Understanding Each Other: Improving Social Cohesion in Schools in Turkey

There are approximately 70.8 million forcibly-displaced people worldwide, including 26 million registered refugees, about half of whom are children. Turkey has received more than 3.5 million refugees since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, making it the country with the highest number of Syrian refugees. More than 1 million Syrian children live in Turkey as of 2020. To encourage access to education, the Turkish Ministry of Education made state schooling available to refugee children. However, many Turkish residents worry that this policy harms the school environment by increasing peer violence and facilitating social segregation along ethnic lines. Faced with these new challenges, teachers need guidance on how to maintain the quality of the learning environment.

Well-developed social skills are vital to building not only cohesive classrooms but also communities and economies, as they allow members of society to communicate effectively and work together. One of these skills is perspective: taking, or viewing a situation from the perspective of another person. This process has been shown to lower social aggression, encourage trust, and increase cooperation. Especially in societies such as Turkey’s that contain ethnically distinct groups, these skills may need to be actively developed in children, and public education may play a critical role in helping to develop them.

To test how perspective-taking can improve interactions among different ethnic groups in diverse classrooms, Sule Alan (European University Institute, J-PAL), Ceren Baysan (University of Essex), Mert Gumren (Koc University), and Elif Kubilay (University of Essex) partnered with the Ministry of Education in Turkey to conduct a randomized evaluation of a curriculum called “Understanding Each Other” (UEO).

August 11, 2020