

Student Adjustment After School Transfer as a Disciplinary Sanction: An Examination of Student Experiences

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Abstract

This study examines the academic, social, and emotional adjustment processes of middle school students who were transferred to another school as a disciplinary sanction. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design, the research aims to explore students' lived experiences following school transfer, the challenges they face, and the support mechanisms available to them. The study group consisted of 10 middle school students (8 male, 2 female) who were transferred to public schools in the Erenler district of Sakarya between 2022 and 2025 due to disciplinary sanctions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and supported by document analysis, including disciplinary records, academic transcripts, and attendance reports. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The findings indicate that disciplinary sanctions leading to school transfer were mainly associated with behaviors violating personal inviolability and bodily integrity, primarily occurring within peer relationships. Most students demonstrated positive academic adjustment and regular attendance at their new schools, suggesting a short-term preventive effect of the sanction. However, social and emotional adjustment varied across students. While some students reported rapid peer acceptance and feelings of safety, others experienced loneliness, social exclusion, guilt, and shame. Family support emerged as the primary source of emotional assistance, whereas school-based guidance services were rarely mentioned. Overall, the findings highlight the need to complement disciplinary sanctions with comprehensive psychosocial and guidance support.

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of the primary education is to raise young students into ethically aware students. Education is not limited to imparting knowledge and skills; it equips individuals with the ability to live together, encourages ethical and responsible behavior, and develops a sense of individual and social responsibility (UNESCO, 2015). However, while these objectives are fundamental in nature, they are difficult to measure directly. Therefore, certain indicators should be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of the educational process. These indicators include academic achievement, regular school attendance, the development of social skills, and compliance with disciplinary rules. Regular school attendance serves as a critical “early warning” function in preventing students' academic failure and risk of school dropout (Sälzer et al., 2024). Furthermore, academic achievement is closely related not only to cognitive outcomes but also to social and emotional factors such as school climate and student engagement (Tomaszewski et al., 2024).

Discipline is defined as the set of measures taken to ensure that individuals act in accordance with the general thoughts and behaviors of the society in which they live (Turkish Language Association, 2025). All students enrolled in school are expected to comply with established rules to ensure a safe and supportive school environment. Interventions regarding student behavior in educational settings are generally based on predetermined standards of behavior. These interventions are based on rule-based expectations for appropriate behavior. Fundamentally, educational processes aim to regulate student behavior within a structured framework of rules (Tunç et al., 2015). However, it is unrealistic to assume that all students will follow these rules completely.

Discipline rules in schools play an important role in shaping students' personal and moral development, as students internalize values such as self-control, empathy, and responsibility through these rules (Tabassum et al., 2024). According to Bursalioğlu (2010), the five fundamental objectives of discipline in educational institutions are to increase students' behavioral awareness, ensure self-discipline, develop a sense of responsibility, enable self-control, and ensure accountability for one's actions.

Nevertheless, the fact that most disciplinary policies are reward-punishment based limits children's ability to experience rights-based learning and overshadows students' fundamental rights such as the right to participation and freedom of expression (Hanna, 2025).

Studies show that peer bullying and violence are widespread problems in schools, with both bullying behaviors and exposure to bullying observed among students (Yekdeş et al., 2025). Bullying is defined as a pattern of repeated aggressive behavior, systematic misuse of power, and a form of peer abuse; it generally involves three key elements: repetition, intent to harm, and power imbalance (Sabramani et al., 2021). According to research conducted by Turan et al. (2010), the most common types of bullying encountered in schools include physical bullying (such as pushing), verbal bullying (such as name-calling and mocking), emotional bullying (damaging personal belongings), and sexually explicit verbal bullying. Furthermore, the study highlights the complexity of managing behavior within schools by revealing that the type and frequency of violence are significantly influenced by factors such as gender and class level (Turan et al., 2010).

Examining the relevant legislation in the Turkish context reveals that the disciplinary measures implemented by the Ministry of National Education aim not only to regulate conflicts among students but also to regulate students' responsibilities towards the school. In Turkey, the Ministry of National Education has established a three-tiered disciplinary structure within the education system, consisting of warning, reprimand, and school transfer. This structure applies to students in grades 5-8. According to the relevant legislation, considering the student's developmental stage, a “warning” process is applied in cases where the behavior can be corrected upon detection. For behaviors that fall outside this scope, disciplinary penalties such as ‘reprimand’ or “school transfer” are applied. The list of behaviors requiring the “school transfer” penalty (Ministry of National Education, 2014) is provided in Appendix A. These sanctions aim to protect rights and principles such as personal inviolability and

physical integrity, the right to education and teaching, public safety and order, privacy and personal rights, property rights, the rule of law, and constitutional order.

Recent studies have revealed that disciplinary problems observed in schools are multidimensional; these problems stem from various factors related to the student (individual characteristics), the family (relationship and socio-cultural factors), and the institution (school management, physical conditions, school climate) (Ateş et al., 2022; Şahin & Mutlu, 2024). Furthermore, despite the existence of numerous disciplinary practices, research shows that preventive measures are more widespread and effective, while punitive practices often fail to address the underlying issues (Şahin & Mutlu, 2024). Wiley et al. (2025) argue that superficial reforms in disciplinary policies are insufficient and that a structural paradigm shift is necessary, explaining this situation with the “superficial reform” approach. Similarly, a systematic review by İjaz et al. (2024) revealed that punitive approaches increase anxiety, depressive symptoms, and social disengagement in students and can reinforce behavioral problems rather than resolve them.

In cases where mental health programs implemented in schools are inadequate, resorting solely to behavior-based punishments may deepen the problem by ignoring students' psychological issues. Langenkamp (2014) states that changing schools disrupts students' social bonds, and students who are unable to quickly rebuild these bonds are at increased risk of experiencing academic and emotional maladjustment. In recent literature, exclusionary disciplinary practices such as school transfer are associated with negative long-term outcomes, including alienation from school, academic disengagement, and involvement with the justice system (Skiba et al., 2014; Osher et al., 2010; Gottlieb & Wilson, 2023). These findings, as also revealed by international meta-analyses (Gerlinger et al., 2021), show that exclusionary discipline can increase students' tendency toward crime, risky behavior, and disengagement from school. Furthermore, it is emphasized that disciplinary processes are also related to students' past experiences, such as trauma and poverty, and that these practices re-traumatize students (Sanders et al., 2024). Rodriguez and Welsh (2022) highlight the equity dimension of discipline, revealing that some student groups face harsher sanctions despite exhibiting similar behaviors.

In contrast, restorative and supportive approaches are highlighted as more effective and constructive alternatives (Welsh & Little, 2018). Anderson and Ritter (2020) state that punitive approaches ignore root causes and increase exclusion among students; conversely, restorative practices foster belonging and responsibility. A study by Garnett et al. (2020) shows that restorative practices improve school climate, reduce bullying, and increase student participation. Similarly, Kervick et al. (2020) emphasize that building relational school communities supports students' social adjustment. McIntosh et al. (2021) show that equity-focused PBIS approaches both reduce exclusionary discipline rates and improve school climate. Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021) highlight that positive results are increasing in the literature on restorative justice practices, but that there are significant gaps in implementation support and sustainability.

A review of the relevant literature reveals that while the studies cited make significant contributions to their respective fields, research on middle school students who change schools due to disciplinary sanctions is very limited. Similarly, the international literature indicates that restorative justice practices are still in their early stages, that there are problems with implementation consistency, and that empirical gaps in this area continue to exist (Kervick et al., 2020; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

Aiming to fill this gap in the literature, this study examines the school adaptation processes of students who have received the penalty of changing schools, particularly in terms of social and academic adaptation.

This study employs a socio-ecological view of school transitions, which views student adjustment not as an individual trait but as something that emerges from the interaction between the student and the social systems they move through: peer groups, classroom climate, and the support structures a school does or doesn't provide (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framing still holds up in more recent work. A

2026 scoping review of the primary secondary transition literature found that student well-being during a school transition is shaped jointly by several ecological domains, including student, family, peer, teacher, and school, across the periods before, during, and after the move (van der Zwet et al., 2026). Two further bodies of theory sharpen this lens for the present study. The first is school belonging and connectedness theory, which holds that students' academic and emotional functioning is closely tied to how socially integrated and accepted they feel within their school (Kervick et al., 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2024). The second concerns restorative and trauma sensitive approaches to discipline, which argue that disciplinary responses produce more lasting behavioral change when they rebuild a student's relational ties and engage with the psychosocial context behind the behavior, rather than relying on exclusion alone (Anderson & Ritter, 2020; Sanders et al., 2024). Read together, these perspectives suggest that a school transfer sanction is not simply a punitive measure. It is a disruption to a student's social ecology, and whether that disruption proves harmful or constructive depends largely on whether the new school offers the relational and institutional support needed to rebuild a sense of belonging. The present study uses this lens to analyze students' academic, social, and emotional adaptations in their transfer school as a result of a disciplinary sanction.

Towards this end, the research focuses on the following questions:

1. What is the general situation of students who have been transferred to another school due to disciplinary action?
 - 1.1. For which violations have the students been punished?
 - 1.2. Did the students exhibit any behavior that would warrant disciplinary action?
 - 1.3. What is the attendance status of these students?
 - 1.4. At what grade levels did the students receive disciplinary action?
2. How well do students transferred to another school due to disciplinary action adapt academically?
3. How are students transferred to another school due to disciplinary action adapting socially?
4. How are students transferred to another school due to disciplinary action adapting emotionally?
5. What are the difficulties faced by students transferred to another school due to disciplinary action and what are the support mechanisms available to them?

METHOD

This section covers the research design, study group, data collection tool and process, data analysis, and validity and reliability.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative research design commonly used to gather in-depth insights into human behavior, emotions, and attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research aims to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject under consideration by examining various empirical sources such as case studies, interviews, and personal narratives.

The main objective of this research is to explore the perceptions and emotional experiences of students who were transferred to another school due to disciplinary measures. To achieve this aim, this study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design, which aims to provide a comprehensive and direct summary of a phenomenon using the words of those who have experienced it, without imposing a pre-existing theoretical lens on the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design was considered appropriate for capturing students' academic, social, and emotional adaptation

experiences as they themselves reported and made sense of them. Although the study adopts a descriptive qualitative design, socio-ecological and school belonging perspectives were used as sensitizing concepts during the interpretation of the findings. These perspectives informed the discussion of students' experiences without determining the coding process or imposing predetermined categories on the data.

STUDY GROUP

In this study, criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used to determine the participants due to the limited number of suitable students and the fact that access to this group could be provided through school administrators. The criterion of “being a middle school student who has been transferred to another school as a result of disciplinary action” was used in the selection of participants. This method focused on a relatively understudied group and allowed for in-depth research. The distribution of the 20 students in the research population according to grade level, disciplinary penalty provisions, school attendance status, gender, and behavior recurrence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic and Disciplinary Characteristics of Students in the Study Population*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Grade Level	5 th Grade	4	20
	6 th Grade	2	10
	7 th Grade	3	15
	8 th Grade	11	55
Disciplinary Sanction Provision	2	15	75
	3	1	5
	12	3	15
	15	1	5
School Attendance Status	Irregular	8	40
	Regular	12	60
Gender	Female	4	20
	Male	16	80
Repetition of Behavior	No Repetition	20	100
	Repetition	0	0

Note. The population consists of a total of 20 students who changed schools due to disciplinary penalties in the Erenler district of Sakarya between 2022 and 2025.

Between 2022 and 2025, 20 middle school students in the Sakarya Erenler region were subject to disciplinary action resulting in a school transfer. Due to the fact that 10 of these students had graduated by the time the study began, only the remaining 10 students were included in the current study. It was found that 55% of the students subject to disciplinary sanctions were 8th graders and 80% of all students were male. According to the primary education regulations applied in middle schools in Turkey, the limit for excused absences is 20 days, and the limit for unexcused absences is 10 days. Considering this, it was noted in the records that 40% of the 20 students exceeded the aforementioned absence limits and either continued attending school or dropped out. It was found that students who exceeded the absence limit for various reasons were graduated at the end of the year by decision of the branch teachers' council. Again, it was seen that none of the participants repeated the behavior that led to the sanction and did not receive any disciplinary punishment in the schools they transferred to.

The study included 10 students (8 males and 2 females) who were subject to disciplinary sanctions and school transfers and were enrolled in middle school. Table 3 shows the grade levels at which participants received punishment and the disciplinary punishment codes. All participants were enrolled in public schools in the Erenler district of Sakarya. This study focuses on a specific three-year period between 2022 and 2025 in order to obtain participants' current and recent experiences. To provide a more detailed and time-limited analysis, an in-depth examination of the feelings and

thoughts of students who received disciplinary sanctions was carried out. Furthermore, only students who received their punishment at the middle school level and were still attending middle school were included in the interviews. The other data set is presented for all students. The students in this study were included in the study at least one month after changing schools.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL AND DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from participants. The interview questions were developed based on a literature review, then reviewed and revised in consultation with experts in the field of educational research. They were revised after two preliminary interviews and given their final form. The interviews were planned during the first visit to the schools by consulting with the school administration and students. The semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted in a quiet and private room allocated by the school administration. The interviews were organized during the students' free time outside of class, and they were called in turn through the school administration. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. Since all participants were under the age of 18, parental consent forms were provided before the interviews and collected before the second visit. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes, and a total of 10 interviews were conducted. This resulted in approximately 150 minutes of audio recordings. All interviews were recorded with an audio recorder, and the verbal responses were then transcribed verbatim to obtain raw data. The interview form consisted of 8 open-ended questions, and additional questions were asked when necessary to elicit more detailed responses from the participants. This data set formed the primary data for the study.

In addition to interview data, a secondary dataset was created using documents provided by the school, such as disciplinary reports, academic transcripts, and official attendance records. Attendance records and disciplinary files indicating whether students committed further disciplinary offenses at their new school were also obtained from the schools.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed the descriptive analysis steps outlined by Creswell (2012): organizing the data, generating initial codes, developing themes from these codes, interpreting the findings, and verifying their accuracy. The interview transcripts were read in full by both researchers independently before coding began, in order to gain a holistic sense of each participant's account. Each transcript was then coded line by line, with short, descriptive labels assigned to segments of text that reflected a distinct idea or experience (e.g., "feeling of loneliness," "academic adjustment," "social acceptance," "absenteeism," "family support"). This process produced a list of 34 codes.

Both researchers coded the first three transcripts independently and then compared their code lists. Discrepancies in code labeling or boundaries were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached; this initial calibration was used to refine the coding scheme applied to the remaining transcripts. Codes with conceptual similarity were then grouped into sub-themes (e.g., the codes "feeling of loneliness," "exclusion by peers," and "difficulty making friends" were grouped under the sub-theme "social isolation"). Sub-themes were subsequently clustered into higher-order themes based on their conceptual relationship to the study's research questions. This process resulted in five main themes: general situations, academic adaptation, social adaptation, emotional adaptation, and challenges encountered and support mechanisms. While some conceptual overlap exists between these themes — particularly between social, emotional adaptation, and support mechanisms — they were maintained as distinct categories to preserve the integrity of participants' own accounts and to address each research question separately. Throughout this process, a color-coding system was used in the qualitative data matrix to visually track which codes and sub-themes belonged to which overarching theme, allowing the researchers to cross-check consistency across the dataset. The finalized coding scheme, including representative codes for each theme, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Representative coding scheme

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Code	Illustrative Excerpt
Academic Adaptation	Behavioral shift under structure	Improved focus under stricter rules	"...At this school, my grade point average went from 57 to 90." (Student 9)
Academic Adaptation	Logistical strain	Sleep loss from commute distance	"...I have to get up earlier because there is a distance between my school and my home." (Student 6)
Academic Adaptation	Workload difference	Increased academic demands	"My new school gives us more homework..." (Student 8)
Social Adaptation	Protective peer environment	New friends as positive influence	"The friendships were good, the environment was safer..." (Student 6)
Social Adaptation	Peer rejection	Exclusion and verbal threat	"...They even say, 'Get out of our seat or we'll beat you up'..." (Student 5)
Social Adaptation	Comparative friendship loss	Old friendships valued more highly	"My friendships were better at my old school..." (Student 9)
Social Adaptation	Pre-existing social ties	Prior acquaintance easing integration	"A classmate welcomed me into their group..." (Student 8)
Emotional Adaptation	Safety perception	Feeling unsafe / harassed	"I don't feel very safe at school. There are fights everywhere..." (Student 5)
Challenges & Support	Social loss	Loss of established friend group	"The change in my circle of friends...was the most challenging..." (Student 9)
Challenges & Support	Logistical burden	Transportation / distance strain	"It was hard to leave my friends. I'm staying with a relative..." (Student 8)
Challenges & Support	Psychological burden	Guilt/shame over disciplinary act	"I couldn't get the incident...out of my mind...I was ashamed..." (Student 7)
Challenges & Support	Informal support	Family as primary support source	(described across multiple participant accounts; no single representative quote)

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In this study, various methods were followed to ensure validity and reliability. First, the interview questionnaire prepared for data collection was reviewed by experts in the field, and the necessary adjustments were made by these individuals. To enable extended interaction and in-depth observation during the data collection process, the researchers made multiple visits to the schools where the students were enrolled. This allowed a relationship of trust to be established and ensured that the interviews took place in a natural atmosphere. In addition, to increase reliability, the data triangulation method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was used; interview data, researcher observations, and document reviews were comparatively analyzed.

Throughout the current research, transparency, consistency, and adherence to ethical principles have been fundamental. In this context, to ensure reliability, the data collection and analysis process has been defined in detail, and all stages have been carried out systematically. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the study, the analyses have been cross-checked by all researchers. Inter-coder consistency was ensured; both researchers coded the same data and then compared each other's analyses (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In addition, throughout the process, the data and findings were discussed with an external researcher proficient in qualitative research methods, and valuable feedback on the subject was obtained. Furthermore, the data and analysis transcripts were stored to ensure the consistency and validity of the study.

ETHICS COMMITTEE REPORT

In order to meet ethical standards, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Sakarya University with code 47/13, and official research permission was obtained from the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey. All individuals participating in the study were given a voluntary consent form in advance, and only those who gave their consent were included in the study. Since all participants were minors according to Turkish law, informed consent forms were obtained from their legal guardians. Finally, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants,

numerical codes were used instead of real names. Interview data and school records were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS

This section reports findings related to students' general situations, academic, social, and emotional adaptation processes, and the difficulties they encounter during the adaptation process, in line with the research questions. It should be noted that the approximately 15-minute interview duration placed practical limits on how deeply each experience could be explored, and the accounts presented here should be read as initial impressions rather than exhaustive accounts of each student's adaptation process.

GENERAL SITUATIONS

This section presents general findings regarding the demographic characteristics, disciplinary measures, attendance status, grade levels, and behavioral recurrence of students who changed schools due to disciplinary action. Table 3 summarizes the general situation.

Table 3. *Grades and disciplinary penalty codes for students who received penalties participating in the study*

Numerical Codes	Gender	Grade Level at Which the Penalty Was Issued	Disciplinary Sanction Provision	School Attendance Status	Repetition of Behavior
Student 1	Male	8	2	Regular	No Repetition
Student 2	Male	8	2	Regular	No Repetition
Student 3	Male	8	2	Regular	No Repetition
Student 4	Male	5	12	Regular	No Repetition
Student 5	Male	5	2	Regular	No Repetition
Student 6	Female	7	2	Irregular	No Repetition
Student 7	Female	6	2	Irregular	No Repetition
Student 8	Male	5	12	Regular	No Repetition
Student 9	Male	5	12	Regular	No Repetition
Student 10	Male	8	2	Regular	No Repetition

DISCIPLINARY PENALTY PROVISIONS

The classification of the sampling according to disciplinary provisions is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Distribution of participants according to disciplinary provisions*

<i>Penalty Provision</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Students</i>
Article 2	Harassment, insult, slander, threat, and abuse	6	Student 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10
Article 12	Violence or incitement to violence (inside/outside school, against students/teachers)	4	Student 4, 7, 8, 9

It was noted that 60% of the sample was punished under "Article 2," which covers behaviors such as harassment, insults, and abuse, while 40% was punished under "Article 12," which covers behaviors involving violence or incitement to violence. Accordingly, the data indicate that all students who received disciplinary penalties were punished for reasons related to interpersonal relationships.

REPETITION OF BEHAVIOR

None of the students included in the study committed any disciplinary offenses that could lead to them receiving further punishment at their new transfer schools.

ATTENDANCE STATUS

The students' attendance status at their new schools, analyzed together with gender, is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Findings regarding attendance status at the newly transferred school

Attendance	Description	f	Students
Regular	Absence duration at the newly transferred school did not exceed the official limit	8	Student 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10
Irregular	Absence period at the new school exceeded the official limit	2	Student 6, 7

The number of students who have exceeded the school attendance limit according to the current legislation is 2, while the number of students who have not exceeded the school attendance limit is 8. Accordingly, it can be said that a significant majority of students regularly attend their new schools.

GRADE LEVEL

The distribution of students according to their grade levels in their new schools is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Distribution of participants according to grade level

Grade Level	f	Students
5 th Grade	3	Student 4, 5, 8
6 th Grade	0	
7 th Grade	2	Student 6, 7
8 th Grade	5	Student 1, 2, 3, 9, 10

When the sample was examined, it was determined that 50% of the students were 8th grade students, which is the final grade of middle school, while the remaining students consisted of three 5th grade students and two 7th grade students.

ACADEMIC ADAPTATION

The academic adaptation processes of students following a school transfer, the difficulties they encountered, and their success in the new school environment were examined. When asked what difficulties they experienced while adapting to classes at their new schools, six students stated that they adapted easily to their new schools and did not experience any difficulties during the adaptation process. In the quotation below, Student 9 stated that because he could not exhibit the behaviors he did at his old school and was better able to adapt to the disciplinary rules at his new school, he was able to focus on his classes, which led to an increase in his grade point average. This student's account suggests that the change in environment may have been associated with a reduction in problem behavior and a greater willingness to participate in class, though this connection reflects the student's own retrospective interpretation rather than observed behavioral data.

"I didn't struggle. The classes and exams here seem easier. This school is more disciplined. At the other school, I didn't listen in class, we misbehaved, we skipped school. We walked around during class. At this school, my grade point average went from 57 to 90." (Student 9)

Three of the students stated that they had difficulty adapting to classes at their new schools. Two of these students cited reasons such as the teaching styles of teachers at their new schools seeming different to them and being given more homework as the source of their adjustment problems. In addition, one student stated that having to wake up early to walk the distance to their new school, which was far from home, prevented them from adapting to the classes.

"Yes. From lack of sleep. I have to get up earlier because there is a distance between my school and my home, and I have to wake up earlier." (Student 6)

Regarding academic adjustment processes, students were asked whether they noticed any differences in academic expectations between their new and old schools. The majority of students (6) stated that they did not notice any differences between their new and old schools. However, 4 students indicated that there were various differences in terms of academic expectations. Three of these students stated that academic expectations were higher at their new schools and that their course load had increased, while one stated that expectations were lower at their new schools. For example, looking at the following quote, Student 8 mentioned that the academic load was heavier at their new school and said that they found it more enjoyable that classes were less intensive at their old school. According to this student, being in a class with behavioral problems led to their teachers covering less material at their old school and lowering their academic expectations of the students.

"My new school gives us more homework. The classes at my old school were more fun. If we stayed quiet during part of the class, the teacher would let us off the hook. Since we were a rowdy class, they didn't push us as hard as the other classes." (Student 8)

Overall, the findings suggest that ease of academic adaptation was closely tied to how students positioned the transfer itself: students who described their previous school environment as disruptive (e.g., frequent rule-breaking, class disorder) tended to frame the new school's stricter academic climate as an opportunity rather than a burden, as seen in Student 9's account of his improved grades. In contrast, students who reported several difficulties concerning their transfer schools pointed to structural and logistical factors such as increased workload, unfamiliar teaching styles or longer commutes. These students did not refer to the disciplinary climate itself. This suggests that academic adaptation in this group was shaped less by the disciplinary transfer per se and more by the practical and motivational context surrounding it.

SOCIAL ADAPTATION

When students were asked to describe their friendships at their new schools during the interviews, it was observed that more than half of the students had quickly adapted to their new school environments. These students reported that they had made friends relatively easily at their new schools and were quickly accepted by their peers. For example, in the quote below, Student 6 stated that the new social environment provided a safer environment for them and that their new friends kept them away from problematic behaviors.

"The friendships were good; the environment was safer. My friends here encourage me to study more." (Student 6)

Students who adapted quickly generally stated that they were quickly accepted by their new environment and thus did not experience any adaptation problems. However, conversely, three students stated that they were more distant from their new circle of friends and were less intimate with their friends at their new schools. One of these students was even subjected to social exclusion and even verbal abuse:

"I only have one friend in class. The others pick on me for no reason, but I don't do anything about it. They even say, 'Get out of our seat or we'll beat you up' when I sit down." (Student 5)

Students were asked about the differences between their friendships at their new and old schools in order to compare their social adjustment processes. The majority of students mentioned various differences. Three of these students stated that their old friendships were better, while three stated that their friendships at their new schools were more positive. Only one student stated that they had severed their old friendships and did not want to interact with anyone at their new school. Three students said they saw no difference between their old and new friendships.

"My friendships were better at my old school. I don't look up to some of my friends here; they do bad things. At the other school, we were better role models for each other, we were more sincere. When something happened there, we acted more collectively. In fact, I was punished as a result of such an incident." (Student 9)

When students were asked about the difficulties they experienced during the adaptation process at their new school, it was found that half of them adapted quickly. These students adapted quickly to their new social environment and were accepted by their social circle thanks to both their circle of friends and the support of their teachers. One student stated that they had old friends at the school they transferred to because they had previously studied there, and that this allowed them to adapt quickly. Four of the students stated that they experienced intense feelings of loneliness and social exclusion at their new schools.

"A classmate welcomed me into their group. When I first arrived, I felt lonely. I feel sad that I left my friends behind when I came to this school." (Student 8)

These students experienced various difficulties during their early days at their new school, with some facing exclusion or negative behavior. However, it is understood that these students were eventually accepted and that the difficulties they experienced were temporary.

A closer reading of these accounts suggests that social acceptance appeared to depend on two factors: whether the student had any pre-existing social connection at the new school, and whether they were perceived by peers as a 'newcomer' subject to testing or exclusion. Student 8's relatively smooth transition, aided by previously knowing people at the new school, contrasts with Student 5's experience of being targeted where no such prior tie existed. These contrasting experiences indicate that the social resources students brought with them to the new setting may have played a more significant role in their adjustment than the transfer itself.

EMOTIONAL ADAPTATION

Students were asked how they felt when they first transferred to their new school, and their positive (happiness, comfort, not feeling like an outsider) and negative (loneliness, exclusion) emotions were examined. According to our findings, half of the students reported experiencing positive emotions when they transferred to their new school environment. In particular, the presence of familiar people and the quick process of making friends helped students feel comfortable. However, four students stated that they experienced intense negative emotions during the first days of school. These students highlighted feelings such as loneliness, shame, and exclusion. One student stated that despite the anxiety they experienced during the first days, they gradually got used to their surroundings.

To gain insight into the students' perceptions of safety at their new schools, they were asked how safe and comfortable they felt in their new school environment. More than half of the students (n=6) stated that they felt safe in their new school environment. Factors supporting this feeling included the physical environment of the school, administrative measures, and familiarity with the social environment. However, two students emphasized that they felt seriously unsafe, stating that there were constant fights in their environment and that they were being harassed.

"I don't feel very safe at school. There are fights everywhere in the school. Sometimes they harass me too." (Student 5)

Two students expressed an indecisive attitude, indicating that they had an average level of security perception. Moreover, it was observed that the most important factor positively affecting the emotional adaptation process was supportive relationships in the social environment and the presence of previously known individuals. However, some students stated that after changing schools, they faced negative situations such as exclusion, labeling, or being targeted due to their "newcomer"

identity. Students' individual characteristics (shyness, self-confidence, social assertiveness) also play a decisive role in the adaptation process.

The findings on emotional adaptation indicate a close relationship between students' emotional well-being and their social experiences at their transfer school. Students who reported feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, such as Student 5, also described experiences of social exclusion, whereas those who felt settled and secure generally reported being accepted by their peers with relative ease. This pattern suggests that emotional adjustment may be closely tied to the quality of students' social integration rather than functioning as a separate dimension of adaptation. Although the small sample size limits broader conclusions, this relationship warrants further investigation in studies involving larger groups of transfer students.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Finally, findings regarding the main challenges students faced during the school transfer process and the support resources that helped them overcome these challenges are presented. In order to learn what challenges students who changed schools as a result of disciplinary action had to face during this process, they were asked what challenge they encountered most frequently. More than half of the students stated that the biggest challenge they faced was moving away from their old social circle or having difficulty making new friends.

"The change in my circle of friends and the difference in my classroom environment were the most challenging things for me." (Student 9)

In addition, as can be seen in the excerpt below, students experienced logistical problems while adapting to their new schools, in addition to being separated from their friends. It can be seen that practical problems such as transportation difficulties and long distances became issues for some students during this process.

"It was hard to leave my friends. I'm staying with a relative who lives closer to my new school. I have to walk a long way to get back to my own home." (Student 8)

Another student (Student 7) drew attention to the internal guilt they felt as a result of the punishment, stating that this situation created a psychological burden.

"I couldn't get the incident for which I was punished out of my mind. I felt very uneasy. I was ashamed of having done it." (Student 7)

In order to learn who played a role in helping the students overcome the difficulties they experienced during this process and in providing psychological support, they were asked who supported them the most. More than half of the students stated that they received support from family members. This support was generally emotional and was described as a source of morale in helping students adapt to the process. Some students stated that they received support from their friends, emphasizing the important role of their friends in encouraging them and accepting them. However, two students stated that they did not receive support from anyone and went through the process on their own. Notably, none of the students directly mentioned guidance services or teacher support when describing who helped them through the process. This absence in students' own accounts does not necessarily indicate that such support was unavailable or ineffective, but it does suggest that, from the students' perspective, these institutional resources were not a salient part of their adaptation experience.

Participants described three main types of challenges: losing established friendships, dealing with practical difficulties related to the transfer (such as transportation and distance), and coping with the emotional impact of the disciplinary action itself. While social and practical challenges were linked to adjusting to a new school, feelings of guilt and shame, particularly in the case of Student 7, appeared to persist beyond the transfer and continued to affect how students viewed themselves.

Students mainly relied on informal sources of support, especially family members and, to a lesser extent, peers. Notably, none of the participants mentioned receiving support from guidance

counselors, school psychologists, or teachers. Given that the disciplinary transfer process is itself an institutional decision, this absence points to a disconnect between the institutional mechanisms that initiate the sanction and the institutional mechanisms, if any, that support students afterward.

DISCUSSION

Each disciplinary provision aims to protect certain values, rights, and public order. When examining acts that warrant the penalty of school transfer, it is seen that the following are taken into account: personal inviolability and bodily integrity, the right to education and the functioning of the relevant institution, public safety and order, privacy and personal rights, property rights, and the continuity of the constitutional order (Appendix A). The research findings show that the experiences of students who change schools as a result of disciplinary punishment are multidimensional. First, it was determined that the records predominantly contained behaviors that violated personal inviolability and bodily integrity, and that these violations mostly occurred among peers. This finding directly reflects the nature of the incidents experienced by students; that is, patterns of physical and verbal assault mostly underlie exclusionary sanctions such as changing schools. Within the framework of the Ministry of National Education's disciplinary regulations, such actions are defined as behaviors that may warrant severe sanctions such as “school transfer” (Ministry of National Education, 2014), and the findings align with students' experiences and the classification in the legislation.

In the study conducted by Turan and colleagues (2010), the most common types of bullying encountered in schools were determined to be physical bullying (such as pushing), verbal bullying (such as name-calling and mocking), emotional bullying (such as damaging personal belongings), and sexually explicit verbal bullying. This finding is consistent with the disciplinary records of the students included in this study. All participants were found to have violated personal inviolability and bodily integrity, and it was observed that these violations were mostly directed at other students. Therefore, based on the findings, it can be said that peer bullying is one of the main factors leading to students receiving the punishment of changing schools. This situation shows that when peer relationships cannot be regulated in a healthy manner in schools, disciplinary problems can lead to serious sanctions (Şahin & Mutlu, 2024; Ateş et al., 2022).

At the same time, the absence of repeated disciplinary infractions among participants at their new schools warrants a more cautious theoretical reading than a straightforward deterrence effect. Within a restorative discipline framework, lasting behavioral change is understood to result not from sanction severity but from the relational repair and accountability processes that follow an offense (Anderson & Ritter, 2020; Garnett et al., 2020). Notably, none of the participants in this study described any structured restorative process — such as mediation, dialogue with those affected, or a formal reintegration plan — accompanying their transfer. This absence makes it difficult to attribute the lack of recurrence to the punitive sanction itself, as opposed to other plausible explanations: students may have been placed in a new peer environment with no prior conflict history, or the transfer itself may have removed them from a specific relational dynamic that does not exist elsewhere. Read this way, the finding is less evidence that exclusionary discipline 'works,' and more evidence that punitive sanctions, in the absence of any restorative or relational component, leave open the question of *why* problem behavior does not recur — a gap that future research comparing transferred students with and without restorative follow-up could help resolve.

According to the research data, approximately 80% of the participants regularly attended their new schools after the school change, while 20% experienced problems with school attendance or did not attend their new school at all. Based on these findings, it can be argued that the perceived adjustive value of a school transfer is highly contingent upon regular school attendance. In cases of absenteeism, however, the expected impact of this practice is limited.

The participants were concentrated at two developmental stages: 5th grade students who had recently transitioned to middle school, and 7th and 8th grade students who were likely in the midst of

adolescence. Accordingly, it can be said that some students may have had difficulty adapting to middle school or that the developmental and psychosocial changes they experienced during their middle school years may have led to problematic attitudes in their peer relationships and behavior.

According to the research findings, it was determined that a large proportion of students easily adapted to the academic processes at their new schools after the school change. The findings suggest that students often perceived the new school environment as more supportive of academic focus. In addition, the fact that there was no significant difference between the old and new schools in terms of academic expectations may have contributed to students adapting to academic processes without difficulty.

According to the data obtained within the scope of the research, the vast majority of students reported that their social adaptation progressed smoothly and that they felt accepted in their new school environments. This suggests that, for most participants in this sample, establishing peer relationships and integrating socially did not appear to be a major source of difficulty, although this reflects students' self-reported impressions rather than an independent measure of social integration. In this context, it can be said that social acceptance contributed positively to the students' overall adaptation process.

The mixed pattern in students' comparisons of old versus new friendships is consistent with the concept of school belonging as a relational and cumulative process rather than a fixed outcome of placement (Kervick et al., 2020). Students who described rapid peer acceptance at their new school, such as Student 6, also described that new environment as actively protective — pulling them away from the dynamics that had led to disciplinary action in the first place. This aligns with Garnett et al.'s (2020) argument that a positive peer climate can substitute for, rather than simply coexist with, formal disciplinary structure. Conversely, students who reported social loss or exclusion did not describe any institutional effort to rebuild belonging deliberately; their adaptation, where it occurred, appeared to happen informally and unevenly. This divergence suggests that school transfer as currently implemented relies on the new environment's pre-existing social climate to do the relational work that, under a more deliberate trauma-sensitive or restorative model, would be actively facilitated rather than left to chance (Sanders et al., 2024).

According to research findings, it has been determined that the vast majority of students are accepted in their new social environments within a short period of time, while the remaining students establish themselves in their social circles over time. This situation reveals that the social adaptation process occurs generally among students, although it varies from student to student. Tomaszewski et al. (2024) have stated that social and emotional factors are intertwined with academic success on this subject. Furthermore, the literature points to the importance of the difference between superficial acceptance and deep, supportive attachment. However, while the finding of “rapid acceptance” is a positive indicator, it is necessary to evaluate through long-term follow-up whether this acceptance translates into sustainable social attachment and support networks.

There is no significant difference in the emotional states of transferred students. Half of the students reported feeling positive emotions such as happiness and not feeling like an outsider, while the other half reported feeling negative emotions such as fear of loneliness and exclusion. In this context, it can be said that students' emotional responses vary depending on factors such as individual differences, previous school experiences, and the level of acceptance in the new school environment. Therefore, each student's emotional adaptation process is unique, and rather than a general trend of improvement or deterioration, an imbalance based on personal experiences is observed. Based on these findings, interventions that positively influence emotional adaptation should not only be behavior-focused but also psychosocial support-focused.

The data shows that students who change schools due to disciplinary action experience the greatest loss of social environment and difficulty in forming new friendships. The social adaptation process has emerged as a significant area of difficulty for students. In addition, some students have been negatively affected by environmental factors such as transportation.

On an emotional level, some students reported feelings of guilt and shame related to the disciplinary process. These findings indicate that psychological adjustment involves not only adapting to the new school environment but also coping with the emotional effects of the process.

Regarding support mechanisms, most participants stated that they received emotional support from family members. While some students mentioned peer support, none referenced guidance services or teacher support. As this study did not include the perspectives of teachers, guidance counselors, or school administrators, this finding should be interpreted as reflecting students' subjective experience of where support came from, rather than as evidence that school-based support structures are absent or failing.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was drawn from a single district (Erenler, Sakarya), and the participant group was predominantly male (8 of 10 students), reflecting the demographic composition of students who received this disciplinary sanction during the study period rather than a deliberate sampling choice. As such, the transferability of these findings to other regions, school types, or more gender-balanced samples should be approached with caution. Second, the study focused exclusively on middle school (grades 5-8) students; the experiences of students transferred at other educational levels may differ substantially and were beyond the scope of this study. Third, interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes on average, which constrained the depth of exploration possible for any single experience or theme. While this was sufficient to identify the descriptive patterns reported here, it limited opportunities for extended probing or follow-up that might have surfaced richer or more nuanced accounts. Future research using longer, multiple-session interviews with a larger and more demographically varied sample across multiple regions would allow for a deeper and more transferable understanding of this population's experiences.

In sum, these findings suggest that school transfer, as currently practiced, functions primarily as a relational *disruption* rather than a relational *intervention*: it removes students from one social context without necessarily replacing the supportive structures — peer mediation, counseling, structured reintegration — that restorative and trauma-sensitive frameworks identify as necessary for genuine behavioral and emotional change (Welsh & Little, 2018; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Whether a given student thrived or struggled after transfer appears to depend less on the sanction itself than on whether they happened to land in a socially receptive environment. This points to a conceptual gap in current policy: exclusionary discipline and restorative support are typically treated as alternative paradigms, yet the experiences described here suggest they may need to operate jointly, with restorative elements built into the transfer process itself rather than left to the receiving school's informal climate.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of a small group of middle school students (N = 10) who were subject to the disciplinary sanction of school transfer, using a descriptive qualitative approach within a single district. The findings revealed that the behaviors leading to disciplinary sanctions were mostly rooted in peer relationships and that students were sanctioned for actions that violated personal integrity. This result points to the likely importance of peer relationship quality in disciplinary processes and suggests that preventive social skills training may be a valuable area for schools to invest in, though this study's design does not allow this relationship to be established conclusively.

The absence of repeated disciplinary infractions among participants points to the possibility that the transfer sanction is associated with reduced problem behavior in the short term, although, as discussed above, this study cannot establish that the sanction itself caused this outcome, given the absence of a comparison group and the presence of plausible alternative explanations such as changed peer context. However, the fact that some students experienced problems with school attendance also indicates that the sanction may, in some cases, lead to outcomes that alienate students from

school. This situation shows that the application of disciplinary measures without taking individual differences into account may pose a risk for some students.

In terms of academic adjustment, it has been determined that the majority of students easily adapted to the new school environment and did not struggle with academic processes. The finding indicates that the new school environment offers students a chance to start afresh. In terms of social and emotional adaptation, individual differences among students are prominent. Most students have been able to make new friends and express that they feel socially accepted; however, some students have experienced a loss of social circle and feelings of exclusion. Emotionally, the presence of feelings such as guilt, shame, and loneliness indicates that the disciplinary process can leave psychological scars on students.

Finally, students predominantly attributed their emotional support to family members, with little to no mention of teachers or guidance services in their accounts. While this study cannot determine whether this reflects a genuine gap in institutional support or simply a gap in students' awareness or perception of it, the finding nonetheless highlights school-based psychosocial support as an area warranting closer examination during disciplinary practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, a number of institutional and policy-level recommendations are proposed. Firstly, guidance services should be actively involved in the process both before and after the school transfer sanction; students should be provided with individual counseling, emotional regulation, and social skills development support. Additionally, to support students who have received the penalty of school transfer to regularly attend their new schools and to facilitate their adaptation process, an individual supervision and guidance system should be established through guidance counselors. Peer support mechanisms should be established in schools; in this regard, structured preventive education programs on bullying prevention, empathy, communication skills, and peer mediation should be implemented. Families should be informed that the disciplinary process is not only punitive but also rehabilitative; school-family cooperation should be strengthened. Finally, these findings tentatively suggest that the Ministry of National Education's disciplinary regulations could benefit from strengthening provisions for preventive and supportive practices alongside sanctions, such as establishing support mechanisms for the adjustment process following a school change; however, given the limited and localized nature of this sample, broader policy validation through larger, multi-region studies would be needed before such recommendations could be considered well-substantiated. In general, research findings indicate that disciplinary practices should be approached not only from a punitive perspective but also from an educational and psychosocial perspective. In this regard, developing a comprehensive disciplinary approach aimed at re-engaging students will contribute to establishing a sustainable positive behavioral culture in school environments.

This study examined the adaptation processes of students who changed schools due to disciplinary sanctions within a limited sample and time frame. Future research involving larger samples covering schools in different regions could contribute to a better understanding of how regional differences affect adaptation processes. Furthermore, the use of longitudinal research designs and long-term observation methods could reveal the development of students' academic, social, and emotional adjustment processes over time after changing schools. Such studies would make it possible to determine whether adjustment difficulties are temporary or permanent and to develop more effective intervention processes. As this study relied only on students' perspectives, future research should also include school administrators and guidance counselors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the support available during the transfer process. This could help determine whether the gaps identified by students reflect a lack of support or limited awareness and use of existing services.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Both authors contributed equally to all stages of the study. All stages of the research process, including study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, and final approval, were carried out collaboratively by both authors.

APPENDIX

Item Number	Behavior (Shortened English Version)
1	Acting against constitutional principles or pressuring others to do so
2	Harassment, insult, slander, threats, or inciting such behavior
3	Bringing or possessing injurious or deadly weapons at school
4	Intentionally starting a fire at school or its surroundings
5	Habitually misusing school property without permission
6	Engaging in or promoting political party or union activities
7	Collecting money or aid on behalf of an organization without permission
8	Discrimination or participation in acts based on language, race, gender, beliefs, or political views
9	Damaging or habitually taking others' property without permission
10	Habitually vandalizing school buildings or property
11	Preventing attendance to or disruption of classes and exams
12	Violence or incitement against school staff or students, in or outside school
13	Habitually staying out at night without permission in boarding schools
14	Harboring unauthorized individuals in the school or school premises
15	Having someone else take a test on one's behalf or doing so for others
16	Using or promoting alcohol or addictive substances
17	(Repealed)
18	Recording or sharing voice/image of staff or students violating their personal rights via digital means