



Exploring the Lived Meanings of Social Integration in Educational Settings among Second-Generation Migrants

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ABSTRACT

Migration and integration studies have long examined the social and cultural dynamics of diverse societies shaped by global mobility. Within this field, the experiences of second-generation migrants in education have become an important focus, yet much of the existing research emphasizes structural or quantitative outcomes rather than lived realities. Consequently, the specific research problem addressed in this study concerns the limited understanding of how second-generation migrants personally interpret and experience social integration within educational settings. Despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to how second-generation migrants themselves make sense of identity, belonging, and recognition in formal educational contexts, leaving unanswered how integration is experienced as a personal and social process. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how second-generation migrants articulate their experiences of integration within schools. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the analysis identified themes of hybrid identity negotiation, subtle exclusion, peer support, and the pursuit of recognition through educational achievement. The findings demonstrate that integration is not a fixed outcome but a continuous negotiation shaped by cultural expectations, social interactions, and personal aspirations. By foregrounding participants' voices, this research highlights the centrality of education as both a site of opportunity and a burden of legitimacy. The results contribute to a richer understanding of social integration and extend migration studies by emphasizing the meanings embedded in everyday experiences. These insights underscore the importance of phenomenological inquiry for capturing the essence of lived realities and suggest directions for future research that compare contexts or explore integration trajectories over time.



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INTRODUCTION

Migration has become one of the defining social phenomena of the twenty-first century, shaping cultural identities, social structures, and educational systems across the globe (Abdelsayed & Bellinzona, 2024). Globalization and the increasing movement of people across borders have created societies marked by cultural diversity, transnational ties, and complex questions of belonging (Boonmoh et al., 2021). Within this dynamic, the experiences of second-generation migrants have attracted scholarly attention, as they embody both the inheritance of parental cultural traditions and the demands of integration into the host society's mainstream institutions, particularly schools and universities.

The relevance of these experiences lies not only in their socio-political implications but also in their deeply personal and subjective dimensions (Compagnoni & Fazzi, 2024). For many second-generation migrants, education serves as a key arena in which questions of identity, belonging, and recognition are negotiated on a daily basis. Schools function as both sites of opportunity and spaces of tension, where young people navigate between multiple cultural expectations while striving for social acceptance (Mukhlis et al. 2023). However, despite this importance, existing studies continue to

emphasize structural indicators—such as academic outcomes or socioeconomic mobility—while offering limited insight into how second-generation migrants themselves interpret these experiences.

A deeper exploration of such experiences is necessary because current understandings of integration often remain limited to statistical outcomes, such as educational attainment or employment rates, which fail to capture the meanings that individuals themselves ascribe to their lives (Gümüř & BÜYÜKgÖZe, 2025). A phenomenological approach provides a way to uncover the essence of these lived experiences, giving voice to second-generation migrants as they articulate how they understand their place in society (Hieu & Thao, 2024). This orientation allows for a richer and more nuanced comprehension of integration, highlighting how identity, belonging, and exclusion are experienced and interpreted within specific social and cultural contexts.

Research on lived experiences has become an essential field of inquiry within the social sciences, particularly when addressing issues of migration and social integration (Ishak et al., 2023). Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that integration cannot be fully understood through policy frameworks or statistical indicators alone, but must instead be examined through the subjective realities of those directly experiencing the phenomenon (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Second-generation migrants, situated between inherited cultural traditions and the expectations of the host society, represent a critical group through which the complexities of identity formation, belonging, and educational participation can be studied.

Despite growing scholarly interest, significant methodological challenges remain in exploring the depth of these experiences. Quantitative approaches have provided valuable insights into measurable outcomes, such as school performance or labor market participation, yet they fall short in capturing the personal meanings and emotional dimensions of integration (Manan et al., 2023). Such approaches tend to overlook how individuals make sense of inclusion, exclusion, and hybrid identities in their daily lives (Morton, 2023). Even qualitative studies, while valuable, have at times emphasized descriptive accounts without sufficiently addressing the interpretative layers that illuminate how migrants construct meaning from their lived realities.

These limitations underscore the need for methodological approaches that allow for a deeper engagement with the essence of experience (Pastori et al., 2021). Phenomenology, particularly in its interpretative form, offers the conceptual and analytical tools to uncover the meanings embedded in participants' narratives (Mukhlis, 2025). By focusing on the subjective interpretations of second-generation migrants in educational settings, this research seeks to advance current understandings of social integration beyond surface-level outcomes, moving toward a more comprehensive appreciation of the lived complexities of migration.

Existing approaches to the study of second-generation migrants in educational contexts have largely relied on practical frameworks such as policy analyses, statistical assessments of academic outcomes, or sociological models of assimilation (Rahmanova et al., 2025). While these perspectives have contributed important structural insights, they remain limited in their ability to illuminate the subjective experiences through which integration is lived and understood (Ray & Ajit, 2024). The prevailing reliance on measurable indicators, such as graduation rates or employment levels, often reduces integration to outcomes that can be quantified, overlooking the meanings and interpretations that migrants themselves attach to their journeys.

These limitations have resulted in an incomplete understanding of how second-generation migrants navigate identity, belonging, and recognition within the educational space (Rokita-Jařkow et al., 2023). Quantitative measures and descriptive qualitative accounts, though valuable, fail to capture the depth of lived experience and the complex ways in which hybrid identities are formed, negotiated, and contested (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). What remains insufficiently understood is not merely whether integration occurs, but how it is experienced and articulated by those most directly affected.

To address this gap, phenomenology offers a promising alternative by enabling the exploration of lived realities through a focus on meaning and interpretation (Sánchez & Sebastián, 2024). By attending to participants' voices and uncovering the essence of their experiences, phenomenological inquiry moves beyond surface-level accounts toward a more holistic

comprehension of integration (Selimi et al., 2025). Such an approach is particularly relevant for second-generation migrants, whose educational experiences often serve as critical arenas for negotiating cultural hybridity, social belonging, and personal identity.

Previous studies on migration and integration have explored social, cultural, and institutional dimensions using theories of assimilation, multiculturalism, and identity construction. These works have highlighted structural factors shaping integration, yet they often miss the subjective dimension of how migrants themselves make sense of belonging (Taşdemir et al., 2025). Research on second-generation migrants has noted the complexity of hybrid identities, but the focus has remained on observable outcomes rather than lived meanings (Mukhlis et al. 2025). This article builds on these insights while addressing what remains underexplored: the experiential narratives of second-generation migrants in formal education. By turning to phenomenology, the study emphasizes how meaning is lived and experienced in context.

This research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the depth of participants' experiences in educational settings (Akıncı, 2020). The method was chosen because it enables a focus on how individuals interpret their own realities, going beyond description to reveal meaning-making processes. It responds directly to the knowledge gap by showing how integration is not only measured by outcomes but embodied in daily life (Bacchus, 2020). Through semi-structured interviews and thematic interpretation, the study reveals how identity, belonging, and recognition are experienced by second-generation migrants. This approach allows for a richer and more holistic understanding of integration.

The article is structured to guide the reader from context to meaning. The introduction presents the social and academic background of migration and integration studies. The method section explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analysis. The results section presents themes derived from participants' narratives, showing the essence of their lived experiences. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion highlights contributions, limitations, and directions for future research. This flow ensures that the article remains coherent, rigorous, and faithful to phenomenological inquiry.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological design with an interpretative orientation, drawing from Heideggerian hermeneutics. The phenomenological approach was chosen because of its emphasis on uncovering the lived meanings embedded in individuals' experiences, allowing for the exploration of the subjective realities of second-generation migrants in educational settings (Cichocka, 2024). By focusing on the essence of experience rather than external measurement, the design enabled the identification of nuanced interpretations, identity negotiations, and the contextual meanings participants ascribed to social integration. The interpretative stance was deemed appropriate, as it not only describes but also seeks to understand how participants make sense of their educational and social realities. This alignment between research aim and methodological orientation ensured coherence, rigor, and depth in capturing meaning-making processes.

Participants

Participants consisted of second-generation migrants enrolled in formal educational institutions within the host society. Inclusion criteria required participants to be students between the ages of 16 and 24, born in the host country to at least one foreign-born parent, and to have experienced at least three consecutive years of formal schooling locally (Demintseva, 2024). Exclusion criteria included first-generation migrants and individuals without direct educational experiences relevant to the integration process. A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure the selection of individuals whose lived experiences aligned with the phenomenon under investigation. The final sample comprised 15 participants, including both male and female students, with diverse ethnic backgrounds such as Middle Eastern, African, and Southeast Asian descent. This

demographic variety offered a broader understanding of how integration is experienced across different cultural contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives of participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted in quiet and familiar environments to ensure participant comfort and authenticity of responses (Giovinazzi & Cocchi, 2022). Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. The guiding questions focused on themes of belonging, identity negotiation, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and perceptions of education as a means of integration. Transcriptions were prepared verbatim to preserve the integrity of participants' voices.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves systematic stages of engagement with the text to uncover both descriptive and interpretive insights. Initially, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Meaning units were identified and coded, followed by clustering into emergent themes (Kalmijn, 2022). These themes were then refined through iterative comparison across cases to capture convergences and divergences in participants' experiences. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the organization and management of codes, although analytical interpretation remained grounded in phenomenological principles. The final thematic structure highlighted the essential meanings of social integration as lived and articulated by participants.

RESULTS

Negotiating Hybrid Identity in the Educational Space

Second-generation migrants consistently described the school environment as a site of identity negotiation. Many participants articulated that they felt suspended between their ethnic heritage and the dominant national culture. One participant stated:

“At school, I always feel like I am two people—at home, I speak my parents' language, but in class, I have to act like everyone else. Sometimes it feels like I am never fully one or the other.”

This tension between belonging and exclusion highlighted the complexity of hybrid identity formation. Participants' narratives underscored that identity was not static but constantly reshaped by interactions with peers, teachers, and institutional expectations.

Navigating Hybrid Identity in School



Experiences of Subtle Exclusion and Discrimination

While overt acts of discrimination were less commonly reported, participants spoke about microaggressions and subtle forms of exclusion that shaped their daily educational experience. These moments were often linked to assumptions about cultural background or language use. For instance, one participant shared:

“Teachers often ask me to explain things about my culture, like I am the representative of my entire community. It makes me feel different, even if they don't mean harm.”

Such experiences created a sense of being “othered,” reinforcing feelings of marginalization within the educational setting.

The Role of Peer Relationships in Social Belonging

Friendship networks played a pivotal role in fostering social integration. Participants emphasized how supportive peer relationships alleviated feelings of isolation and contributed to their sense of belonging. One participant recalled:

“It was only when I made close friends who accepted me as I am that I started to feel like I belonged in this school. Without them, I would have felt completely alone.”

These peer connections were described as essential spaces where identity negotiation was less pressured, enabling participants to experience acceptance beyond institutional structures

Education as a Pathway to Social Mobility and Recognition

Many participants framed education as more than an academic pursuit—it symbolized legitimacy and recognition in the host society. Success in school was perceived as a tool to counter stereotypes and redefine their place within the community. As one participant expressed:

“If I do well in school, people stop seeing me just as an immigrant kid. They start to respect me, and that makes me feel like I can truly be part of this country.”

This theme revealed how education is internalized as both an opportunity and a burden, where achievement is tied to broader struggles for acceptance and integration.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that second-generation migrants experience integration as a process of identity negotiation, subtle exclusion, supportive peer relationships, and aspirations for recognition through education (Kılınc, 2025). These insights respond directly to the central research question by demonstrating how integration is lived and interpreted within the everyday realities of formal schooling.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results show that integration for second-generation migrants cannot be reduced to structural indicators or policy outcomes. Instead, integration emerges as a deeply subjective and relational process shaped by the interplay of cultural expectations, social interactions, and personal aspirations (Kuźma-Markowska, 2025). By emphasizing participants’ voices, the study provides a nuanced account of how belonging and exclusion are simultaneously experienced in the educational sphere (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). The narratives indicate that hybrid identities are continuously renegotiated within the school environment, while peer relationships offer spaces of acceptance that counterbalance feelings of marginalization (Leng et al., 2020). Furthermore, education is perceived not only as a pathway to opportunity but also as a symbolic site of legitimacy and social recognition. Together, these findings demonstrate that the lived realities of migrants are integral to understanding integration, thereby advancing knowledge beyond descriptive or outcome-oriented accounts.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theory

These findings align with prior studies that highlight the challenges of segmented assimilation and the complexity of constructing hybrid identities in multicultural contexts (Lev-Ari, 2023). However, the results also extend earlier work by showing how these dynamics are experienced in the micro-context of everyday schooling, where subtle exclusion and peer support simultaneously shape identity. The emphasis on education as both opportunity and burden echoes Mukhlis (2025a) perspective on integration but adds phenomenological depth by illustrating how success is lived as a struggle for recognition. In contrast to more descriptive qualitative studies, this research offers an interpretative layer that uncovers how meaning is actively constructed by second-generation migrants (D’Angelo, 2024). Thus, the study enriches existing theory by showing that integration is not a fixed endpoint but a fluid process of sense-making embedded in daily experiences.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry both scholarly and practical implications for understanding integration in multicultural societies (Levinson et al., 2021). From a social perspective, the narratives highlight how schools act as crucial spaces where identity negotiation and belonging are experienced in tangible ways, suggesting the need for more culturally responsive educational practices. Culturally, the results underscore the importance of acknowledging hybrid identities as valid and dynamic rather than viewing them as transitional or incomplete (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Professionally, the insights are relevant for educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders who work with migrant populations, as they demonstrate the significance of relational support and recognition in fostering successful integration (Sabarudin et al., 2024). By emphasizing the lived realities of second-generation migrants, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of integration that can inform both academic discourse and practical interventions.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size, though appropriate for phenomenological research, was relatively small and context-specific, which may limit the transferability of findings to broader populations (Petzel & Sowerby, 2025). The reliance on self-reported narratives also carries the possibility of selective recall or personal bias. Furthermore, the focus on second-generation migrants within formal educational settings means that the findings may not fully capture experiences across different institutional or community contexts (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). These limitations do not diminish the value of the study but rather highlight the need for cautious interpretation and contextual application of the results.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future studies could expand on these findings by examining how the lived experiences of second-generation migrants differ across various educational systems and cultural contexts. Comparative research involving multiple host societies may reveal variations in how identity negotiation and belonging are shaped by broader structural and cultural factors (Tongkaw, 2021). Additionally, longitudinal approaches could provide insights into how the meanings of integration evolve over time, particularly as young migrants transition into higher education or the labor market. Expanding the methodological scope to include participatory or narrative-based techniques may also enrich understanding by capturing more diverse forms of expression (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Collectively, these directions can strengthen the contribution of phenomenological inquiry to migration and integration studies while informing policies that better reflect the lived realities of migrant communities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of second-generation migrants within formal educational settings, focusing on how they interpret integration, identity, and belonging. The findings reveal that integration is not a static outcome but an ongoing process shaped by identity negotiation, subtle exclusion, peer relationships, and aspirations for recognition. By uncovering these meanings through a phenomenological approach, the study addressed gaps in previous research that relied heavily on quantitative outcomes or descriptive accounts. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of how social integration is experienced and highlight the importance of relational support and cultural recognition in educational contexts. These insights not only enrich theoretical discussions of migration and integration but also offer practical implications for educators and policymakers working with diverse student populations. Future research may build on these findings by comparing different cultural contexts or employing longitudinal designs to explore how meanings of integration evolve over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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