

Cultural responsiveness in practice: Teachers' perspectives on education of migrant children

Responsividade cultural na prática:
Perspetivas dos/as professores/as sobre a educação de crianças migrantes

Réactivité culturelle dans la pratique:
Points de vue des enseignants sur l'éducation des enfants migrants

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Abstract

This study explores how teachers in Türkiye perceive their preparation, professional competencies, and classroom practices when working with students from migrant backgrounds, using the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) framework. Drawing on a descriptive, survey-based design with 102 in-service teachers, the research reveals that most participants felt underprepared by their pre-service education, particularly in technical areas such as material development, assessment, and family engagement. However, many reported significant growth in interpersonal competencies through direct experience with migrant learners. While classrooms were generally viewed as inclusive, concerns were raised about the school environment, curriculum responsiveness, and the adequacy of educational materials. Findings highlight the critical need for systemic reform across teacher training, curriculum design, and school support structures. Despite these challenges, the study identifies opportunities for leveraging teachers' lived experiences and professional values as a foundation for advancing inclusive education. In an increasingly mobile and diverse world, preparing teachers to respond effectively to cultural and linguistic diversity is not only a pedagogical challenge but a social imperative.

Keywords: inclusive education, migrant/refugee students, culturally responsive teaching, teacher perceptions, teacher training

Resumo

Este estudo explora a forma como os/as professores/as na Turquia percebem a sua formação, competências profissionais e práticas em sala de aula ao trabalhar com alunos/as de origem migrante, utilizando o enquadramento da Pedagogia Culturalmente Responsiva (*Culturally Responsive Teaching* – CRT). Com base num desenho descritivo, sustentado por inquérito, envolvendo 102 professores/as no ativo, a investigação revela que a maioria dos/as participantes se sentiu pouco preparada pela formação inicial, especialmente em áreas técnicas como o desenvolvimento

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de materiais, a avaliação e o envolvimento das famílias. No entanto, muitos/as relataram um crescimento significativo nas competências interpessoais através da experiência direta com alunos/as migrantes. Embora as salas de aula fossem geralmente vistas como inclusivas, foram levantadas preocupações relativamente ao ambiente escolar, à capacidade de resposta do currículo e à adequação dos materiais educativos. Os resultados destacam a necessidade crítica de reformas sistémicas na formação de professores, na conceção curricular e nas estruturas de apoio escolar. Apesar destes desafios, o estudo identifica oportunidades para valorizar as experiências vividas e os valores profissionais dos/as docentes como base para promover uma educação inclusiva. Num mundo cada vez mais móvel e diverso, preparar os/as professores/as para responder eficazmente à diversidade cultural e linguística é não apenas um desafio pedagógico, mas também um imperativo social.

Palavras-chave: educação inclusiva, alunos/as migrantes/refugiados, pedagogia culturalmente responsiva, percepções dos/as professores, formação de professores

Résumé

Cette étude examine la manière dont les enseignants en Turquie perçoivent leur formation, leurs compétences professionnelles et leurs pratiques en classe lorsqu'ils travaillent avec des élèves issus de contextes migratoires, en s'appuyant sur le cadre de l'enseignement culturellement réactif (*Culturally Responsive Teaching* – CRT). S'appuyant sur un devis descriptif basé sur une enquête menée auprès de 102 enseignants en exercice, la recherche révèle que la majorité des participants se sentait insuffisamment préparée par leur formation initiale, en particulier dans des domaines techniques tels que l'élaboration de matériels pédagogiques, l'évaluation et l'implication des familles. Cependant, nombreux sont ceux qui ont déclaré avoir développé de façon notable leurs compétences interpersonnelles grâce à l'expérience directe avec des apprenants migrants. Si les classes étaient généralement perçues comme inclusives, des préoccupations ont été soulevées concernant l'environnement scolaire, la capacité du programme à répondre à la diversité culturelle, ainsi que l'adéquation des ressources éducatives. Les résultats mettent en évidence la nécessité cruciale d'une réforme systémique touchant la formation des enseignants, la conception curriculaire et les structures de soutien scolaire. Malgré ces défis, l'étude identifie des opportunités pour valoriser les expériences vécues et les valeurs professionnelles des enseignants comme base pour renforcer l'éducation inclusive. Dans un monde de plus en plus mobile et diversifié, préparer les enseignants à répondre efficacement à la diversité culturelle et linguistique constitue non seulement un défi pédagogique, mais également un impératif social.

Mots-clés: éducation inclusive, élèves migrants/réfugiés, enseignement culturellement réactif, perceptions des enseignants, formation des enseignants

Introduction

Teaching and learning are meaningful, including ecological factors as experiences, culture, and identity (Gay, 2018). They are not neutral acts but culturally situated processes shaped by teachers' beliefs, values, and interactions with learners. It requires a professional, political, cultural, ethical, and ideological orientation beyond just "teaching" and fundamental beliefs about teaching, learning, students, their families, and communities, and efforts toward including all students (Howard, 2021). In Türkiye, diversity has long existed, but it has become a more visible and vital issue in the wake of large-scale migration. Since the Syrian refugee influx, the classroom has increasingly become a site where teachers navigate linguistic and cultural plurality, often without sufficient institutional support. As such, the need for culturally responsive education has never been more urgent, particularly as the educational system faces the challenge of adapting to an increasingly diverse student population.

Teachers play a crucial role at the intersection of policy and practice, often navigating challenges related to language barriers, cultural dissonance, and institutional gaps without adequate preparation or support. Although national policies promote inclusion and access, teachers' everyday practices reveal persistent

challenges in translating these ideals into equitable classroom experiences. Despite national efforts to integrate migrant children into formal education, achieving Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) remains limited by systemic constraints in teacher training, curriculum design, practice, and school-community engagement.

Türkiye has always been a place where many different people, languages, and beliefs come together. Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, and others have lived side by side here for generations, shaping the country's everyday life and schools. Even before the recent wave of migration, classrooms were already full of students with all sorts of backgrounds, making every school a vibrant mix of cultures and traditions. Over the past five years, Türkiye has hosted the largest population of displaced people in the world, with over 3.7 million Syrians and a total of around 6 million foreigners residing in the country. Initially concentrated in border camps, most Syrians now live in major urban areas such as Istanbul, where their presence has significantly altered city demographics and intensified pressures on housing, employment, and public services (Liszkowska, 2023). Although Türkiye made efforts to develop migration policies, including access to healthcare and education, integration remains uneven due to administrative inconsistencies and local institutions often prioritising national security over service provision (Küçükcan, 2022; Yüksel, 2023). In response to these multifaceted challenges, civil society organisations have played an increasingly vital role in delivering services and supporting the integration process, often in partnership with the European Union (Ünalp Çepel, 2024; Yanardağ & Ateş, 2024). Despite policy efforts, Türkiye's migration landscape remains defined by ongoing demographic pressures, emerging migration patterns, and the continued need for systemic, long-term integration strategies.

Türkiye has made significant efforts to ensure educational access for migrant children, particularly Syrians. As of 2023, approximately 818,531 migrant children were enrolled in formal public education. However, around 31 per cent, nearly 400,000 children, remained out of school, particularly at the secondary level (European Commission, 2023). The access to education for Syrian children in Türkiye is expanded mainly through their transition from Temporary Education Centres to public schools. Important efforts include teacher training, psychosocial services, and language support. Despite progress, issues such as dropout rates in secondary school, economic hardship, and language barriers remain (UNICEF, 2023). Recently, there have been increased developments in integrating migrant children into formal education, improving school infrastructure, and strengthening teacher support and training driven by EU-funded initiatives such as Supporting Inclusive Education for Children in the Turkish Education System Project (PIKTES and PIKTES+; European Commission, 2024). However, challenges persist in implementation, integration, and inclusivity. Access to education remains uneven; they face economic hardship and are pressured to work, which limits their school attendance (Aydın, 2022). Additional barriers affect children with special needs, who often lack access to appropriate support tools and trained personnel (Bayraklı, 2023; Eker et al., 2023; Kaya & Yıldız, 2023). Local institutions have prioritised national security concerns over education in some contexts, leading to inconsistent access and support across regions (Yüksel, 2023). Nevertheless, emerging planning approaches, such as cooperative capacity models, promise to improve school enrolment and foster long-term educational integration when adopted early in crisis responses (Demir et al., 2025). Despite the long-

standing efforts that have been made in this area, a standardised and holistic approach that supports diversity remains elusive.

Building on this context, this article explores how teachers in Türkiye perceive these challenges, focusing on their understandings and practices related to the education of migrant children. By examining their perspectives through the lens of CRT, the study seeks to contribute to broader international discussions on how teacher competencies, beliefs, and institutional structures can better support culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Teaching in a migration context

In the context of migration in Türkiye, both schooling and teacher-related research highlight several significant challenges. Teacher training programs have generally been slow to adapt to the realities of a multicultural classroom, with migration-related topics often limited to isolated courses rather than being integrated into the overall curriculum (Bulut, 2024). Teachers frequently encounter communication barriers with migrant students due to language differences and cultural unfamiliarity, contributing to academic disengagement, absenteeism, and social isolation (Coşkun, 2022). While many teachers are aware of the socioeconomic challenges that migrant students face, such as poverty and trauma, they often lack the training and institutional support to address these issues effectively in the classroom (Akyürek & Akkoyun, 2024).

Prospective teachers also reveal mixed attitudes toward migration, with many expressing concerns about its negative impact on education, though some recognise the potential for cultural enrichment (Gögebakan-Yildiz, 2017). Some teacher educators advocate for a humanising pedagogy that validates the lived experiences of migrant students, but such approaches are not yet widely supported at the systemic level (Akin-Sabuncu et al., 2024). Compounding these issues, schools in high-migration areas often struggle with overcrowding, limited resources, and inadequate support for both students and educators (Akar, 2010). Together, these findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in teacher education and school infrastructure to ensure inclusive, equitable education for all students in Türkiye's diverse classrooms.

Syrian migrant children in Türkiye face a range of educational barriers, including poverty, child labour, language difficulties, trauma, and legal registration issues. Teachers often show empathy but lack training and institutional support to effectively meet migrant students' needs (Aydin & Kaya, 2019; Uyan-Semerci & Erdoğan, 2018). Migrant children in Türkiye report a moderate sense of school belonging, shaped by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, school type, and length of stay in the country (Mammadova & Aypay, 2023). Belonging tends to be lower among newly arrived children, those from low-income families, and students attending under-resourced public schools. Gender plays a complex role in shaping educational experiences. While immigrant girls often face broader societal barriers, such as early marriage risks and family responsibilities, they are frequently perceived by teachers as more motivated and better integrated than boys, who are more likely to struggle with behavioural and attendance issues (Aydin & Kaya, 2019).

However, girls may still report a reduced sense of belonging due to cultural and social pressures (Mammadova & Aypay, 2023).

There are findings that teachers working with immigrants in Türkiye are in an identity transformation; they “learn on the job” and are faced with language barriers, lack of resources, and role confusion (Karslı-Çalamak & Kılınç, 2021). Expanding on this, recent studies have highlighted both the emotional and professional challenges teachers face in culturally diverse classrooms. Demir-Başaran (2021) found that many teachers of Syrian refugee students experience institutional uncertainty and emotional burden, often navigating these challenges with a strong sense of moral responsibility but little formal support. Akman (2020) showed that teachers’ attitudes toward refugee students are closely tied to their understanding of multicultural education; those with more positive views on cultural diversity tend to be more inclusive in practice. Building on this, a mixed-methods study identifies key components of culturally sensitive pedagogical competence, such as adaptive communication, inclusive instructional strategies, and intercultural awareness (Çelik et al., 2024). The study revealed that although teachers often attempt to meet the needs of students with migration backgrounds, most lack adequate training and rely heavily on personal experience rather than structured guidance. These findings emphasise that fostering inclusive education for migrant children in Türkiye requires systemic investments in teacher training, culturally responsive curricula, and emotional and institutional support frameworks.

Research on culturally responsive education for Syrian migrants in Türkiye reveals multiple barriers and emerging strategies, especially in language adaptation, inclusive pedagogy, and access to equity. A significant challenge is the language and cultural gap between Syrian students and the Turkish education system. Teachers and students face communication difficulties worsened by the lack of culturally adapted materials and insufficient teacher training in inclusive pedagogy (Eker et al., 2023). This is particularly acute for students with disabilities, where both cultural understanding and specialised resources are often missing. Non-formal education, including language courses, catch-up classes, and vocational training, has emerged as a key support system to bridge cultural and curricular gaps, particularly for out-of-school children. However, these programs are not always systematic or scalable (Tutar, 2024). Important steps have been taken toward including Syrian migrants in its education system, but achieving proper cultural responsiveness requires systemic changes in teacher training, curriculum design, non-formal support, and community engagement.

Culturally responsive teaching and teacher competencies

CRT framework states that cultural sensitivity should be essential in teacher attitudes, learning and teaching processes and methods, teacher training, and in-class interactions (Gay, 2013). Beyond recognising cultural diversity, CRT emphasises transforming teaching practices and institutional structures to promote equity and inclusion. While originally developed in North American contexts, it has been widely adopted in international discussions on diversity in education. In Türkiye, where linguistic, regional, and migration-

related diversity intersect, CRT provides a valuable lens for understanding how teachers conceptualise inclusion in practice.

This study uses the CRT framework to analyse teacher competencies defined by Türkiye's Ministry of National Education (MoNE, 2017). The MoNE framework is closely aligned with the European Teacher Competency Framework (Punie & Redecker, 2017), which includes the elements of personal and professional values, professional development, understanding students, teaching and learning process, monitoring and assessment of learning and development, school, family, and community relations, and curriculum and content knowledge. The CRT lens enables a critical examination of how cultural sensitivity is embedded across core professional domains, including teachers' personal and professional values, their ability to recognise and respond to the diverse needs of students, and the design and implementation of inclusive teaching processes. It also informs how teachers monitor and assess student learning in ways that account for linguistic and cultural diversity, engage with families and communities to foster supportive school environments, and critically approach curriculum content to ensure it is inclusive and culturally responsive.

Within this context, pre-service and in-service teacher training emerges as a pivotal area where alignment between policy and practice can be strengthened, particularly in equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for navigating culturally diverse classrooms. Strengthening educators' cultural awareness and reflexivity requires continuous professional development, not only initial training.

Applying CRT in the Turkish context also requires a critical stance that acknowledges its Western origins and adapts its principles to local understandings of diversity, ethnicity, and language. By framing these six competency domains through CRT, the study highlights both the alignment and the gaps between national professional standards and the practical demands of inclusive education for migrant students. Building on this framework, the study empirically examines teachers' self-reported competencies and practices, exploring how these align with culturally responsive principles in everyday classroom realities.

Current study

This study adopts a descriptive approach grounded in the belief that teachers' perspectives offer valuable insights into the everyday realities of inclusive education. Teachers are not only implementers of policy and curriculum but also key informants who experience the complexities of working with migrant students firsthand. By gathering and analysing their self-reported opinions on core professional domains—such as planning, instruction, assessment, family engagement, and professional development—this research aims to construct a grounded picture of inclusive teaching from the practitioners' point of view. Framing these insights within the CRT framework allows the study to critically examine how national teacher competencies (MoNE, 2017) are perceived and enacted in multicultural classroom contexts, highlighting both the strengths and the gaps in current training systems and educational structures.

To further explore these dynamics, the study addresses three key research questions that reflect both

attitudinal and practical dimensions of teachers' engagement with migration-related diversity in their classrooms. These questions aim to illuminate not only how teachers think and feel about their roles but also how they navigate institutional and pedagogical challenges in real-world settings. Specifically, the study asks:

1. How do teachers evaluate their preparation and training for working with students from migrant backgrounds?
2. How do teachers perceive their professional experiences and classroom practices in addressing the needs of students from migrant backgrounds?
3. What are teachers' views and dispositions regarding working with students from migrant backgrounds?

Research design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to explore teachers' views, dispositions, and classroom practices related to working with students from migrant backgrounds. Descriptive research is widely used in social sciences to answer foundational questions about *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *to what extent* (Loeb et al., 2017).

While it does not aim to establish causal relationships, descriptive analysis helps reveal patterns, trends, and needs within a population. These findings can inform practice, highlight critical areas for intervention, and guide future research. According to Loeb et al. (2017), descriptive studies serve as a basis for understanding complex educational phenomena, particularly when the field lacks baseline data. Such insights are especially valuable for policymakers (at local, state, and national levels) and practitioners (such as teachers and school administrators), as they provide a simplified but meaningful landscape of needs and opportunities within educational settings. Therefore, a descriptive approach was deemed appropriate for this study, which aims to identify how teachers experience, evaluate, and respond to cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom without manipulating variables.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 102 in-service teachers working in various public (n=84) and private schools (n=18) across different levels of education in İstanbul, Türkiye. The sample was formed through convenience sampling, a method frequently used in educational settings where access to a large and diverse population is limited (Creswell, 2014). The average age of the participants was 38.3 years, and their mean professional experience was 14 years. Regarding gender, 75 participants identified as female, and 27 as male. Teachers self-reported a subjective economic status (SES) score of 3.16 on a 5-point Likert scale, reflecting a moderate economic perception. Regarding educational qualifications, 40 participants held graduate degrees, while others had bachelor's degrees (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Sample characteristics

Variable	Category / Description	n	%	M
School type	Public	84	82.4	
	Private	18	17.6	
Gender	Female	75	73.5	
	Male	27	26.5	
Age (years)				38.3
Professional experience (years)				14.0
Subjective economic status (1–5)	1 – Very low / 5 – Very high			3.16
Education level	Bachelor's degree	62	60.8	
	Graduate degree (Master's or above)	40	39.2	

Participants were also asked about their cultural self-positioning within Türkiye's multicultural society. When asked whether they perceived themselves as belonging to the dominant culture in Türkiye, 11 teachers responded "Yes," 66 said "No," and 25 indicated "Partially." This distribution suggests a diverse set of cultural identifications among teachers rather than a uniform affiliation with a single dominant identity. Such variation reflects Türkiye's complex sociocultural fabric and may influence how teachers interpret difference, inclusion, and belonging in their classrooms. Teachers reported having an average of 3.8 years of experience working with students from migrant backgrounds, and their classes included an average of 3.1 migrant students. These data indicate professional exposure to culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Data collection tool & procedure

Data were collected through a researcher-developed questionnaire designed to assess teachers' self-reported experiences, perceptions of curriculum responsiveness, and views on their professional preparation for working with culturally diverse student populations. The development of this instrument did not aim to produce a standardised or psychometrically validated scale but rather a context-specific tool to capture teachers' reflections in the Turkish educational setting. During the instrument development process, the research team consulted two field experts to ensure content validity and cultural relevance: one was an international scholar specialising in teacher education and diversity, and the other a professor based in Türkiye with expertise in inclusive education and personal experience as a migrant academic. Their feedback informed the refinement of the item wording, structure, and cultural appropriateness, resulting in the final version of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire included Likert-type items, multiple-choice questions, and demographic information. The items were structured around three core themes:

1. Teachers' dispositions and views on working with migrant students
2. Perceived adequacy of teacher training and curriculum/materials
3. Professional experience and classroom practices

Item construction was informed by relevant literature on CRT (Gay, 2010) and national teacher competency frameworks (MoNE, 2017). The data collection process spanned two consecutive academic

terms (2023–2024 school year), allowing for representation across different school contexts and seasonal teaching cycles. The questionnaire was administered online using a secure web-based platform. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. The survey remained open during the Spring term, and reminders were sent to increase response rates. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Istanbul Aydın University Educational Sciences Ethics Committee. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. No identifying information was collected, and all data was stored securely and used only for academic purposes.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequency distributions, percentages, and means. The analysis aimed to identify trends and dominant patterns in participants' responses, without attempting to establish causal relationships. Descriptive analysis is commonly used in social research to summarise large volumes of data and inform policy or practice recommendations (Babbie, 1975/2020; Loeb et al., 2017). Following the data collection, it was initially transferred to an Excel file and subsequently to the licensed SPSS 2021 package programme. Thereafter, the descriptive analysis was conducted.

Findings

1. Teachers' reflections on pre-service training and professional growth

This section presents teachers' evaluations of their pre-service education and their professional growth experiences in relation to working with students from migrant backgrounds. Framed within the CRT framework (Gay, 2010), these reflections reveal how teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning align, or fail to align, with key CRT dimensions such as culturally responsive pedagogy, caring relationships, and community engagement.

1.1. Perceived adequacy of pre-service teacher education

As part of this study, teachers were asked to reflect on how well their university education prepared them for the practical demands of teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. This reflection aimed to capture their retrospective assessment of how university-based teacher education supported the development of practical and interpersonal competencies required for inclusive teaching. Specifically, teachers were asked to consider five domains of professional practice: material development, lesson planning, implementation and evaluation, communication with children, and communication with families.

TABLE 2

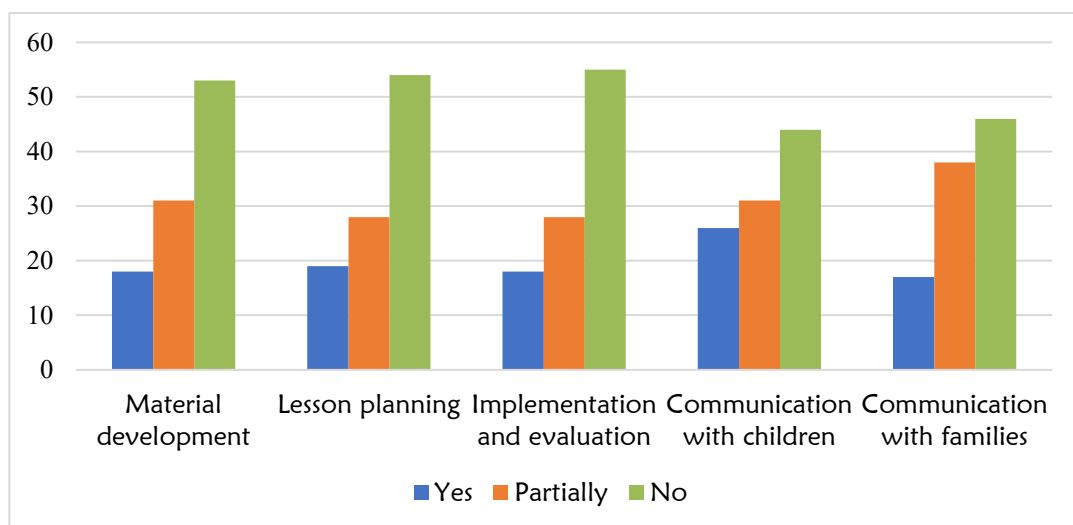
Reported frequency of competency development by domain in pre-service teacher education

Competency	Yes	Partially	No
Material development	18	31	53
Lesson planning	19	28	54
Implementation and evaluation	18	28	55
Communication with children	26	31	44
Communication with families	17	38	46

The findings reveal that most teachers felt either only partially prepared or not prepared at all, especially in areas such as material development (n=84) (84%), implementation and evaluation (n=83) (83%), and communication with families (n=84) (84%). The data suggest that most teachers entered the profession with limited preparation for addressing the pedagogical and communicative challenges associated with culturally diverse classrooms. Fewer teachers reported feeling adequately prepared in these domains, suggesting that training programs may have provided limited opportunities to engage with the practical and relational dimensions of CRT.

FIGURE 1

Teachers' self-reported preparedness levels



1.2. Perceived contributions of teaching migrant students to teacher competencies

Participants were asked to rank the teacher competencies they felt were most developed due to working with students from migrant backgrounds. Based on the MoNE (2017), in line with European Teacher Competency (Punie & Redecker, 2017) frameworks, six key areas were presented:

- Personal and professional values – professional development
- Understanding students
- Teaching and learning process
- Monitoring and assessment of learning and development

- e) School, family, and community relations
- f) Curriculum and content knowledge

Participants were invited to indicate their top three areas, in order of significance. A simple weighted ranking system was used to calculate the total value for each competency: first rank selections were multiplied by 3, second rank by 2, and third rank by 1. In total, “Understanding Students” was selected 43 times as the first rank, 13 times as the second rank, and 9 times as the third rank, making it the most frequently prioritised competency. This was followed by “Personal and Professional Development”, which was ranked first by 20 teachers, second by 15, and third by 16. “Teaching and Learning Process” also emerged as the third strong area of perceived growth, particularly in the second and third ranks (27 and 23, respectively). “School, family, and community relations” was also another significant dimension in the total value of 88. Competencies such as “Monitoring and Assessment” and “Curriculum and Content Knowledge” were mentioned less frequently in total (46 and 12, respectively), indicating that teachers perceived the most significant impact of working with migrant students in interpersonal and value-based dimensions of their professional practice.

2. Teachers’ professional experiences and classroom practices

This section explores how teachers perceive their day-to-day professional experiences in relation to working with students from migrant backgrounds. It examines their reflections on classroom practices, school environments, and curriculum implementation, particularly how they navigate cultural diversity in teaching. In the context of CRT (Gay, 2010), understanding how teachers view their curriculum, materials, and ways of adapting instruction to create inclusive classrooms helps illuminate what cultural responsiveness means from their perspective. By focusing on the perceptions of pedagogical work in diverse settings, this section aims to illuminate teachers’ opinions when addressing the needs of students from migrant backgrounds.

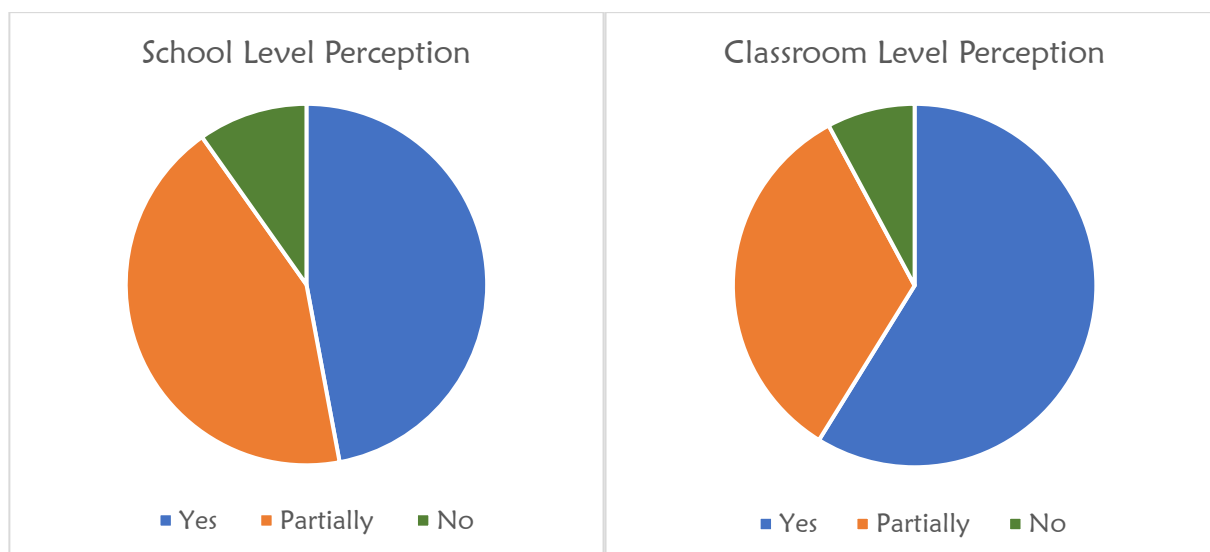
2.1. Inclusive school and classroom environments

When teachers were asked, “Do you think that your classroom provides an environment where immigrant students or children from immigrant families feel safe, included in the community, and actively participate?”, most teachers perceived their classrooms as safe and inclusive spaces for students from migrant backgrounds. Specifically, 60 teachers agreed with this statement, while 34 partially agreed and eight disagreed. At the broader institutional level, perceptions were slightly less affirmative: 48 teachers viewed their schools as inclusive, 44 partially agreed, and 10 disagreed. These findings indicate a consistent but differentiated pattern between classroom-level and school-level perceptions. While most teachers viewed their own classrooms as spaces where migrant students can feel safe and included, fewer expressed the same level of confidence about inclusivity at the institutional level. This difference may reflect teachers’ stronger

sense of agency within their immediate teaching contexts than broader school structures.

FIGURE 2

Perceptions of inclusive and safe environments at school and classroom levels



2.2. Perception of curriculum responsiveness

When teachers were asked, “Do you think the curriculum you teach is culturally responsive?” Thirty-three teachers (32%) said “Yes,” 39 (38%) said “Partially,” and 30 (30%) said “No.” Overall, these responses suggest that only a minority of teachers view the current curriculum as fully responsive to cultural diversity.

Teachers were then asked to evaluate the national curriculum’s responsiveness to the needs of migrant and minority students across five core dimensions: planning, objectives and outcomes, content, learning experiences, and assessment. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Teachers’ perceptions of curriculum responsiveness

Curriculum Dimension	Definitely Yes	Yes	Not Sure	No	Definitely No
Planning	7	31	27	20	17
Objectives and Outcomes	5	32	27	22	16
Content	5	28	29	26	14
Learning Experiences	5	32	27	24	5
Assessment	6	32	23	24	17

Across all dimensions, responses were primarily concentrated in the “Not Sure”, “No” and “Definitely No” categories. Very few teachers selected “Definitely Yes,” and “Yes”, indicating that most participants did not perceive the curriculum as sufficiently responsive to the needs of culturally diverse and migrant students.

2.3. Responsiveness of educational materials

Teachers were asked, “Do you think the educational materials provided to you are culturally sensitive and inclusive of other cultures?” Twenty-two teachers (22%) responded “Yes,” 48 (47%) responded “Partially,” and 32 (31%) answered “No”. This distribution shows that less than one-third of the teachers found the materials adequate for representing or supporting cultural diversity in the classroom, while nearly half viewed them as only partially responsive.

These findings suggest that although some degree of multicultural awareness exists within the materials used, most teachers recognise significant gaps in cultural inclusivity. The predominance of “Partially” responses points to an educational context where materials may touch upon cultural topics but lack depth, contextual relevance, or consistent integration across subjects. Overall, these responses point to a general sense that current educational resources do not fully reflect or support the diversity present in today’s classrooms.

3. Competence and willingness to work with migrant students

This section examines teachers’ willingness and self-perceived competence in working with migrant students. In the context of CRT (Gay, 2010), these indicators reflect teachers’ willingness to work in diverse contexts and confidence in applying inclusive practices. The findings indicated that 38 teachers expressed willingness to work with students from migrant backgrounds, 24 reported reluctance, and 40 were uncertain. This distribution reflects varied orientations toward cultural diversity in the classroom, with only a minority demonstrating a clear preference for engaging with migrant students. Next to it, regarding their self-perceived competence working with this group of students, 38 teachers expressed they (37%) felt competent, 53 (52%) said “Partially,” and 11 (11%) felt not competent.

This distribution reflects a considerable level of ambivalence, with relatively few teachers showing a clear preference either way. In relation to their self-perceived competence in working with migrant students, 38 teachers (37%) stated that they felt competent, 53 (52%) responded “Partially,” and 11 (11%) reported feeling not competent. Taken together, these findings indicate that while some teachers feel adequately prepared to support culturally diverse learners, the majority perceive their competence as limited or incomplete. The coexistence of moderate willingness and partial self-efficacy suggests that teachers may recognise the importance of inclusive practice yet feel uncertain about their own readiness to implement it effectively.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into how teachers in Türkiye perceive their preparation, professional growth, and classroom practices when working with students from migrant backgrounds. The findings reveal important insights into both the perceived gaps in pre-service education and the growth

opportunities that arise from real-world teaching experience. Interpreted through the lens of CRT, these findings reveal cultural responsiveness of teaching processes in migration-affected classrooms.

Teachers generally reported feeling underprepared by their pre-service education in key pedagogical areas related to cultural diversity. Particularly low ratings were seen in competencies such as material development, assessment, and family communication, suggesting that current training programs may not sufficiently address the needs of a multicultural learning environment. This aligns with critiques in the literature emphasising the limitations of traditional teacher education models in preparing teachers for diversity (Gay, 2010; OECD, 2010). Given that most participants were experienced teachers, these findings underline the importance of in-service and continuing professional learning opportunities, not only pre-service preparation, to sustain culturally responsive practice throughout teachers' careers. Internationally, teachers often feel underprepared to support migration-driven diversity, with systemic barriers like rigid curricula and limited training hindering CRT. Research shows that effective professional development emphasising empathy, reflection, and leadership support enhances teacher preparedness and helps schools view cultural diversity as a learning asset (Akin-Sabuncu et al., 2024; Forghani-Arani et al., 2019; Kim & Cooc, 2023; Obondo, 2018; Vanahans et al., 2024)

Despite shortcomings in initial training, the study shows that working directly with migrant students contributes positively to developing key teacher competencies. Many teachers reported professional learning due to their direct experiences with migrant students. The most frequently mentioned areas of growth were personal and professional values, understanding students, and school-family-community relations. It suggests that interpersonal and value-based dimensions of teaching are particularly enriched through these experiences. This supports existing research indicating that experience with diversity fosters greater empathy, adaptability, and professional reflection (Cauchie et al., 2019; Gündeş Orman & Şenol, 2024; Vižintin, 2018). It also illustrates the importance of relational pedagogy in multicultural settings, where empathy and interpersonal understanding become as crucial as curricular expertise.

These findings suggest that even mere exposure to diversity through direct contact with migrant students can spark meaningful growth in interpersonal and value-oriented dimensions of teaching. In this sense, interaction becomes a catalyst for developing empathy, relational awareness, and reflective practice. However, more technical competencies such as “curriculum and content knowledge” and “assessment” were less frequently reported as areas of growth. This suggests that hands-on experience alone may not suffice to strengthen all dimensions of teaching competence, especially in areas that require more structured pedagogical knowledge and training. Hence, ongoing professional development and in-service learning opportunities become critical in addressing these gaps (Širca et al., 2019).

Most teachers believed that their classrooms were relatively inclusive and safe for migrant students, but they were less confident about their schools as institutions. Similarly, most teachers expressed uncertainty or scepticism regarding the curriculum's ability and available educational materials to address the needs of migrant students, with only a minority considering the curriculum culturally responsive. These concerns are consistent with findings from international literature, which emphasises that inclusive education is not only

about teacher attitudes but also depends on culturally representative content, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and institutional support (Civitillo et al., 2018; Vižintin, 2018). Teachers often take on compensatory roles, developing their own strategies and materials in the absence of culturally responsive curricular support (Çelik et al., 2024), which can lead to burnout or uneven educational outcomes. This finding reflects what Gay (2013) calls “institutional incongruence,” where teachers’ individual commitments to equity are not matched by systemic structures.

These findings suggest that while many teachers express a degree of openness toward working with migrant students, a substantial number also report feeling only partially competent or uncertain about responding to diverse classroom needs. Notably, perceived under-preparedness should not be conflated with unwillingness. Hesitation often reflects structural constraints, such as limited training, lack of resources, and unclear institutional guidance, rather than resistance to inclusion. What may appear as a lack of motivation can, in fact, stem from various structural and emotional factors, such as limited training, lack of institutional support, fear of failure, or unfamiliarity with cultural and linguistic differences. In practice, most teachers described their willingness to engage with migrant students as moderate and their self-assessed competence levels as developing. Some expressed genuine interest, while others showed hesitation, not necessarily due to negative attitudes, but due to perceived lack of tools, strategies, or confidence. This highlights the need to distinguish between teachers’ attitudes and their enacted capacity; hesitation or disengagement may reflect systemic constraints rather than individual resistance. Additionally, the hesitation could be related to shifts in their professional identity, often navigating new roles and emotional challenges without clear institutional guidance (Demir-Başaran, 2021; Karslı-Çalamak & Kılınç, 2021). Consistent with previous research, these findings reinforce the role of adequate preparation and ongoing support in shaping teacher efficacy and inclusive engagement (Becker et al., 2023).

Taken together, these findings contribute to a more contextually grounded understanding of CRT. They demonstrate that teachers can develop relational competencies through lived experience, yet these capacities remain fragile without systemic reinforcement through curriculum, leadership, and policy. While pre-service education remains limited in equipping teachers for multicultural environments, ongoing, equity-oriented professional development is essential. As classrooms grow increasingly diverse, supporting teachers in translating empathy and reflection into pedagogical action is not only an educational necessity but also a moral and social imperative. In this way, the study extends CRT from a primarily classroom-level construct to a systemic framework that considers the policy and institutional conditions required for its realisation in Türkiye.

Conclusion

This study provides a grounded understanding of how teachers in Türkiye perceive their preparation, competencies, and professional experiences when working with students from migrant backgrounds through the lens of CRT. The analysis highlights that CRT in this context extends beyond individual attitudes; it

requires alignment between teachers' beliefs, institutional structures, and professional learning opportunities. The findings reveal that while many teachers demonstrate openness and a sense of moral responsibility toward migrant students, they frequently feel underprepared to meet the complex demands of culturally diverse classrooms.

The diversity in how teachers positioned themselves culturally within Türkiye's multicultural society also provides important insight. Teachers who did not fully identify with the dominant culture often expressed heightened sensitivity to diversity, suggesting that personal cultural awareness may enhance relational and empathetic engagement with migrant learners. Despite the challenges, teachers reported significant professional growth through direct engagement with migrant students, particularly in interpersonal domains, understanding students, and relational communication. However, technical competencies such as curriculum adaptation and assessment were less frequently reported as areas of development, indicating that hands-on experience alone may be insufficient to address all facets of inclusive teaching. Moreover, many teachers expressed concerns about the adequacy of existing curricula and school environments to support inclusion. These patterns echo international findings (Szelei et al., 2019) that fragmented and short-term professional development can limit sustainable change.

In an increasingly mobile and changing world, the preparedness of teachers and schools to support migrant students is not only a pedagogical concern but a social imperative. At the systemic level, inclusive education must move from fragmented initiatives to a coherent, equity-oriented strategy embedded in national policy and institutional practice. Pre-service teacher education programs should be revised to embed migration and diversity-related content across all pedagogical domains, rather than limiting it to isolated or elective courses. These programs must also incorporate more practical and experiential components, allowing future teachers to gain early and meaningful exposure to culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Such exposure fosters confidence, empathy, and the ability to develop contextually relevant teaching strategies. At the professional level, in-service professional development should be continuous, collaborative, and critically oriented toward justice and equity, helping teachers link reflection with pedagogical action. Equally important is ensuring access to culturally inclusive materials, multilingual tools, and representative curricula. Moreover, addressing the educational needs of migrant students requires a systemic and coherent reform across the curriculum, school structure, and teacher education systems. Fragmented or individual-level efforts are not sufficient; instead, inclusive education must be embedded as a foundational principle in national education policies, school practices, and teacher development pathways (Shuali Trachtenberg et al., 2020). Finally, teacher well-being must be prioritised through mentorship, peer networks, and reflective professional learning communities that support educators in navigating the emotional and professional complexities of multicultural classrooms (Diab & Green, 2024; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). By situating the Turkish experience within wider international debates, this study contributes to extending the CRT framework beyond individual pedagogy to encompass systemic and policy dimensions of culturally responsive education.

Limitations & future research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, it relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability or personal interpretation. Second, while it captures a broad picture of teacher perceptions, it does not include direct classroom observations or migrant student voices, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices. Third, the findings reflect a specific national context, and while they may resonate with other migration-affected settings, generalizability should be cautiously approached. Lastly, the data collected in this study were obtained from a survey developed by the researchers, rather than from standardised instruments. This should be considered as another concern about the generalisability of the data.

Further research should incorporate longitudinal designs to explore how teacher competencies evolve over time in response to increasing classroom diversity. Studies involving classroom-based observations, as well as perspectives from migrant students and families, would also enrich the understanding of how inclusive education is enacted and experienced. Finally, comparative studies across regions or countries could help identify scalable practices and systemic factors that facilitate or hinder CRT.

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