

2020

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### Recommended Citation

selvitopu, abdullah and Gün, Fatih. (2020). “I feel so happy now” Afghan students’ cross-cultural adaptation experiences in Turkey. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 9.*

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol12/iss2/9>

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# “I feel so happy now”: Afghan Students' Cross-Cultural Adaptation Experiences in Turkey

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand Afghan students' cross-cultural adaptation experiences by applying Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation. Within the first part of this study, we discuss cross-cultural adaptation theory and give some information about Afghan immigrants in Turkey. Then, Afghan students' experiences are discussed under three sub-themes within the frame of Kim's stress adaptation growth model. The participant group consisted of three middle school students who have come from Afghanistan to Turkey at different times. Data for this study were collected by using semi-structured interviews and analyzed through a content analysis technique. Findings revealed that Afghan students have lived through many positive and negative experiences in the whole process. Similar cultural characteristics, the target language, people's attitudes towards immigrants in the host country, religious and cultural proximity play critical roles in adapting to the new environment. The last section includes a conclusion and offers some implications for research and practice.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, Experiences, Immigrants, Afghans

## Introduction

Immigration has been an inseparable part of humanity throughout history, as it is today. The only difference today may be the frequency, type, motive, or magnitude of it. People have crossed the boundaries of cultures and countries countless times to meet their various needs. In this sense, while running away from conflict, poverty, war, discrimination, or human rights abuses, and looking for freedom, safety, security, and a better life, millions of people have moved from one place to another recently, though they have faced many dangers along the way (Van Hear et al., 2009). After a dangerous trip, the challenging part starts upon arrival in the host country. They realize that most of their old habits and behaviors that were beneficial and helpful in their homeland may prove useless in their new environment, while at the same time they try hard to carry out their daily activities and survive in their new situation (Kim,

2017). All these experiences before and after arriving at the new environment have attracted the attention of social scientists, governments, stakeholders, and decision makers, and they have taken all these lived experiences into consideration while making policies. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences that Afghan students lived before and after resettlement?
2. How did they adapt to the new environment?

## **Literature Review**

### **Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory**

Cross-cultural adaptation is one of the most fundamental, life-enhancing and sustaining activities, since immigrants in a new environment need to sustain an equilibrium and find relief and comfort in their new life (Jantsch, 1980). Adaptation is built into human nature, and it's a tool to be used in an unfamiliar culture. Communication between immigrants and the host environment is a must for successful cross-cultural adaptation. With those communication activities, adaptive change occurs (von Bertalanffy, 1968). As the communication continues, the individual manages to establish a relatively consistent, mutual and useful relationship with the new culture.

Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory highlights specific aspects of experiences individuals go through in a new and unfamiliar culture by consolidating terms such as acculturation, deculturation, coping and adjustment, integration, assimilation, and culture shock. Kim associates these terms into cross-cultural adaptation successfully. Acculturation refers to the process in which an individual obtains some of the features of a new culture. Another important term is deculturation, which means losing some of one's old habits while adopting new cultural patterns. As a result of acculturation and deculturation, adaptive changes begin to occur first in the "surface" parts of the original cultural habits, such as food, dress, music, etc. Given enough time for cultural interaction and learning, deeper changes such as moral and ethical values, joy, and beauty occur in time (Kim, 2017).

Adaptive changes cause a "stress" for an individual as a result of one's resistance to change and desire to keep old habits. An individual can insist on keeping old habits and remaining faithful to his or her original identity. While coping with stress and striving to create an equilibrium, people obtain new abilities, habits, and creativity, and they discover their power, understand inner existence, see the limits, and recreate themselves (Kim, 2017). As a result of these efforts and experiences, people get through the "stress" part and start experiencing the "adaptation" part. From this point of view, stress is essential for adaptation. In other words, the more an individual endeavors in the stress part, the more an individual improves himself or herself in the adaptation part. After successfully experiencing stress and adaptation processes, the individual starts experiencing the "growth" process. In the growth part, an individual experiences equilibrium, self-fulfillment, and self-realization, and does not feel separated or isolated from the new environment.

In sum, unexpected changes in an individual's life mostly come with a pain, and this pain results in stress. Struggling with it successfully lets that individual into an adaptation process and finally, the pain at the beginning turns into a gain in the growth period. To get the gain in the growth part, it is mostly inevitable to face pain in the stress part, just as in the quote "no pain, no gain." Kim (2001; 2005; 2017) explained stress, adaptation, and growth processes in

the theory of cross-cultural adaptation as a psychological process in the forward and upward direction. The progression of the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic is fragile, steady, and linear. It is not smooth, and it has a perpetual and cyclic “drawback-to-leap” pattern. Each adaptive change causes stress and leads to a “drawback” and individuals reorganize themselves, find solutions and “leap forward” (Kim, 2017). As long as an individual encounters challenges about communication and interaction in the host environment, the stress, adaptation, and growth processes go on. Individuals experience the harsh, severe, and disruptive effects of stress most acutely when they first interact with the new culture. Undergoing adaptive and internal change for a while, the effect of stress causes less disruption and disequilibrium. Coping with stress and challenges and forming positive relationships in the host environment leads to an entire relief of the internal circumstance of the individual. These processes are experienced by immigrants all over the world in different degrees, just as they are also experienced by Afghan immigrants in Turkey (Alimia, 2014). It is beneficial here to give an overview of Afghan immigration to Turkey before examining how these immigrants experience cross-cultural adaptation processes.

### **An Overview of Afghan Immigrants in Turkey**

For many years, Turkey has become a center of attraction for immigrants, as it is a crossroads country between Asia and Europe geographically. Many people have come to Turkey, especially from the Middle East, as they run away from the conflicts and wars in their countries. The status of immigrants in Turkey was designated according to the Geneva Convention (İçduygu, 2007). The Republic of Turkey has signed the 1951 Geneva Convention with a geographical limitation. As a result of Turkey’s geographical restriction, only immigrants coming from European Council member countries take official refugee status. Turkey provides temporary international protection for immigrants coming from countries that are not members of the European Council, such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran (Grand National Assembly of Turkey [GNAT], 1961). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2019) indicates that there are 4 million temporarily protected immigrants and asylum seekers in Turkey. According to the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM, 2019), this makes Turkey the country with the most immigrants living there in the world.

There are 3,676,000 Syrian asylum seekers (under temporary protection) and 170,000 Afghan and 142,000 Iraqi immigrants in Turkey (UNHCR, 2019). The numbers of immigrants in Turkey are given in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Numbers of asylum seekers and other refugees in Turkey*

Country of origin	Number of Persons (as of August 31, 2019)	%
Syria	3,600,000	90.0
Afghanistan	170,000	4.25
Iraq	142,000	3.55
Iran	39,000	0.98
Somalia	5,700	0.14
Other Nationalities	43,300	1.07
Total	4,00,000	99.99

Source: UNHCR (2019)

Afghanistan has been a leading country for years in sending immigrants to Turkey because of wars and conflicts in that country. It has been struggling with war and internal conflicts for many years, and the governments couldn't supply sufficient food, water, and security or education services for people (Geyik, 2018). The Cold War, Russian invasion, and American interference after Taliban activities have become remarkable milestones in Afghanistan's history, and a lot of people left the country seeking a better life. Turkey has become one of the first countries affected by immigration waves because of its cultural and historical proximities to Afghanistan. All these struggles have affected children most. A gift from Afghanistan to the world literature, Khaled Hosseini, expresses this situation in his world-famous book *The Kite Runner*, writing, "there are a lot of children in Afghanistan, but little childhood" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 274). In Turkey, 33% of immigrants from different countries are children and 28% of Afghans are children (UNHCR, 2019).

### Research Method

This qualitative case study mainly focused on Afghan students' cross-cultural adaptation processes by applying Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation to understand how they have adapted to the host country. The study group consisted of three middle school students who came to Turkey from Afghanistan at different times. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994) in a qualitative case study, researchers aim to study complex and complicated phenomena within their own circumstances.

### Participants

Participants were purposefully selected to take part in semi-structured interviews. All three were underrepresented middle school students from Afghanistan, and they were all male students. Further information about the participants is given in Table 2.

**Table 2**

#### *Characteristics of Research Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Grade	Length of time spent in Turkey
Abdel	11	6	2 years, 8 months
Saleh	11	6	3 years
Aditya	10	5	6 years

### Data Collection

We used ten questions to prepare a semi-structured interview form, which is the major source to gather data for qualitative studies (Drever, 1995). We prepared these questions taking into consideration three major themes according to Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory. These are the stress, adaptation, and growth processes of students. Major themes and sub-themes were discussed through these categorizations. We recorded the interviews and transcribed them for analysis. The interviews continued until the researcher believed that the interviews would not offer any further different or remarkable opinions. After the second participant, we saw that the themes and experiences stated by the participants had been repeated, and the third participant assured data saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We shared the

transcriptions with participants, and they were given a chance to confirm their statements to increase trustworthiness.

## Findings

We grouped findings under three themes: (a) stress-related experiences before and after resettlement, (b) adaptation to the new environment, and (c) growth in the new environment. These themes indicated what participants experienced from the first day of their leaving home until the time of the interview.

### First Process: Stress Before and After Resettlement

Changing one's environment causes stress for people, especially for children. Participants in this study experienced stress before and after resettlement. They stated that they had dealt with difficulties on their journey before coming to Turkey, and they have experienced economic difficulties, communication problems, and accommodation-related problems after their arrival. All three children left their country because of war-related problems, and they were 4, 8 and 9 years old when they came to Turkey.

It was compulsory. My father had enemies. He said so. Enemies, so we came here three years ago. I was very young. I didn't understand, and we came here (Saleh).

Interviewer: Why did you leave your home?

Abdel: There was war. For 52 years.

Security is essential for a proper life, and as seen in their interviews, they didn't have any other choice than to leave their homes, as they couldn't feel safe in their country.

### *Ignorance is strength! Is it?*

For similar reasons, their fathers each decided for their families to leave their home, and they didn't give an explanation to the children. The children just did what their father wanted them to do. It can be inferred from their statements that not receiving an explanation made the children feel more anxious about their departure. It is not clear why their fathers didn't give them an explanation about their leaving. Perhaps they didn't have time to explain and didn't want to make them feel anxious. In other words, they might have thought that for their children, "ignorance is strength," to quote George Orwell's (1949/1961) world-famous novel *1984*.

I didn't ask. I don't know whether my mum asked or not. We were at home. My father said we are going. Everybody asked, "Where?" He didn't say. It was evening. He told us, "Go and sleep." To my mother, he said, "Come and sit here, I will tell you." We slept. They talked. In the morning, we left home. (Saleh)

He said, "We are going." I was anxious and scared. We gathered our belongings. Then we came here. I didn't know; I learned one day later. A few months later. After we came here (Abdel).

Contrary to their fathers' expectations, it is obvious that a lack of knowledge about their journey made them feel more anxious and scared. Sabahattin Ali (1943/2017), a famous and

gifted Turkish writer, expresses this situation with these words in his well-known book *Madonna in a Fur Coat*: “It is easier to find a hero to land in a well, known to have a dragon at the bottom than to find a person who will dare to go down to a well whose bottom is not known at all.”

***We walked at night, walked and walked all the time!***

The reason for their leaving was because of wars, inadequate living conditions, and difficulties they faced in their daily life. These difficulties didn't end after they decided to leave, and they also encountered some dangers on their way just after leaving their home country. They shared their experiences and struggles they came across on their journey with the following statements:

It was night, I was sleepy and scared. It was difficult for me. I was hungry for one day, thirsty, my mouth was bleeding because of thirstiness. There was a fountain. Water, we didn't know whether it was clean or dirty. We drank it. We were very tired. My father said, “Hide, bend your heads” to everyone. (Saleh)

Aditya mentioned similar problems his family experienced on their way and shared their experiences with these words:

It was night when we left our home. We traveled in truck haulage until morning. We started walking at dawn, and we walked for 12 hours. We walked there, family. My sister was very thirsty. A relative gave her water. We walked holding each other's hands, not to lose each other. (Aditya)

Abdel had similar experiences and emphasized that he was really afraid during their journey.

I was scared. A taxi took us to my grandmother's home. After that, we walked. We came here from Iran and walked for 4 to 5 hours. I was scared. I was afraid of falling into a marsh. It was stone, gravel, soil. We walked at night, waked all the time. (Abdel)

Saleh also mentioned his fear during their journey:

I didn't see happiness. Everybody was scared. I didn't know of whom are they afraid. Then I started to feel scared. I didn't know if there is an animal or something else.

It can be inferred from his words that fear is contagious, especially for children. As seen in the quotes, they didn't have easy journeys. They had food, beverage, and security-related problems on their way. In the midst of all these struggles, their only chance was that they were not alone during their journey.

***You will never walk alone!***

Shared traumatic experiences bring people closer and prompt them to act together—sometimes voluntarily and sometimes forcibly. The children stated that they were not alone on their difficult journeys:

There was no one at the beginning, then we arrived somewhere. There were some people there like us, running away from war. Other friends joined, too. Some were coming from Afghanistan. Not so crowded. I remember almost 15 people. (Saleh)

A few, there were two to three groups of people with us, 10 to 15 people. (Abdel)

During the interview, they expressed that the only good side of their journey was that they were not alone, and they felt relieved while saying, "We were not alone," after mentioning their difficulties.

### ***It was an empty house!***

Their struggles weren't over yet, and they encountered more difficulties in the new environment. They came across empty houses at first, which they recounted in the following words:

We entered the house and had a rest. There was no pillow or blanket. We used our belongings as a pillow and blanket. I didn't go out for one week. Then my father started to work; he bought a carpet. (Saleh)

It was an old house. Normal. There was a couch. Nothing else. (Aditya)

One of the participants especially emphasized his experience with economic difficulties.

Here it is really difficult. My father doesn't work sometimes; they do not give him his money. For example, he worked for two days; they didn't give money. That is our life. My mother is ill too; the doctor said she has a problem. My father sometimes doesn't work. They say he doesn't have [legal] permission. So, it is difficult. I feel sad when my father doesn't work. (Saleh)

Having economic difficulties is hard for everyone, but it is obvious that it was harder for them since they didn't have anyone they could turn to in such difficult circumstances.

### ***I stayed at home for a few months.***

Language is very important for everyone, as it is the best tool for appropriate communication, especially for a person in a new environment. Having positive communication with the new environment helps people feel stress less, while a lack of communication causes problems not only mentally but also physically. Communication also directly affected their social life. Because they couldn't speak Turkish during their first days in the country, these children couldn't communicate with others and couldn't go out for a long time.

I stayed at home for one week, didn't go out, sitting, reading Kur'an-ı Kerim. Sometimes, I helped my mom. Mother was ill. She was pregnant. I helped her when she needed help. Then I went out. I met Recep. (Saleh)

Saleh also stated that a lack of language proficiency made him upset in his educational life.

When we came here, our neighbors were playing outside, with my brother. Then I wanted to go out, but I couldn't. Because I couldn't speak Turkish. I stayed at home



for a few months. I learned a little Turkish, my brother helped me. I was repeating all the time, not to tell something wrong. Then I met my friends. (Aditya)

They also mentioned what their family members experienced regarding language barriers:

My father sometimes meets his friends, but my mother doesn't go out. Because she doesn't know Turkish, she doesn't understand what they are saying. She can't speak Turkish. It makes her unhappy. Now she is sick. She goes to a psychologist, had a problem with her brain, I don't know. She gets angry easily; she is ill. She is very sad. She wants to make friends, talks to them. (Saleh)

Aditya also talked about similar situations involving his family members.

My family doesn't go to neighbors. They feel shy because they don't speak Turkish. (Aditya)

Having an efficient interaction with other people in society is very important for mental well-being. The exact opposite case may end up causing health problems for an individual, as in our participants' family members' situations. Their family members have had some health issues because of the inadequacy of interaction with people around them, as a result of target language inadequacy. One of the participant's mothers had some psychological problems as a consequence of isolation from society, and another participant's mother still has problems socializing with others, as they stated above.

## **Second Process: Adaptation to the New Environment**

As Kim (2007) stated, the stress process is followed by the adaptation process. Individuals feel stress because of difficulties experienced before and after arriving at the new environment, and they try to find new ways to maintain an equilibrium and adapt to the new environment. In this sense, participants in this study become more comfortable in the host environment by experiencing the hospitality of Turkish people, learning the target language, playing games, and making new friends. As immigrants who had difficulties in communicating in the host language, they found some ways to communicate. Body language and facial expressions were the first things participants mentioned, while using technology was another one.

We used sign language. Then my father used a telephone [as a translator]. We talked, the phone translated into Turkish. He said, "Go to this street, houses are cheap there." We found a house near Recep's. It was for rent. We found the owner. Communicated with sign language. Then we rented. We stayed in that house. (Saleh)

***I felt happy. I was scared at first.***

Hospitality is one of the keys for newcomers to feel better and cope with stress. Participants emphasized that they were really happy when they felt the hospitality of the Turkish people.

Our landlord visited us, brought something to eat. Then invited us to them. I speak a little Turkish, a little, know how to greet. I translated it to my mother. Then we visited them. They visited us. We communicated in this way. (Abdel)

Saleh shared his experience about their neighbors as follows:

They didn't bring us. But when we visited them, they had a stove. We drank tea. Then they visited us. We bought something, tea, biscuits, cookies, etc. They visited us, as guests. They talked then went up. (Saleh)

Abdel's happiness could be seen in his eyes while sharing his experience with their neighbors during the first days.

I didn't know "sarma" [a traditional dish made from stuffed vine leaves]. Our neighbors brought us. I felt happy. I was scared at first. (Aditya)

In Turkish culture, offering and serving food means a lot, and it is a symbol of sincerity, friendship, and Turkish hospitality. As seen in the quotes, feeling hospitality makes them feel happy and relieved.

### ***Five, four, three, two, one ... olly oxen free!***

Children have a different world and different adaptation skills from their parents. Playing games constitutes an important part of their life. It helps children socialize in their new environment and allows them to learn the new language better and more quickly. All of the participants expressed almost the same things on this topic and emphasized that playing games, especially similar ones, makes them happy.

My brother was playing hide and seek with me. He said, "Can I play with you?" I said yes. Sign language. You run, I catch you. I explained it. Hide and seek. He said, "Can I play with you?" I said yes, then we played. We had similar games. Hide and seek. Tag. Playing keepy-uppy. Skipping rope. Some games are the same. I improved my Turkish, learned new games. They learned new games from me. ... I was happy because I knew the same games. My friend told me how to play. Then we played. (Saleh)

Abdel and Aditya also stated that having similar games made them feel better and happy.

There was a mountain next to our home. We climbed it. We played hide and seek. There were good places to hide. Football, volleyball, basketball. Playing helped me to know Turkish better, with Turkish children. (Aditya)

Playing games was the most common thing in their interviews, and while they talked about games, it was easy to see how happy they were. As seen in their experience, playing games helps children socialize and adapt to the new environment better.

### ***I felt like a stranger.***

The study participants had similar school experiences. Similar to the stress-adaptation-growth processes, they felt stress in the first days in their schools and adapted to it in time with the help of positive communication experiences with friends and teachers. As time passed, they felt better and did a good job.

Unhappiness. I was excited and nervous. Because I was going to stop playing, start studying. (Abdel)

Saleh and Aditya stated that they felt scared at first, but now they can do all their homework. They feel better and they are happy.

I felt a stranger. Everybody was talking, I didn't know what they are talking about. I said, "What is going to happen now? How can I study now?" I came to class and studied hard. I understood the courses, I don't know how. I was asking my friends when I don't understand Turkish. I played games; my family bought books for me. If I don't understand something in the book, I asked my friends at school, in the neighborhood. (Saleh)

As seen in their words, their negative experiences were replaced with positive ones thanks to their positive interactions with their friends and teachers. This positive interaction also helped them feel better and adapt to the new environment more quickly.

How they spend their free time is also important for their adaptation process, and the children stated that they do beneficial activities to improve their Turkish. These activities have helped them adapt to the new environment better. The following reflections are about their free-time activities:

I read the book. Watch series, for example, cartoons because my brother watches them. They help me improve my Turkish, learn new words better. (Abdel)

Aditya also mentioned similar things to improve his Turkish and free time activities but with one difference:

I read books. It helps me with Turkish. I don't watch TV. We don't have a TV at home. (Aditya)

He said that they don't have a television at their home. When asked why, he felt uncomfortable and was not willing to answer, so we moved on to the next question. It seems that they still have economic difficulties. As mentioned above, they still do not have appropriate furniture at their home, such as couches, carpets, television, etc., and it is obvious that this makes them unhappy.

Moving to a new country means identifying similarities and differences. All these differences bring changes first in the surface areas such as food, clothes, and music interests (Kim, 2007). Saleh first mentioned differences, especially about clothes, and added in the end, "I wear like this now [a pair of trousers and a sweater]."

Clothes are different. They wear different things in my country. We wore them, some wore trousers there, but not many. 10% or less. Music is so different because language is different. Foods are different. But we had pilaf there; it is here too. But we had different pilafs also. (Saleh)

Aditya mentioned his experiences about food as follows:

Foods are different. We don't eat "dolma" [stuffed vegetables]. We don't eat "arabasi" soup [a traditional soup in Karaman]. We had different trousers in Afghanistan, different. But I eat them when my mother cooked now. (Abdel)

As they mentioned, they figured out some differences, and now they are accustomed to these differences, which are now part of their present life. Besides observing similarities in surface areas, having similar religious beliefs also has a positive effect on participants. Saleh started his experience and feelings about religious proximity.

When we came here, we didn't know if it is a Muslim country or not. We learned later and we were happy. We went to the mosque with my father. Imam said something but we couldn't understand it. But I understand it now. (Saleh)

Observing religious and ethnic proximity helps immigrants feel relieved, according to our participants' experiences.

### **Third Process: Growth in the New Environment**

After successfully experiencing stress and adaptation processes, as in Kim's (2007) theory, it is expected that immigrants will experience the "growth" process. From the students' perspective, growth means having plans in their new environment and feeling happy at home and school. They expressed their future plans with these words:

I want to study here. I learned something new. I learn more at high school and university. I speak Turkish so it is not a problem. (Abdel)

A: What is your dream job?

Abdel: Doctor, footballer.

A: Where would you like to do it?

Abdel: Turkey or Afghanistan. Turkey.

A: Why?

Abdel: There isn't war.

As seen in their quotes, they want to study in Turkey in the following years and are thinking of pursuing their dream jobs in Turkey. The participants also mentioned that they have a good relationship with their neighbors and friends.

My mom was so happy. Because we did something together with neighbors, they came to us, as they wonder about us. (Saleh)

We made friends here. I felt better and I was happy. (Saleh)

I was afraid at first. Later, as I could speak Turkish in time, I could play with them happily. (Aditya)

Having efficient communication with others is essential for one's emotional well-being, and so language proficiency is a must. As seen in their quotes, having a good relationship with friends and neighbors makes the participants really happy. Saleh also stated that he is good at school and he is doing his homework now, since he can speak and understand Turkish better.

I wasn't happy first. I couldn't speak Turkish. I am happy now. I can speak to my friends, play with them. I can do everything. I was crying sometimes. I couldn't speak. But now, I could do all my homework. For example, I couldn't do Turkish homework. (Saleh)

Aditya also shared his feelings about his teachers and friends.

Now I love my teachers and friends at school. (Aditya)

After struggling a lot with target language proficiency, it seems that they did a good job in terms of socialization. Learning the target language is the key here, and it is obvious that with the help of language acquisition, they can communicate with the people them around more, and as they communicate more, they have a chance to improve their Turkish. Language proficiency and proper communication are essential for a successful socialization process (Schieffelin, 1990). As a result of a successful socialization process, they feel happy now and have positive feelings towards people around them.

### **Discussion**

In the last decade, as the number of immigrant and refugee students in Turkey has risen, researchers have started to focus on the challenges, needs, integration issues, and satisfaction levels of foreign-born students in the Turkish education system (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Dogan, 2019; Titrek et al., 2016). Those studies focused in particular on describing integrational challenges, pull factors in deciding to study in Turkey, and the academic performance of those students. More research is needed to understand their living conditions and experiences by focusing on their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes comprehensively, since the number is increasing steadily. The acculturation, adaptation, and adjustment issues of immigrant students should immediately be on the agenda with a variety of studies. While having positive experiences in the new culture enables these students to benefit efficiently from these policies, having negative experiences in the new culture may cause them to benefit less. Unfortunately, children of immigrants have disadvantages in terms of the fact that they are more likely to live in poverty than native children are, they do not have enough parental education, and they have to deal with language and linguistic barriers (Fortuny et al., 2009). All these experiences may cause stress for immigrants, especially for children, in their social life and education practices.

In describing their stress before and after resettlement, the participants mainly mentioned the problems they encountered. All participants stated that they have experienced stress before and after resettlement in varying degrees. The reasons for leaving home, which Kim (2017) calls a "push" factor, were similar and related to security problems. And a journey of thousand miles in their world began with a single step. These children started their journey into an unknown, new country, a new life as a result of their fathers' decisions. They experienced danger along the way. They have also had difficulties after arriving in their new environment. They stated that they had economic difficulties during the first days of their arrivals, particularly having to live in empty houses. We saw that these economic problems are still present, and in this regard, they still couldn't complete the stress part in terms of economic problems, in contrast to communication-related processes. These economic problems seem to be a barrier for their families to have a better life and feel happier in the new environment. As in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is critical for someone to fulfill

basic needs (such as home furniture, a couch, carpet, or a television, as in our participants' cases) to achieve emotional satisfaction (Gawel, 1996).

Another main problem—maybe the most important—was the lack of host language proficiency. Target language inadequacy affects people's adaptation process negatively (Foley, 2010; Kim, 2017; Myrna, 2016). Participants' quotes supported this idea, and they had difficulties as a result of language barriers during their first days in their neighborhood and at school. To learn a new language better, the best way is to use it in the host environment, practicing it all the time in real-life circumstances, since practice makes perfect (Roth et al., 2010). They emphasized that they started to have fewer problems and adapt to the new environment better by learning the host language in time, especially in the school environment with the help of their friends and their teachers' positive attitudes. As in the proverb "adversity and loss make a man wise," these children felt stress very much at the beginning of their first days of school, but in following days, this obligation made them learn a new language better and adapt fast. One of the participants stated that his mother experienced mental health issues as a result of communication problems with the environment.

In the adaptation part, besides achieving language adequacy, children mentioned their free time activities and their observations about Turkish culture and people. In that process, because of the challenges they face in the host environment, they have to find similarities and differences between their new home and their old culture to make their life easier and to arrange their new life according to them. While similarities between the cultures help them feel relieved and comfortable, differences also make them feel uncomfortable, at least during the first phase of their arrival (Kim, 2001). Children have different adaptation skills from adults, and according to what the participants said, playing games has an important role in their adaptation processes. Having similar games makes them feel happy and relieved and helps them adapt better to the new environment. With the help of playing games, a better socialization and adaptation process encourages success not only in their social life but also in their academic life at school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; McCarthy, 1998). Another important point is that Turkish people showed their hospitality by serving food as a symbol of sincerity and kindness; this also helped the participants to adapt to the new environment. As Kim (2017) stated, children have had some differences in their cultural surface areas such as clothes, music, and food preferences. They started to dress like Turkish children, eat Turkish foods, and behave like Turkish children. It's like the famous idiom "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

After struggling so much, participants feel better now, and they even plan to stay in Turkey and pursue careers here. They also stated that they are now happy, which is an expected result of their efficient communication with people around them. But this doesn't mean that they have forgotten Afghanistan and their life there. One of the participants clearly stated that he missed his home country and his previous life, although he is happy to be in Turkey. Though they are happy to be here, they still need time to feel at home and belong to here. Their situation reminded us of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which he writes, "a person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground" (1967/2006, p. 13). In sum, it is obvious that these students have overcome most of the problems of resettlement. However, it doesn't mean that everything has finished. To have a better life here and in the future, they have to study and do more. After all, "Rome wasn't built in a day."

## Conclusion

The findings of this study showed immigrant students' progress through the processes of stress, adaptation and growth. Stress-related experiences included difficulties on their journey; problems related to food, water, and accommodations; not knowing the target language; and economic difficulties. Adaptation experiences included playing games, having social interaction with friends and teachers, and seeing the hospitality of their new Turkish neighbors. Finally, their thoughts about their future plans represent the growth part of their process. According to all their experiences, it can be concluded that having similar cultural characteristics, learning the target language, experiencing the hospitality of their new community, and having religious and cultural proximity play critical roles in adapting to the new environment.

## Implications for Research and Practice

In a school community, immigrant students are often a minority group and may potentially be underrepresented. So, it is necessary to understand and hear their voices through more qualitative or mixed-design research focusing on their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes comprehensively. It is important to understand their experiences and focus on their problems in order to help them to cope with these problems. By analyzing these study results, policymakers, school principals, governments and other stakeholders may shape their applications. According to one of the main results of this study, language is the primary tool for a better adaptation process, and children are luckier than their parents in language learning since they have the opportunity to practice Turkish with their friends at school and while playing games. Qualified language courses and opportunities should be provided for immigrant parents to socialize and adapt to the new environment better. Another main problem is with housing. Governments should take action to supply immigrants with better living accommodations. Policymakers should also take into account immigrants' positive experiences and negative experiences while making further policies.

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