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**UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER: IMPROVING
INTER-ETHNIC COHESION IN SCHOOLS IN TURKEY**

An interactive classroom program encouraging students to consider one another's perspectives in Turkey lowered peer violence, improved relationships between refugee and Turkish students, and increased prosocial behaviors like trust, cooperation, and altruism.

Featuring an evaluation by Sule Alan, Ceren Baysan, Mert Gumren, and Elif Kubilay



Sule Alan and students in a classroom. Photo: Sule Alan | IIPA

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).

KEY RESULTS:

The program improved students' perspective-taking abilities and decreased impulsivity. Children in the program demonstrated a 0.27 standard deviation increase in their ability to understand others' perspectives and were 0.07 standard deviations less impulsive than comparison children.

The curriculum lowered incidents of peer violence. Perhaps because of students' improved socio-emotional skills, classrooms that received the program experienced 1.21 fewer incidents of violence between peers in a ten-day period than classrooms that did not use the program (a 65 percent decline).

The program encouraged students to be more inclusive and reduced ethnic segregation. Refugee children who attended the program were 7 percentage points more likely to form a friendship with a Turkish host classmate than comparison students. They were also 17 and 10 percentage points more likely, respectively, to receive emotional and academic support from host classmates than their counterparts who did not participate in the program.

Students from the program demonstrated more socially positive behaviors, such as trust, reciprocity, and altruism.

The curriculum improved refugee children's Turkish language skills. Refugee children who participated in the program scored 0.14 standard deviations higher on a Turkish language test than their peers in schools where the curriculum was not implemented.

Understanding Each Other: Improving Social Cohesion in Schools in Turkey

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