their policies, curriculum and environment. Research shows that students in schools that promote a collaborative ethos and do not create level groups are less prejudiced (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). For example, Aboud et al. (2012) state that activities based on "perspective-taking" skills to address peer prejudice lead to an improvement in primary school children's attitudes towards diversity. It is also stated that family and home environments have an impact on children's perceptions towards diversity. It should be noted that children's prejudices decrease when values related to equality are given through direct teaching and the example of parents (Degner & Dalege, 2013).

However, children in primary schools may face exclusion, bullying and psychological pressure when they are different from the majority in terms of characteristics such as race/ethnicity, disability status, religion and weight (Crick et al., 2006). It has been reported that marginalized children generally experience higher levels of anxiety and depression, and suffer the lack of academic self-efficacy and self-esteem (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012). Children with disabilities are socially rejected and victimized more than their non-disabled peers (Nowicki, 2006); religious minority children have to endure prejudice in school settings (Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002); and victimization of overweight children has a negative impact on their mental health and achievement (Lumeng et al., 2010).

Therefore, interventions are needed at the individual, classroom and institutional levels to promote positive perceptions, reduce prejudices and increase the participation of children with differences in primary schools. More studies are needed to contribute to the development of inclusive school climates that embrace different identities in the primary school teaching process. Therefore, this study was designed to reveal primary school children's perceptions, attitudes or behaviors towards diversity. The research aims to examine the perception of the "otherness" among the students living in Türkiye and those who migrated to Türkiye from Syria in a comparative manner.

## 2. Method

This study aimed to examine the perceptions of Syrian children under temporary protection and Turkish children about the phenomenon of "otherness" separately and in a comparative manner. To that end, "case study", a qualitative research method, was adopted in the study and embedded

single case design was utilized in terms of research design. The embedded single case design is a type of case study that includes multiple units of analysis within a single case, such as different groups, individuals, processes, or outcomes. The purpose of this research design is to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of the case by comparing sub-units or sub-cases (Yin, 2018).

The embedded single case design was selected for this study due to its ability to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex phenomenon of "otherness" as perceived by Syrian children under temporary protection and Turkish children. This design is particularly apt for our research aims for several reasons.

The study examines a single overarching case - the perception of "otherness" in a specific context (a particular community and a region in Türkiye). This allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real-world context. Thus, richer insights can be obtained compared to a single holistic case study. Furthermore, by combining multiple units of analysis, comparisons can be made between the perceptions of Syrian and Turkish children, highlighting similarities, differences and potential interactions between views on 'otherness'.

The embedded design allows us to examine how the wider context (e.g. social, cultural and/or political factors in Türkiye) influences the perceptions of both groups, while maintaining a focus on individual experiences. Furthermore, 'otherness' is a multifaceted concept and this design allows us to capture this complexity by examining it from different angles within a single case study. The embedded single case design balances the depth provided by case study research with the breadth of insights gained from multiple units of analysis.

## 2.1. Study Group

The study group of the research was determined using criterion sampling, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods. In this context, the research was conducted with 48 Turkish and Syrian students aged 9-10 years old who are living in the southern region of Türkiye. In the selection process of Syrian students, those who speak Turkish were especially preferred. Within the framework of the research problem, the fact that these children have lived in Türkiye and can communicate with their Turkish peers is considered important in terms of comparative examination of their perceptions of "otherness". The reason why the research was conducted in the southern region of Türkiye province is that this region is one of the most heavily migrated regions of Türkiye and is home to people with many ethnic, religious and cultural differences. In addition, the reason why children of primary school age (9-10 years) were preferred within the scope of the research is that this age group is stated as the age when individuals begin to understand what they and their groups mean ethnically (Allport et al., 1979).

An analysis of the demographic characteristics (see Table 1) of the study group reveals that most students are academically successful, with girls outnumbering boys. The majority of mothers are housewives, while fathers work in a range of occupations. Although parental education levels vary, primary school is the most common level achieved by both mothers and fathers. Over half of the students report a poor financial situation. Most students come from nuclear families, with both parents alive and living together, and have not changed schools. Approximately half of the students are Turkish, with a significant portion being Arab or Syrian. Nearly all students demonstrate strong social skills and an ability to work well in groups, with only a small percentage requiring additional support for social needs.

## 2.2. Data Collection

In this study, interview technique, a qualitative data collection tool, was used in this study. The interview form applied in the data collection process is composed of two parts. The first part consists of questions to be asked to the teacher in order to obtain information about the student. The second part is a semi-structured part consisting of questions directed to the student in order to determine the children's perceptions of the people they perceive as "the other". After the second

Table 1  
 Characteristics of the participants

Characteristics	f	%	Characteristics	f	%
Academic achievement level			Financial Situation		
Bad	2	4.3	Bad	26	56.5
Intermediate	9	19.6	Medium	13	28.3
Successful	35	76.1	Good	7	15.2
Gender			Are Parents Alive?		
Girl	29	63.0	Yes	43	93.5
Boy	17	37.0	No	3	6.5
Mother profession			Are Mom and Dad Together?		
Housewife	38	82.6	Yes	40	87.0
Officer	5	10.9	No	6	13.0
Small Business	1	2.2	Family Structure		
Employee	2	4.3	Nuclear Family	36	78.3
Father profession			Extended Family	10	21.7
Unknown	1	2.2	Did the student change schools?		
Unemployed	7	15.2	Yes	13	28.3
Serbest Meslek	8	17.4	No	33	71.7
Officer	7	15.2	Hometown/Origin		
Employee	5	10.9	Turkmen/Syrian	3	6.5
Small Business	13	28.3	Turkish/Türkiye	26	56.5
Other	5	10.9	Arab/Syrian	19	41.3
Mother's Education Status			Ability to work in groups		
Illiterate	6	13.0	Bad	1	2.2
Primary School	22	47.8	Medium	3	6.5
Middle School	8	17.4	Good	42	91.3
High School	5	10.9	Social Skills Ability		
University	5	10.9	Low	1	2.2
Father's Education Status			Medium	2	4.3
Unknown	10	21.7	Good	43	93.5
Illiterate	1	2.2	Social need status		
Primary School	14	30.4	Yes	3	6.5
Middle School	6	13.0	No	43	93.5
High School	9	19.6			
University	6	13.0			

part of the form was prepared, expert opinions were taken and a pilot study was conducted with two students. Following the feedback received from the students, final revisions were made to the questions. In order to deepen the basic 4 interview questions determined during the pilot application process, related sub-questions were created and expert opinions were taken. In order to clarify the research problem situation, data were collected around the basic questions presented in Appendix 1.

During the data collection process, interviews were conducted with volunteer students after obtaining permissions from the ethics committee and relevant institutions besides parents of the students.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and then transcribed to avoid data loss after obtaining the necessary permissions. The data obtained were analyzed using Nvivo11 qualitative data analysis software. Content analysis technique was used in the data analysis process. In the content analysis, the data were first coded, then categories were formed using these codes and finally themes were obtained.

## 2.4. Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, credibility, transferability, and verifiability are required to ensure validity and reliability. Internal validity / credibility in research is achieved by ensuring that the findings are in line with reality (Merriam, 1988) and through long-term interaction, participant confirmation and expert review (Başkale, 2016). Accordingly, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the students in the study, the answers given during the interviews were recorded, and the interview periods continued until the interviewer received clear and understandable answers to all questions. The findings obtained were analyzed by field experts. Another method to increase credibility is to terminate the data collection process when the data obtained reaches saturation (Merriam, 2018). The researchers decided to terminate the data collection process when they realized that the findings obtained from the collected data started to be repeated and the potential for obtaining new information started to decrease. In order to increase reliability in the research, the findings and results obtained were examined by experts and necessary arrangements were made. Başkale (2016) argues that if the data obtained are compatible with other studies, this increases reliability. Therefore, the findings of this study were organized based on the theoretical framework and the results were compared with the results of previous studies in the literature.

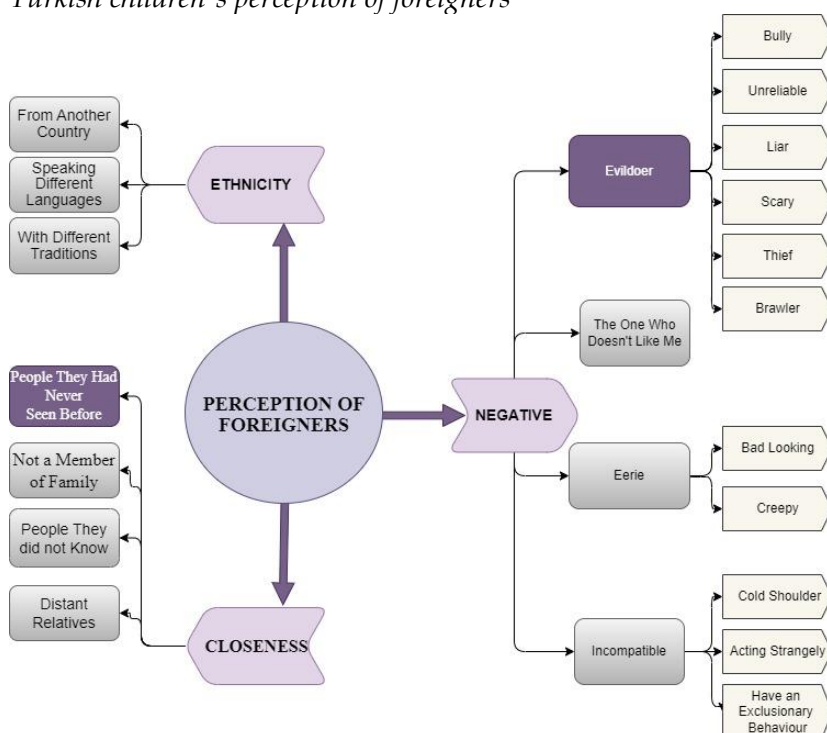
## 3. Findings

This study aims to determine the perception of the "other" among Syrian students who have been temporarily settled in Türkiye and Turkish children. The study reveals the perceptions of Syrian students under temporary protection and Turkish children about the concept of "otherness". In the research process, the children's perception of the foreigner was firstly determined, and then their perceptions of people with similar and different characteristics were tried to be determined.

In order to make the codes and categories in the findings more understandable, they were expressed in figures. In the figures, the codes with the highest frequency were highlighted in bold color. In addition, the relationships between codes, categories and themes are shown with arrows. In some figures, the relationships between the codes were expressed as ( ). As to the research problems, the findings in Figure 1 were reached with respect to Turkish children's understanding of the concept of "foreigner".

Figure 1

*Turkish children's perception of foreigners*



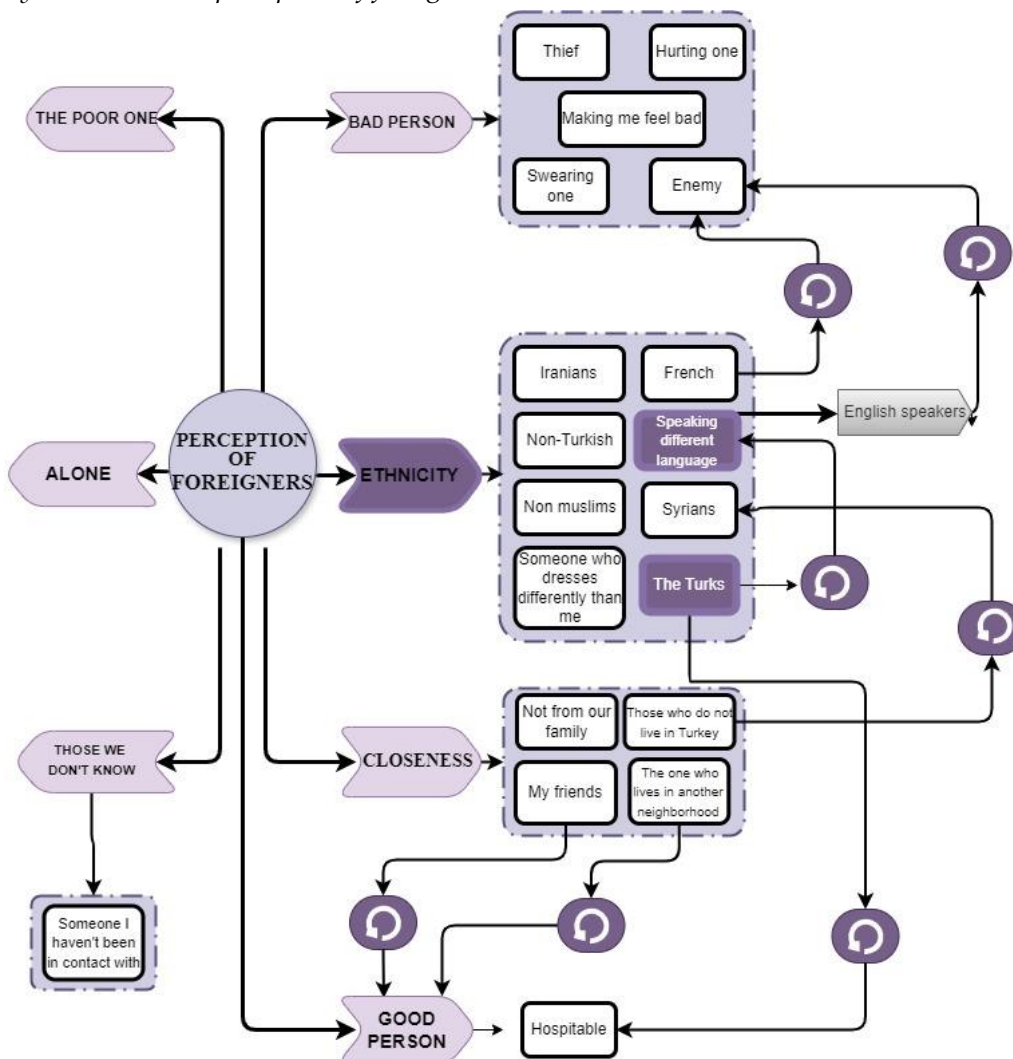
According to Figure 1, the concept of "foreigner" generally evokes negative emotions among Turkish students. The perception of "foreigner" is characterized by negative descriptions and the phenomena of "closeness" or "being close" among Turkish students. The students stated that both the physical appearance and behavior of strangers, whom they defined as people they had never seen before, who were not from their families and whom they did not know, were unpleasant. In addition, it is also among the findings that children do not feel comfortable, even experience fear and shyness, around strangers.

For example, T1 asserted that, "Theft is committed by foreigners. They are also people I do not know. Some of them are big, some of them are kidnappers, some of them are beating people." Another participant, T2 stated that:

For me, it is someone who is not a member of my family. Someone who is not a relative of mine. I consider him unpleasant, someone who doesn't like me, someone who gets annoyed when he sees me.

Furthermore, T14 said that "For me, a foreigner is someone I do not know. To me, a foreigner is someone who lies and does a lot of things behind others' backs". The fact that the children stated that foreigners are people they do not know and have not seen, besides making negative definitions, shows that the perception of foreigners in children's memories contains negative elements. It can also be stated that there are prejudices against foreigners among children. Figure 2 presents the findings regarding Syrian children's understanding of the concept of "foreigner".

Figure 2  
Syrian children's perception of foreigners



According to the analysis of Syrian children's perceptions of "foreigners", their perceptions are primarily influenced by ethnic differences, including Turkish and foreign languages. Syrian children under temporary protection who define Turks as foreigners have a more positive perception of foreigners than Turkish children who define them as foreigners. For example, S16, one of the children, said, "Turks are foreigners. For me, Turks are kind-hearted and hospitable." From this point of view, it can also be stated that the children no longer see Turks as "the other", which they saw as foreigners when they first came to Türkiye. For example, another student, S1, stated that:

The Turks are not foreigners anymore. Before, we used to call them foreigners, but now they are not. I first came here at five years old. Now I'm 11, so I've been here for six years. They are not foreigners anymore.

However, it was observed that some of the children emphasized the concept of "foreigner" as others who do not live in Türkiye. S12 said, "...I have Syrian friends. Those who live in other countries are foreigners. Those who live in other countries in a different place are foreigners." Some of the Syrian children under temporary protection even described others from Syria as foreigners. S15 expressed his view succinctly in this regard, saying, "Foreigners are Syrians. Because we came here from Syria. We are foreigners here because we are not Turkish. In my opinion, it is not Turks who are foreigners, but other states...". He further stated that they are foreigners because they come from another country. In fact, based on this statement, it is understood that some of the children see Turks as "the other".

Furthermore, Syrian children under temporary protection make negative attributions to foreigners that they define as foreigners. Negative meanings are especially associated with ethnicity. There are differences between Turkish and Syrian children's perceptions of the concept of "foreigner" in terms of positive and negative opinions in general. The perception of foreigners among Turkish children under temporary protection is generally negative, whereas the perception of foreigners among Syrian children under temporary protection is relatively more positive, although there are ethnic differences as well.

In general, Turkish children define "others" as unpleasant people who they have never met. On the other hand, Syrian children under temporary protection have more positive perceptions of the "other" and relatively more positive perceptions of Turks. The spoken language (Turkish) is very important for Syrian students who define those who speak a different language as foreigners. Another interesting point is that some of these children did not consider Turkish to be an "other" language. Also, although the majority of Syrian children defined foreigners with reference to Türkiye, some also defined those who were Syrian, still lived in Syria, or did not speak Turkish as foreigners.

There are also common codes in Turkish and Syrian children's perceptions of "foreigners". The concept of ethnicity is central to both Turkish and Syrian children's perceptions of foreigners. In contrast to Turkish students, Syrian students make positive definitions about ethnic differences. The findings also reveal that "closeness" is a common phenomenon. Generally, children define foreigners in the context of "closeness" as people they don't know or see. Both Turkish and Syrian students share a code of closeness, but their content differs. Turkish students defined strangers in terms of "closeness" as people they had never seen, distant relatives, people they had never met, and people who did not belong to their family, whereas Syrian students defined strangers as foreigners, neighbors, and friends living outside Türkiye.

By paying attention to their behaviors, Turkish and Syrian students often define their "otherness". Syrian students express positive behaviors such as helping me, being nice to me, and playing games with me, whereas Turkish students associate foreigners with negative behaviors such as lying, stealing, fighting, and bullying. Foreigners are also viewed as scary and bad-looking by Turkish students, unlike Syrians.

Finally, Turkish children's description of foreigners as emotionally unreliable is a significant finding that should be taken into consideration in terms of children's social and personality



development. Syrian students, however, do not provide a positive or negative emotional definition. The children's perceptions of the "other" are shown in Figures 3 and 4, including the characteristics they think are similar to those of the foreigner.

Figure 3  
Similar characteristics of Turkish children with the "other"

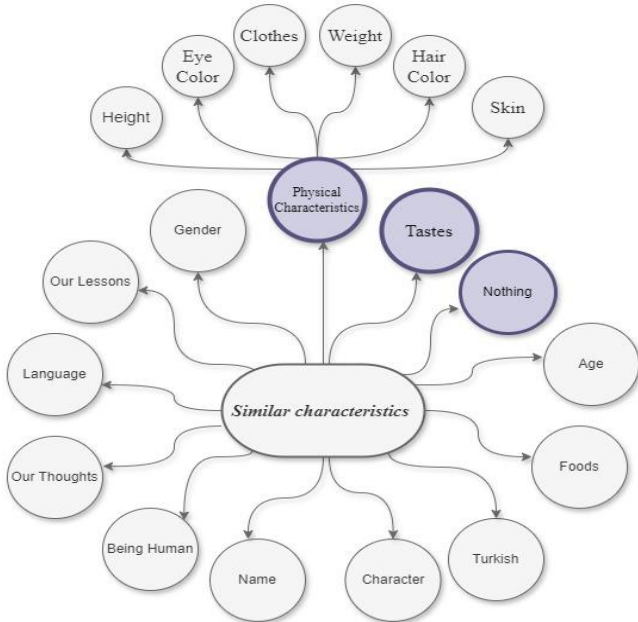
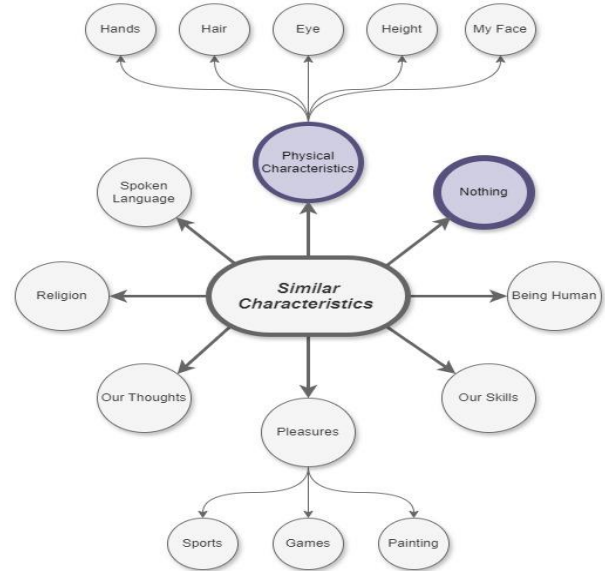


Figure 4  
Similar characteristics of Syrian children with the "other"



Within the scope of their similar characteristics with the "other", Turkish children emphasize physical similarity the most. Children share physical characteristics such as eye color, hair color, clothes, skin, and weight, which are easily observable from the outside. "Tastes" was another similar feature that children emphasized most. For instance, T16 stated that, "...I think there are. For example, I like reading books, and he may like it too. I like painting and traveling, and he may like them too". Children mostly stated their favorite activities, such as painting and playing games, and expressed their emotions in this context. Some children, however, perceive that they don't share similar characteristics with the "other". In Figure 4, Syrian children describe the characteristics they think are similar to the "other."

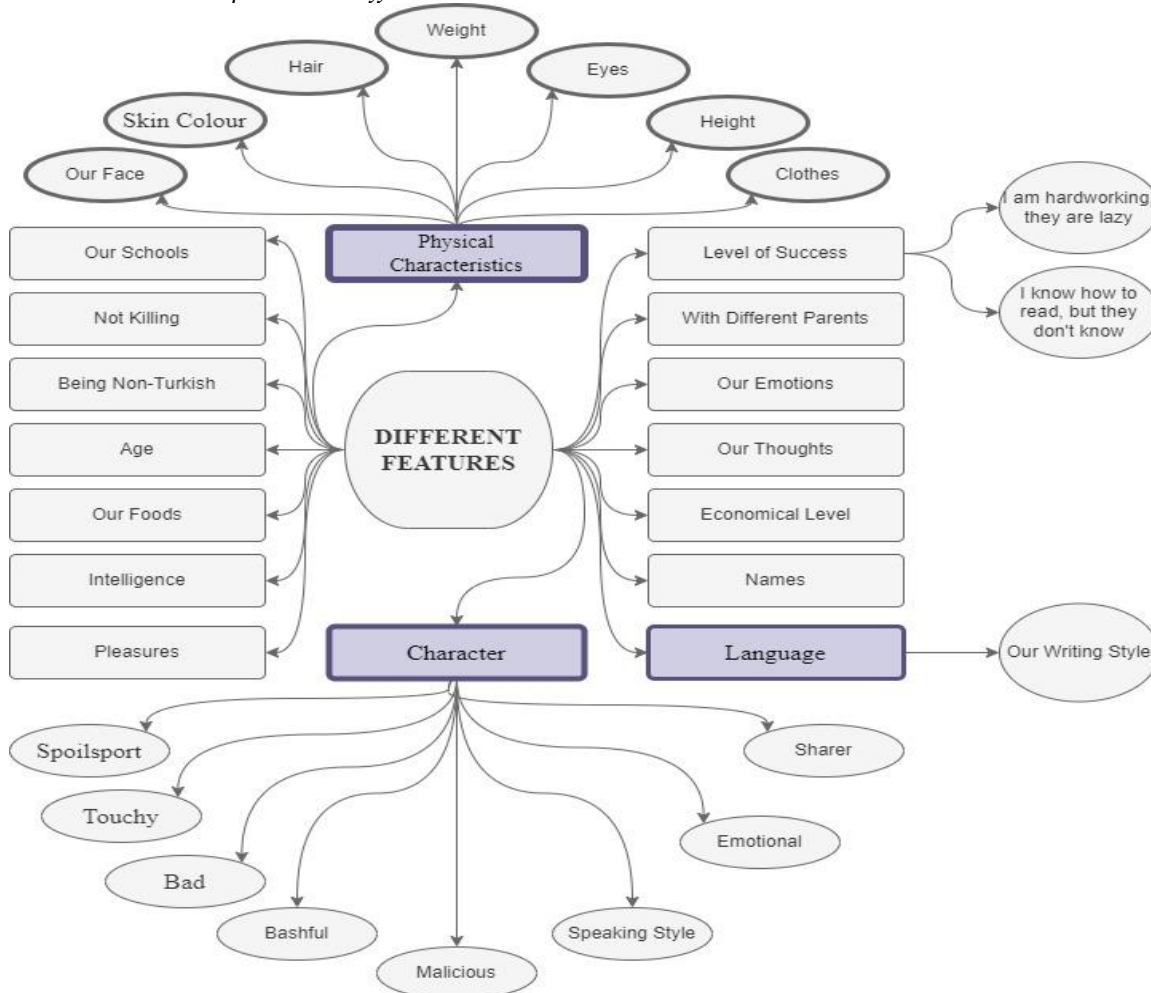
Syrian children also emphasize physical similarities with their "other" when analyzing their perceptions regarding their similar characteristics with them. The eyes, height, hair, hands, and face are usually the features that children who emphasize physical similarity emphasize. It can also be stated that most of the children believe that they do not share the same characteristics as the "other". Children who think they have similar characteristics to the "other" refer to activities under the category of "pleasures", such as sports and playing similar games. Furthermore, students highlighted the games they played among the aspects they believed were similar. Play should be considered a serious endeavor for children during their current developmental stages. Children expressed play as a similar aspect with the "other" in this respect. Additionally, students perceive themselves to be similar to the "other" based on their abilities in connection with the phenomenon of play. It was surprising to hear some students say that "spoken language" could also be a similarity they share with the "other". As an example, S1 said, "Our languages are similar because I now speak Turkish". This suggests that language accelerates children's integration processes.

"Physical characteristics", "tastes", "no similarity", "being human", and "language" were found to be common codes in Turkish and Syrian students' perceptions of similar characteristics. In comparing Turkish and Syrian perceptions of similarities with the "other", both groups tend to emphasize similarities in appearance. There are also students in both groups who believe they do

not have similar characteristics to the "other". Among Syrian children under temporary protection, the number of students with this perception was higher. In contrast to their Turkish peers, Syrian students also express similarity in religion with the "other" in their findings. By referring to Turks as foreigners, the students emphasized their religious similarity. Perceptions of the "other" are not only determined by similar characteristics but also by differences. Figure 5 and Figure 6 illustrate different characteristics of Turkish and Syrian students with the "other" respectively.

Figure 5

*Turkish childrens' perceived differences with the "other"*



In analyzing the characteristics of the "other" perceived by Turkish students, "physical characteristics", "character" and "language" are most often cited. Most students perceived the "other" as someone physically different from themselves. T20, for example, said, "...then our face shapes are different. China and Japan have different eye shapes. Some people have slanted eyes upwards and downwards. Some people have upward-facing eyes".

Students also made negative judgments about perceived "others" based on character codes such as "spoilsport", "touchy", "bad", etc. In this context, T8 said, "For example, I am good, he is bad, he has another desire, like kidnapping (people)" and T11 said, "Some foreigners kidnap us, but I don't have that. Some of them poison us first, then take us somewhere else". Students who stated behavioral differences based on character definitions are negatively judged in this regard. A "different" person is someone who is bad in character, who behaves badly, and therefore is different from them. Moreover, they evaluated the "other" as a bad person who is likely to commit kidnapping while evaluating themselves in the good category.

The difference that Turkish students drew most attention to is "language". T10, for example, said, "Our spoken languages. I am Turkish, he is Syrian, differences like that". From this

perspective, students see the perceived "other" as someone different from them because they speak a different language. Due to the migration phenomenon, students generally emphasize the language of Syrian students. However, none of the students' definitions contained negative expressions. T13 said, "For example, their clothes, food, and the way they answer are very different. For example, some speak Arabic, some speak English. We do not understand what they are saying." It is important to note that children under temporary protection are perceived as "others" not only because of their mother tongue, but also because they speak a language other than Turkish. Figure 6 shows the characteristics of the "other" as perceived by Syrian students under temporary protection.

Figure 6  
Syrian childrens' perceived differences with other

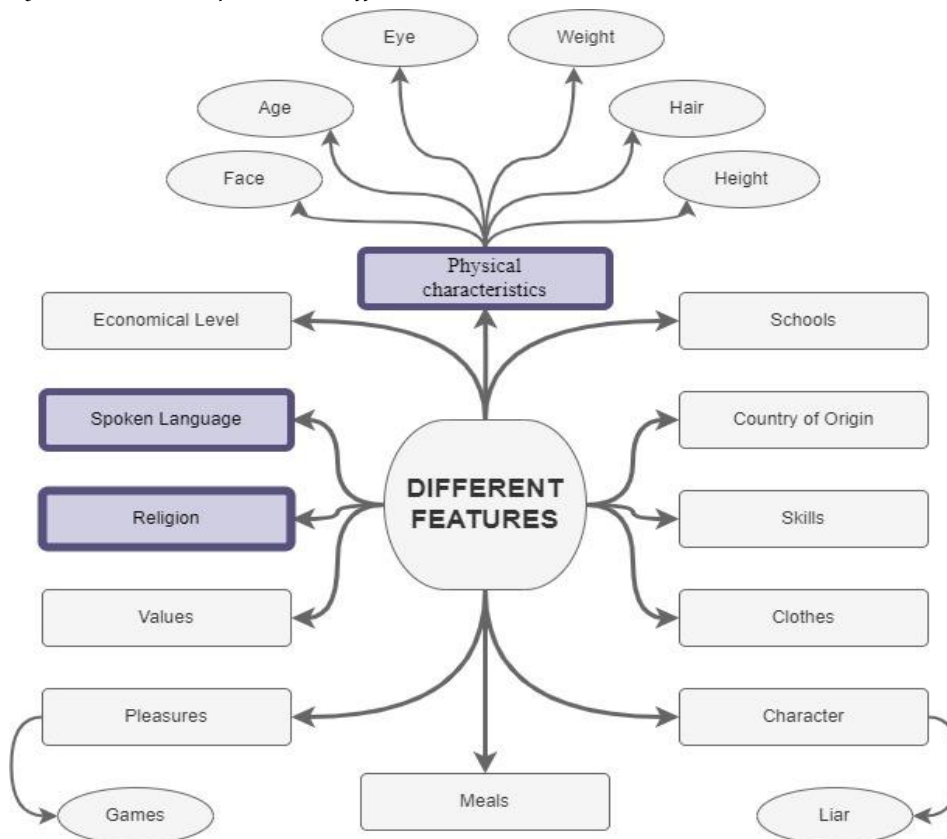


Figure 6 illustrates how Syrian students perceive themselves as "physically different", "speaking a different language" and "having a different religion" from those they perceive as the "other". It has been observed that Syrian children who perceive others who speak a different language as "others" emphasize the fact that Turkish is spoken around them, and in this context, they describe Turkish speakers as "others". Syrian children also perceive people as "others" because of their religious beliefs. A student, S21, commented, "...they have no religion, they are not Muslims.". As can be seen from the findings, however, while religious belief plays a role in the formation of the perception of the "other" for children, some religious rituals also play a role in this perception. At this point, the students who stressed the differences in religious beliefs pointed to clothing as an example. As an example, while expressing her thoughts, S19 stated, "...For example, Turks do the headscarf this way, but we do it differently. Turks do not wear long coats, but we always do."

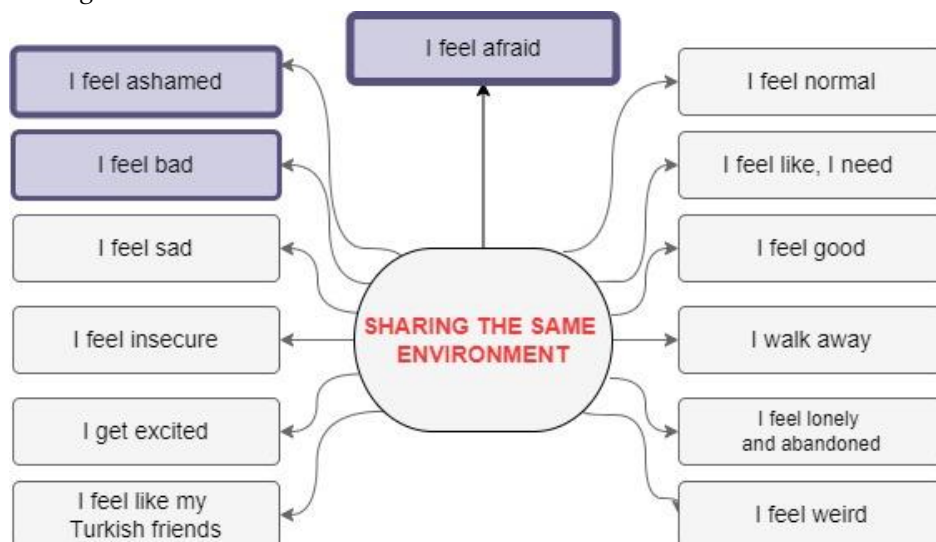
Some of the children's hobbies also contributed to their perceptions of "otherness". The children at this point make an evaluation as the "other" especially in the context of the games they play. Playing games distinguishes children from others, so it is important that they refer to them as such.

When Turkish and Syrian children are compared with the "other," it is evident that both groups emphasize differences related to appearance. Differences in appearance, such as hair, face, hands, and height, are expressed by Turkish and Syrian students. Additionally, only a few negative expressions were found in children's definitions of the "other" and differences. They also expressed negative opinions, especially under the character code. Although both groups attribute positive views to themselves, they attribute negative traits to those they perceive as the "other". However, Turkish children are more negatively characterized in this regard than Syrian children. Despite similar codes in both groups, there are also differences. For instance, Syrian children under temporary protection refer to "religious belief" when they define the "other".

The experiences of children shape their perceptions about the "other" in addition to how they define "otherness". Sharing the same environment with "others" can lead to uneasiness in primary school children, which ultimately shapes their perception of each other. The study examined how they felt being in the same environment as the "other". The findings of the research regarding the feelings of Turkish children when they share the same environment with the "other" are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

*Feelings towards the "other": Turkish students*

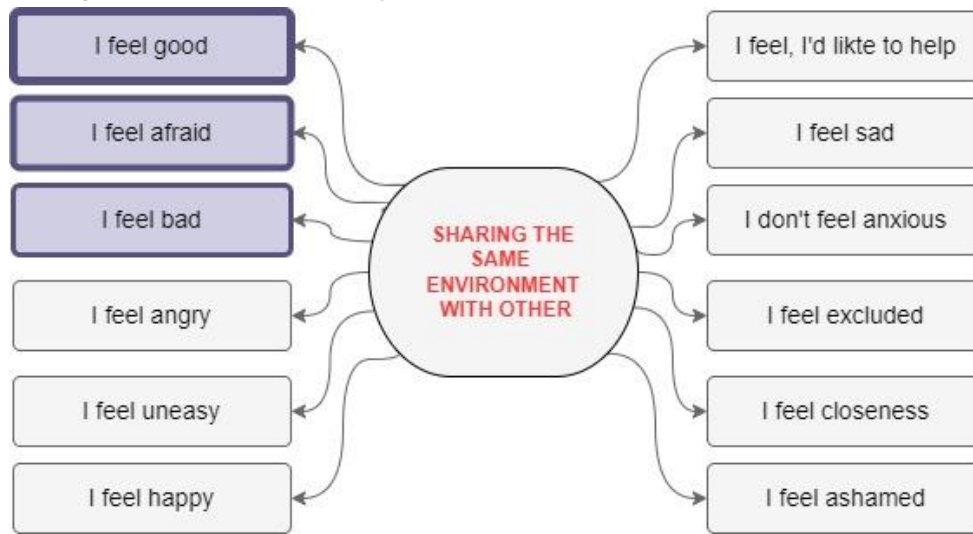


When children share the same environment with "others", their feelings towards them are more intensely manifested in the phenomena of "I feel afraid", "I feel ashamed" and "I feel bad". One of the students, T16, said, "I feel fear when I am with a foreigner. Maybe he/she will call me and give me something poisonous". T1 also said, "I also feel a bit scared. I guess he's a thief, I get scared.". Therefore, being in the same environment as those perceived as "others" does not make children feel good. On the other hand, Figure 8 shows the feelings Syrian children under temporary protection experience when they share the same environment as the "other."

Figure 8 indicates Syrian children's feelings towards the perceived "other" when sharing the same environment with foreigners are more likely to be "I feel good", "I feel scared" and "I feel bad". Therefore, both positive and negative emotions are expressed towards foreigners. Positive thoughts expressed by children in this regard are particularly noteworthy. As S21, one of the students, said, "I feel good. We learn each other's languages. It would be good for him.", as S18 said, "I would feel happy if a person came and I could talk to him/her."

Figure 8

Feelings towards the "other": Syrian students



Children's positive expressions as well as expressions that they are afraid and feel bad appear in the findings when they think that they are in the same environment with the "other". The student coded as S9 said, "I get scared because it's someone I don't know and don't recognize". In general, children who feel bad and afraid when in the same environment as the "other" think foreigners will harm them because they don't know them. The research also found that they blame the people they define as the "other" as the reason for their current situation (namely, their forced migration because of war). S2, one of the students, said, "I feel very angry right now. Because they took my country, I feel very angry. "I was not angry with them when they came to my country as visitors, but now I am very angry with them". Syrian students have also associated their negative perceptions of foreign countries with the "other" due to the civil war in their country, as in the example of S2.

The Syrian children may have a negative perception of citizens of other countries in this case. However, there are also students who have positive opinions. Syrian children have also mentioned Turks when expressing positive opinions. For example, S19 said:

... There won't be anything happening. We live next door to the Turkish house. So nothing happens. Nothing happens when we talk to Turks. The husband of my aunt's daughter's daughter is Turkish. I have a Turkish relative. This is how we talk, so nothing happens. As usual, I feel fine.

As shown in the example of student S19, Syrian children under temporary protection who had established kinship or neighbourly relations with Turks over time did not define Turks as "others".

Turkish and Syrian children's feelings when they are in the same environment with the "other" differ in terms of positive and negative feelings. Syrian children's feelings can be evaluated as relatively positive in comparison to Turkish children's feelings when they are in the same environment as foreigners. Syrian students under temporary protection expressed their feelings as "I feel good", while Turkish students expressed their feelings as "I'm afraid". Therefore, Syrian students are more likely to experience positive emotions. Turkish and Syrian children also share common codes when they are in the same environment with the "other". Emotions such as fear, shame, and embarrassment are included in these codes. Based on an analysis of the codes in general, it can be concluded that both Turkish children and Syrian children do not want to be in the same environment as people who they perceive as "the other".

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

According to the findings obtained from this study, Turkish children's perception of "otherness" is generally emphasized through closeness and expressed through negative images. According to Turkish students, the "other" is someone they have never seen, someone who is not related to

them, and someone who lives far away. Apparently, children form stereotypical attitudes toward people they perceive as the "other" (Vandenbroeck, 2009). Therefore, foreigners are people that children perceive as "others".

Turkish children's relatively negative perception of the people they perceive as the "other" and their definition of them as "people they have never met" who "can harm them" imply that children have some prejudices. It is stated that this prejudice in children occurs instinctively, as a result of socialisation throughout their developmental process. It is emphasised that children act with the instinct of self-protection towards people they define as the "other" (Olsson et al., 2005). In addition, it is established that children's perceptions of strangers are greatly influenced by the social environment in which they grow up, and that parental behaviours, media representations and social norms cause the development of negative perceptions towards the "other" (Ronfard & Harris, 2014). In addition, as children's cognitive abilities develop, they become better at distinguishing between familiar and unfamiliar individuals. When this ability is supported by inadequate social experience and inappropriate perspectives, it can lead to increased prejudice and fear towards the "other" (Brownell & Kopp, 2007).

Similar to the results of this study, Gash and Murphy (2004) assert that Irish children are highly prejudiced against other children who are different from them (especially when these children are not sufficiently recognised). Some researchers (Kowalski & Lo, 2001; Lambert & Klineberg, 1969; Perszyk et al., 2019) argue that the group to which children belong also has an effect on children's prejudice formation and that children constantly make comparisons with other groups and attribute negative characteristics to them with the influence of older group members.

As a result of this study, it was concluded that educational processes may also affect the formation of negative perceptions among Turkish children towards those they view as the "other". The 3rd-grade Life Skills textbook may be given as an example in this respect. In this book, in a text explaining how children should behave when they encounter strangers, namely people called "foreign men" and "foreign women", such people are characterized as those who want to harm children. In addition, in some of the visuals in the book, the clothes and face shape of foreigners are clearly depicted as malicious persons (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2019a, 2019b).

It can be stated that the perception of bad appearance towards people perceived as the "other" may also stem from the media content the children are exposed to. Tuncay (2004) states that the characters symbolising evil in the media content watched by students are bad looking. Again, in many media contents, foreigners are depicted as individuals who can exhibit examples of bad behaviour. Alver (2000) emphasizes that media may shape thoughts. Regulating the encounter with foreigners, the media creates or reproduces thoughts, prejudices and stereotypes about "others". While representing the foreigner, the media ensures that he/she remains foreign and is perceived as exotic (Alver, 2000). We do not subjectively perceive the distant foreigner as a threat; we perceive the foreigner as a close and concrete threat in our social environment (Bischur, 2003).

Therefore, school textbooks and the media are effective in the formation of children's perception of foreigners. Although children's fear of strangers is actually necessary to keep them safe, too much of this fear can be harmful for them. Bal (2010) states that it is necessary for children to experience the feeling of fear in their normal development, but the excess of this fear can affect them psychologically and impede their healthy growth and development. In addition, it is clear that supporting the child and eliminating his/her fears will contribute to the development of a healthy and strong self (Kratochwill et al., 2004).

As a result of this study, it is seen that children perceive people who are not from their family or relatives as the "other". The fact that children perceive the individuals they perceive as the "other" as bad people and that they do not see their family members as the "other" can be explained by the concept expressed as "stranger anxiety". One of the studies on the subject was conducted by Braungart et al. (2010), who state that during their development starting from infancy, children experience anxiety when interacting with strangers and this anxiety peaks especially in 8-10 months. However, it is emphasised that children tend to be more cautious and anxious towards

those perceived as the "other" as they grow older (Ruffman et al., 2006). This situation is generally reinforced by parents, close social environment (Bögels & Brechman, 2006; Burnstein & Ginsburg, 2010), cultural norms, media (Chao & Tseng, 2002) and the teaching process.

Among Turkish children, those who are perceived as the "other" are those who are from another country, speak another language and have different traditions. However, although there were negative opinions against foreigners among Turkish children, no negative opinion based on ethnicity was found in their expressions. Research shows that children can develop awareness of ethnic differences at an early age. It is stated that such awareness is shaped by social norms, representations and experiences (Quintana & McKown, 2012). The children in the study group grew up in a multicultural environment because Hatay province, where the children in the study group live, has received intensive migration in the last decade. This situation may have helped Turkish children to accept ethnic differences. According to the data obtained from the General Directorate of Migration Management [GDMM] (2021) on the population under temporary protection, Syrian population in Hatay is 435,968. The ratio of migrant population to the total population in Hatay province is 26.34%. In addition, children have easy access to media tools, which facilitate learning about the traditions, languages, people and cultures of other countries, and this helps them come to terms with ethnic differences (Alver, 2000; Laughey, 2009; Kaşkaya, 2013).

It is among the results of the research that Syrian children's perception of "otherness" is based on ethnicity and that Turks are perceived as foreigners. However, Syrian children think that Turks are hospitable and good people. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that Syrian children's perception of "otherness" is relatively more positive. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) stated that people who migrate to other countries begin to empathize as they are exposed to different cultures by having to adapt to a new environment, learning a new language and coping with cultural differences. Therefore, the authors emphasized that people who have migrated to another country develop a more positive perspective towards differences with the local population.

However, it is also considered that the way the subject is handled in children's textbooks may have been effective in the formation of these perceptions. While the concepts of benevolence, hospitality, different languages and cultures emphasized by Syrian children in their perception of foreigners are mentioned in the Life Science textbooks, Turks are also portrayed as good people. In the visuals and texts, it is seen that Turkish children play games with and help the children who migrated to their country (MoNE, 2019a, 2019b). In addition, in the 4th -grade MoNE Social Studies book, there are sentences such as, "Türkiye embraced its Syrian guests, ensured their safety, and showed a great example of humanity by meeting their basic needs" (MoNE, 2018), describing the aid provided to Syria. Media coverage of Türkiye's attitude towards the war in Syria may also have contributed to the development of children's perception in this direction. Yaylagül (2010) states that mass media aims to raise awareness about these issues by bringing up issues that affect the public. In recent years, news about the events in Syria have frequently appeared on the country's agenda. Thus, it can be argued that children are aware of these events. James and Tenen (1951) state that the child's recognition of his/her own country and understanding of other countries moves from self-centeredness to understanding the other. He states that the child's prejudices may decrease as the child gets to know other countries and increases his/her communication with them. Therefore, he states that children should be provided with an emotional perspective and the ability to be impartial.

Another result obtained from the research process is that Syrian children perceive other Syrians, who are still living in Syria and who have taken refuge in Türkiye more recently than them, as foreigners, despite the fact that they are originally from their own country. A similar situation was experienced in the Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2021) report, it was observed that Rohingya refugees who arrived in the camps earlier discriminated against and marginalized those who arrived later. A similar example occurred among Syrian refugees in Lebanon as well. According to a Human Rights Watch

report (2018), some Syrian refugees who have been in Lebanon for a longer period discriminated against and marginalized others, especially those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The reasons behind this situation are multifaceted and complex. In addition to limited resources, the trauma and psychological pressure of being a refugee as well as religious and ethnic affiliations may also be among the reasons for this situation. In the case of Türkiye, it can be stated that the fact that most of these children were born in Türkiye and that some of them speak Turkish has led to the formation of this perception.

In a study conducted by Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (2017), it was observed that children under temporary protection who speak Turkish have a more positive sense of belonging to school. It was stated that the communication of Turkish-speaking children with their friends and teachers improved their sense of belonging. Uysal (2019) reported that 30% of Syrian children under temporary protection felt like they were in their own country, 36% felt like Turkish citizens and 53% wanted to become Turkish citizens. Karademir and Doğan (2019), on the other hand, state that Syrians do not experience any problems while settling in Türkiye by using their kinship relations, and that this situation strengthens their sense of belonging. According to the authors, some of the factors that cause Syrian refugees to have a high sense of belonging are that there are workplaces belonging to Syrians in Türkiye and that they can easily live with their own identities in Türkiye. They add that for this reason, the sense of belonging is high socially and spatially. Uysal (2015) argues that population has a positive effect on the formation of a sense of belonging. He draws attention to the high number of Turkish population in London as one of the reasons why Turks who migrated to London feel a sense of belonging there.

It was observed that similar characteristics of Turkish and Syrian children with the "other" were concentrated on physical similarity. Senemoğlu (2018) stated that children tend towards concrete realities that they can see during the concrete operations period. On the other hand, Ekmişoğlu (2007) stated that physical appearance are the most easily recognizable features for children. Moreover, it was concluded that children's tastes and games are similar to the "other". Koçyiğit et al. (2007) state that children develop a sense of sharing while playing games and socialize by establishing relationships with other people. In addition, some universal games may also have an inclusive effect for children. Sinan (2019) reported that male Syrian children socialized with Turkish students because they played soccer, a universally known game played by everyone. Brophy and Alleman (2002) state that individuals bond with each other through their similarities to each other, regardless of their membership in a group or geography. Thus, bringing students together with their similarities can provide an opportunity for them to establish a bond between them.

Students stated that their differentiating characteristics were related to the notions of character, language, race and culture. In addition, it was concluded that Turkish children perceived foreigners as "the unsuccessful one" and associated this concept with their Syrian friends. Similarly, it was observed in Biçer and Özaltun's (2020) study that Turkish children characterized Syrian students as academically unsuccessful. Benli Özdemir (2018) found that when the term "Syrian student" is mentioned, the expression "lazy" comes to mind in the minds of Turkish children. In addition, many studies have concluded that Syrian children are generally unsuccessful in academic terms because they cannot learn Turkish sufficiently (Ereş, 2016; Güzel, 2019; Taştan & Çelik, 2017).

In the findings of this study, cultural differences such as clothing, language and games appear as the characteristics that differ students from foreigners according to the perceptions of Syrian students. It seems that in defining Turks as foreigners, Syrian children refer to the language barrier and cultural differences. These two problems experienced by Syrian children were analyzed in many studies (Alkalay, 2020). Uzun and Bütün (2016) stated that Syrian children were left alone in games due to language problems and their peers' unwillingness to play with them. Peterson et al. (2017) and Hek (2005) emphasize that refugee children feel alien and inadequate due to language problems. In his study to investigate the education of Turkish immigrant children



in Germany, Doyuran (1989) stated that growing up in an atmosphere where two languages and two cultures are prominent is a difficult situation and that children's perception of themselves as foreigners leads to failure. However, the situation in Türkiye is not similar to the situation in Germany. While German culture was a foreign culture for Turks who started to live in Germany decades ago, Turkish culture is largely considered as a familiar culture by Syrians. In fact, there are studies that conclude that Syrian children find Turkish culture close to their own culture, so they adapt easily and do not experience foreignness (Harunoğulları et al., 2019).

Another result of the research is that Turkish children's feelings towards the "other" are negative. The students stated that they felt scared, uncomfortable and bad when they thought they were in the same environment with a foreigner. It was concluded that Turkish children who thought that they were in the same environment with a foreigner felt sad, insecure, lonely and unprotected and wanted to get away from that environment. It is also seen that children do not trust strangers and are afraid of them. Although many emotions were observed in terms of Turkish children's feelings towards a foreigner, it was concluded that the most emphasized emotion was fear. In the findings, the students used expressions indicating that strangers might do evil to them, try to deceive them by giving them things and want to poison them. It is stated that children who observe negative attitudes towards refugees in the media or when they communicate with adults, can develop fear and anxiety towards these groups (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Lambert & Klineberg, 1969; Seefeldt et al., 2015). Again, non-conscious, implicit messages given in the teaching processes carried out at school can be a factor in the formation of this reaction. For example, within the scope of the Primary School Life Science Course program in Türkiye, children are taught to protect themselves by staying away from strangers in the "Safe Life" unit, which is thought to somehow cause a negative perception towards foreigners. In the following unit of the same book, there are sentences expressing that we should treat foreigners who come to our country as immigrants well. In this case, it can be said that the concept of foreigner is given to students in a contradictory way (MoNE 2019a; MoNE, 2019b). Although it is not thought that a text or topic in the textbook is the only factor in the emergence of this result, one should still be sensitive in the creation of course content. In addition, it is believed that children's developmental characteristics, the characteristics of the period they live in and the experiences they are exposed to, pave the way for the formation of these perceptions.

In the light of these results obtained from the research, it should be ensured that the texts prepared for children do not include practices and content that will create a negative perception with regard to foreigners. In addition, based on the impact of the media on children, the characters, scenes, etc. represented in media content should not lead children to form a prejudiced perception of foreigners. To that end, children should be given critical media literacy education based on respect for differences. They should be helped to recognize different cultures and value differences through media content. Again, based on the research results, it is seen that children's games are an important factor in eliminating negative perceptions of differences. In this context, organizing tournaments in which Turkish and Syrian children take part in the same team is important for these children not to perceive each other as "others". Not only in tournaments but also in the teaching process one should ensure that Turkish and Syrian children do not see each other as "others". Syrian and Turkish children's participation in teaching activities together in working groups may be helpful in this regard.

In the context of the teaching process, experiencing a sense of success is an important developmental need, especially in the primary school age group. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that the element of success is an important determinant in establishing social relationships among primary school children. Based on the results obtained from the research, in establishing a positive social relationship between Turkish and Syrian students, Syrian children who have academic success problems, especially due to language problems, should be supported in the areas where they are successful and appreciated in the classes where they study. Based on the results obtained from the research, especially Turkish children should be supported in

respecting differences and having a positive perception of the "other". In this context, it is considered that it is important for Turkish children to be included in teaching processes where the biographies of foreign and especially Syrian people who have contributed to their country (in areas such as trade, art, literature, science, etc.) are covered. At the same time, it should be aimed for Turkish and Syrian students to realize common features of the two cultures and to stop defining each other as the "other". For this purpose, an educational process should be planned in which children are taught similar beliefs, clothes, food, games, dances, etc. of the two cultures. In this process, it has been observed that it is important to emphasize common features. At the same time, it was also seen that it is important for children to be able to empathize. Therefore, it is thought that it would be right to provide children with an education in which they can have a more inclusive perspective not only on what Türkiye has done in terms of accepting Syrian refugees, but also on what is happening in Syria.

**Author contributions:** All authors have sufficiently contributed to the study and agreed with the results and conclusions.

**Data availability:** The data supporting this study's findings are available upon request. Interested researchers may contact the corresponding author for access to the data.

**Declaration of interest:** The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

**Ethical statement:** Authors declared that the study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research, Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University on 31 May 2021 with protocol code 06/17.

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### **Appendix 1. Interview questions**

1. What does the word 'foreigner' mean to you?
2. How would you describe a person you think of as a foreigner?
3. Why do you think we call someone a foreigner?
4. Do you have any things in common with someone you consider a foreigner?
5. Can you tell me some things you think you have in common with a foreigner?
6. What are some things that make someone you consider a foreigner different from you?
7. How do you feel when you're around someone you see as a foreigner?