

**SKILLS
FOR LIFE**

Social Skills for Inter-Ethnic Cohesion

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Author



Sule Alan

European University Institute

Dr. Sule Alan is a Professor of Economics at the European University Institute, Florence and an Adjunct Professor of Economics at Bilkent University, Turkey. Her research interests include education, migrant integration, gender and household behavior.

Abstract

Social skills are essential to building empowered and cohesive communities in ethnic diversity. In a world with massive population movements and growing anti-immigrant sentiments, schools stand out as important platforms to instill key social skills into our children to build inter-ethnic cohesion. Achieving this requires the implementation of rigorously tested educational actions. This brief provides the evaluation results of a particular educational program that was implemented in a high-stakes context where the ethnic composition of schools changed abruptly due to a massive refugee influx. The program significantly lowered peer violence and ethnic segregation in schools, and improved prosociality in children.

1. Introduction

Current migratory flows have made ethnic diversity an unavoidable reality of our times. Ethnic diversity, depending on how it is managed at the policy level, can promote economic development through skill complementarities, innovation, and creativity. However, it can also hinder development if it brings inter-ethnic discord and disturbs social cohesion by disabling effective communication tools within and across communities.

There is ample evidence showing that social cohesion is a crucial factor in achieving sustainable economic development and prosperity (See Alesina & Ferrara, 2005; Easterly et al., 2006; Fryer & Loury, 2013; Hjort, 2014; Rodrik, 1999). A cohesive society is a society that possesses a good collective character supported by the well-developed social skills of its members.

Social skills refer to a wide range of individual characteristics that govern social interactions, including trust, reciprocity, and cooperation. Together, these skills form social capital to communicate effectively with others, engage in ethical economic interactions, and work together for common goals. While it is to humans' utmost advantage to build cohesive environments, non-cohesive environments, characterized by violence and inter-ethnic tensions, can arise under turbulent sociopolitical conditions. In such conditions, restorative social and educational actions can emerge as policy imperatives.

Public education represents an ideal setting to build cohesive communities in ethnic diversity. Schools are where we instill civic virtues into our children, shape their social skills and build our social capital (Gradstein & Justman, 2002). Research shows that the childhood period is critical for building foundational skills, cognitive and socio-emotional, as neural plasticity is thought to be the highest in this period (Alan et al., 2019; Alan & Ertac, 2018; Cappelen et al., 2019; Heckman et al., 2013, 2006; Murray et al., 2020). As skill development opportunities are likely to be limited in non-cohesive environments, providing these opportunities outside the home can be of critical value for socioeconomically disadvantaged children and their communities.

Recent research showed that school-based interventions targeting specific socio-emotional skills can have long-lasting impacts on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. Alan and Ertac (2018) showed that teaching future orientation and how to control self-defeating impulses to primary school children can significantly lower behavioral problems related to impulsivity. These effects are observed to persist three years after the intervention. Similarly, Alan et al. (2019) showed that perseverance can be fostered by instilling a growth mindset in children, leading to higher academic achievement, which persists through adolescence. While research on socio-emotional skills and their

effect on individual achievement is still surging, not much is known about the skills that regulate our social relationships and govern our interactions with one another, especially with the members of what is considered to be “out-groups”. Even less is known about the extent to which these “social” skills are malleable and whether it is possible to design and implement effective educational tools to shape them in ethnically diverse schools.

The challenges of governing ethnically diverse communities hold for ethnically diverse schools as the school environment tends to mirror its neighborhood. There is now an ample body of research that examines the effects of schools’ ethnic composition on students’ outcomes. Much of this literature showed mixed results. On the one hand, as a prominent approach, inter-group contact theory predicts considerable social and private benefits of integrated schools (Corno et al., 2019; Paluck et al., 2019; Rao, 2019). On the other hand, conflict theory paints a different picture. It suggests that ethnic diversity feeds negative attitudes toward outgroups evoked by competition over economic and social resources (Bartos & Wehr, 2002; Intriligator, 1982). Ethnically diverse schools, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings, tend to be susceptible to ethnicity-based conflicts, acts of social exclusion, and inter-group violence. In schools where the ethnic composition changed rapidly without effective management tools in place, these issues can dangerously spiral out of control. It is important to note that inter-ethnic violence affects not only the minority children, who are often the victims, but also the non-minority students who witness it, negatively impacting all exposed children’s longer-term developmental trajectories.

Achieving inter-ethnic cohesion in at-risk schools requires fostering social skills that are fundamental to social interactions amongst different ethnic groups. This can be done using various curricular and pedagogical tools. The effectiveness of these tools needs to be tested rigorously, especially in contexts where such interventions are most needed (i.e., social cohesion has been undermined by external factors, such as mass migration).

2. Building Inter-ethnic Cohesion by Fostering Social Skills

Alan et al. (2021) have recently conducted one such study in Southeast Turkey, a region that experienced a massive influx of migrants at an unprecedented scale and speed. The study represents the first large-scale intervention where a specifically designed curricular program to build inter-ethnic cohesion in at-risk schools is put to the test.

The program was implemented in Southeast Turkey in a high-stakes context, where the ethnic composition has changed in a short period. Turkey has received more than 3.5 million refugees since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. This figure implies 14% of the world's refugees and makes Turkey the host country with the highest number of Syrian refugees. Among those, over 1 million are school-age children. Since there is no sign of the Syrian conflict coming to an end, Syrians living in Turkey see very little chance of returning home.

The current Turkish Ministry of Education policy is to place all school-age refugee children in state schools based on their registered address. The objective of the school placement policy is to achieve faster integration through total immersion.

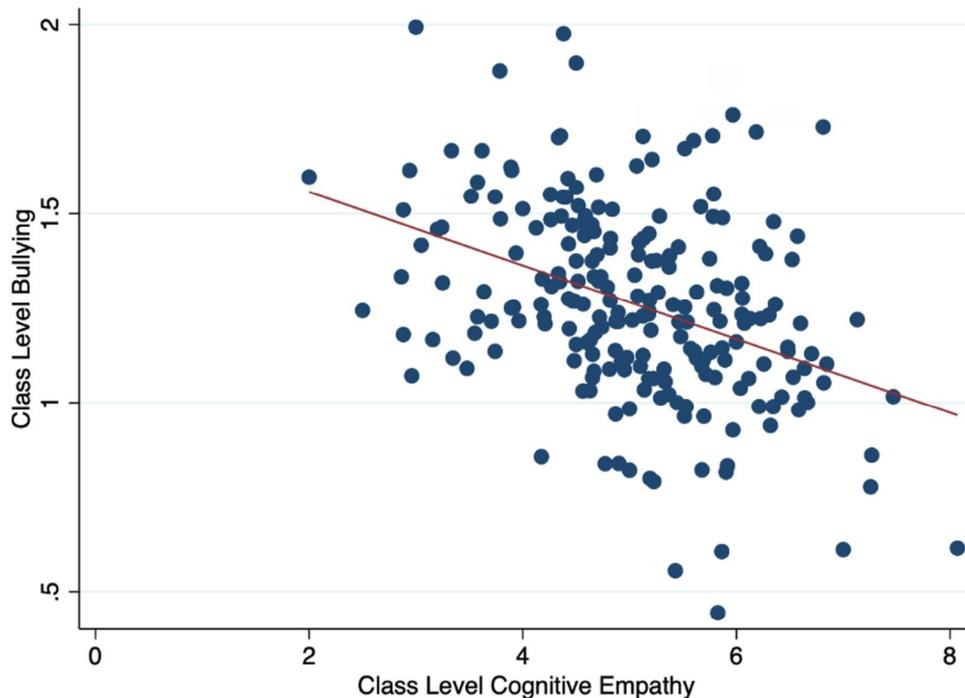
However, these efforts face considerable challenges. Ethnic segregation, social exclusion of refugees, and increasing peer violence threaten the quality of education for all and make the affected communities uneasy about the rapid changes they observe in their neighborhoods.

2.1. How Can We Help Develop Perspective-Taking? An Educational Program on Perspective-Taking

The program content targets perspective-taking ability, a particular socio-cognitive skill, among children. Perspective-taking is a socio-cognitive ability to view a situation from the perspective of the affected person. Perspective-taking has been shown to invoke cognitive mechanisms in the brain and dissociate from what is generally known as an empathetic concern (or emotional empathy). Stietz et al. (2019) shows that empathy and perspective-taking recruit different neural circuits in the brain.

Studies show that perspective-taking is associated with lower social aggression, higher trust, and social cooperation (see Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Our data from corroborate these findings. Classrooms with higher average perspective-taking ability exhibit lower incidences of bullying and peer violence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Perspective Taking and Peer Violence



Motivated by these findings, a multidisciplinary team of educators, pedagogical consultants, and multimedia developers designed a perspective-taking curriculum coined as “Understanding Each Other” for elementary school students (see Figure 2). The curriculum contains a set of class activities and pedagogical tools for teachers to develop children’s ability to understand each other’s perspectives, their capacity to make inferences about others’ intentions, goals, and motives.

Specifically, the curriculum aims to help students better understand and experience the emotions of the described character through reading and visual materials (Alan et al., 2021). For instance, in an animated video, children watch that the characters experience many adverse events, such as falling while running after a ball and hurting knees. This material attempts to emphasize the similar events' impacts on different people.

In another example, students read a diary extract of a refugee student and their friend (Alan et al., 2021). Students read the hypothetical child's diary about their first day at the new school. Then, students read a host child's diary extract who wrote about the very same day of a new friend's arrival from another country. Their ethnic identity was never explicitly mentioned throughout the curriculum, yet could be inferred.

Figure 2. Book Cover “Understanding Each Other”



Additionally, the program includes a variety of activities and games that teacher can implement. For instance, after watching the video highlighting social exclusion, the teacher asks children to guess the characters' feelings and fill in thinking balloons. Prior research emphasized such deliberation activities' roles in improving perspective-taking ability (Galinsky et al., 2005). Another example is a fun class activity called 'Emotion Jar.' In this activity, students prepared a jar full of different emotions (written in small pieces of paper). Then, they learned how to guess each other's emotions (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. A Classroom Activity 'Emotion Jar'



The program designers took great care to ensure that the content does not make ethnicity a salient subject in any of the activities. Instead, they aimed to encourage all students, hosts, and refugees alike to exert effort to see individual differences, whether they be ethnic or otherwise, from a different, more tolerant perspective. The development of the curriculum was a philanthropic endeavor of a private Turkish university. For more information on the content, see the Online Appendix of (Alan et al., 2021).

2.2. Implementation

The program was implemented as a cluster randomized controlled trial in the 2018-2019 academic year. The evaluation sample includes over 6,500 elementary school children, 16% of whom are refugees, from 80 elementary schools.

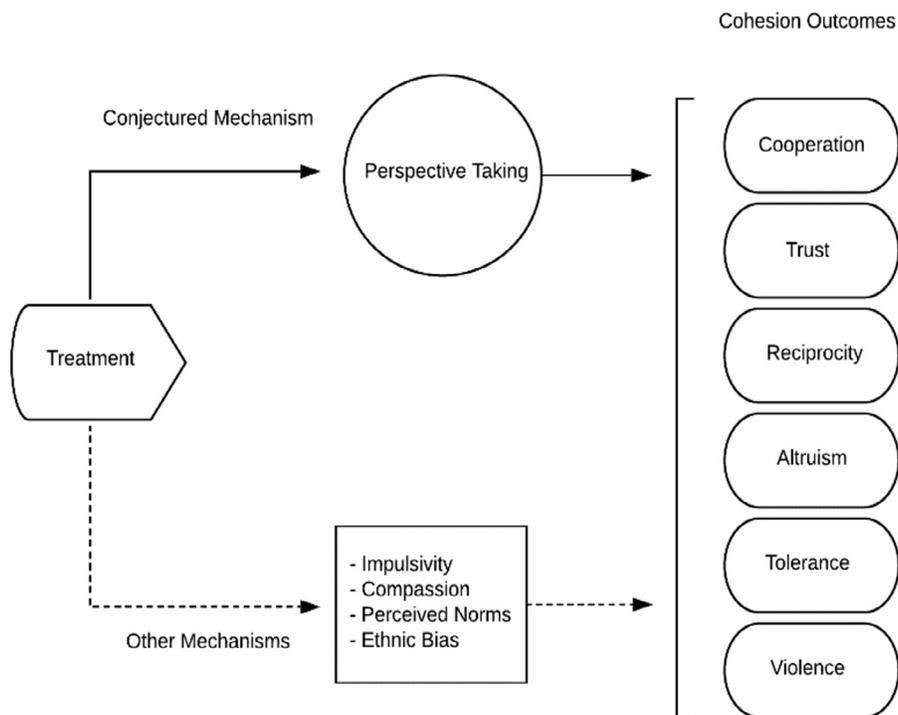
After collecting detailed baseline data from all children in spring and fall 2018, randomly selected 40 schools (124 teachers) received training on implementing the curriculum and related class activities. Teachers were instructed to use the entire academic year of 2018-2019, about three lecture hours per week, to cover the program in the extra-curricular project hours allotted by the Ministry of Education. The endline data were collected by the research team visiting all classrooms in May 2019 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Field Moments



While we expect that the program would improve the aforementioned cohesion indicators through its effect on children’s perspective-taking ability, we also acknowledge that it may do so through reducing impulsivity and ethnic bias as well as improving empathetic concern and social norms (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Effect on Peer Violence and Victimization



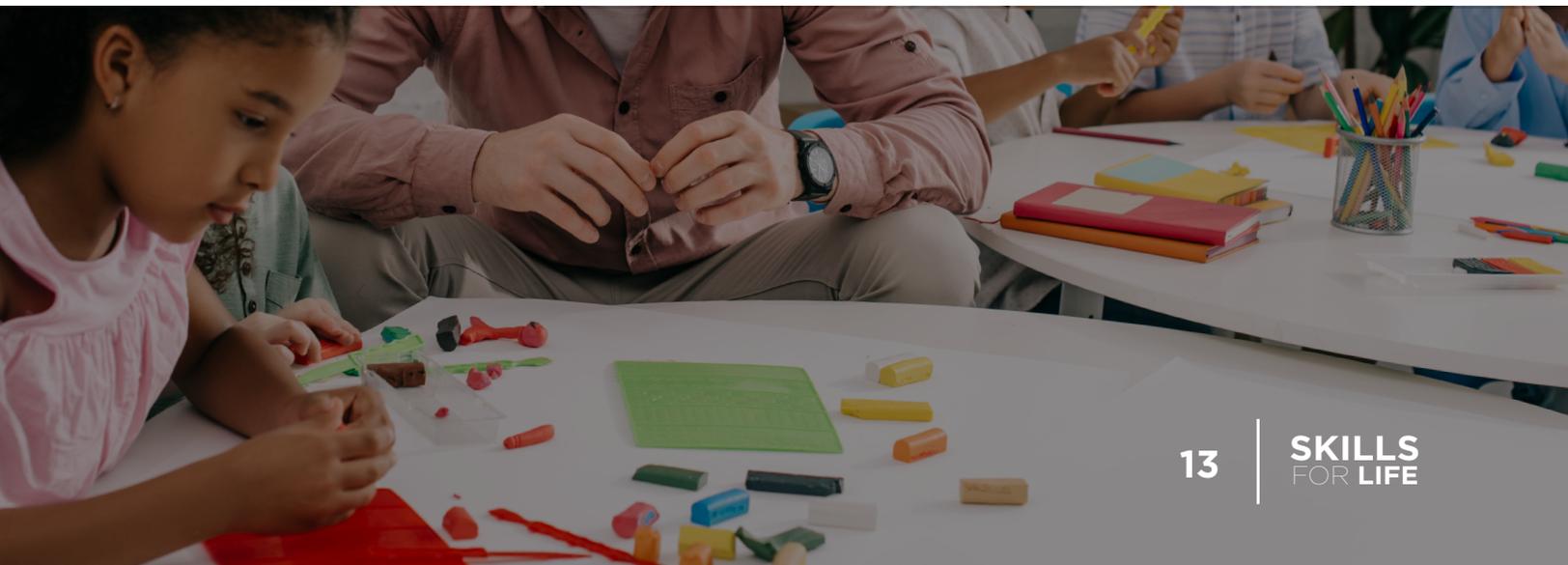
2.3. How Can We Measure Social Cohesion in Ethnically Diverse Schools?

An important component of the study is the breadth of its measurement toolkit, which combines contemporary insights from physiology, sociology, and experimental economics. A diverse set of measurement inventories in this toolkit characterize the cohesiveness of the school and classroom environment (Alan et al., 2021).

First, to measure peer violence, we used administrative records of peer violence on the school ground. It was the number of high-intensity disciplinary episodes that took place in the school ground in the last ten school days. High intensity here means that severe conflicts involving perpetrators and victims, and events are serious enough to involve school administrators and parents. Independent designated school administrators, who are not involved in the program in any way, provided a 10-day diary log.

To measure social exclusion and ethnic segregation, we used elicited friendship (network) ties. First, we constructed a classroom level segregation index to capture the homophily level in the classroom. Then, we asked children to nominate up to three classmates as their close friends, and up to three classmates from whom they frequently receive emotional and academic help to measure inter-ethnic ties between host and refugee children.

Lastly, we used incentivized lab-in-the-field experiments to measure prosocial behaviors (trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and altruism), and psychometric tests (i.e., surveys) to measure socio-emotional skills, social norms, and ethnic bias (Boisjoly et al., 2006; Corno et al., 2019; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Rao, 2019). For more information, see Alan et al. (2020).

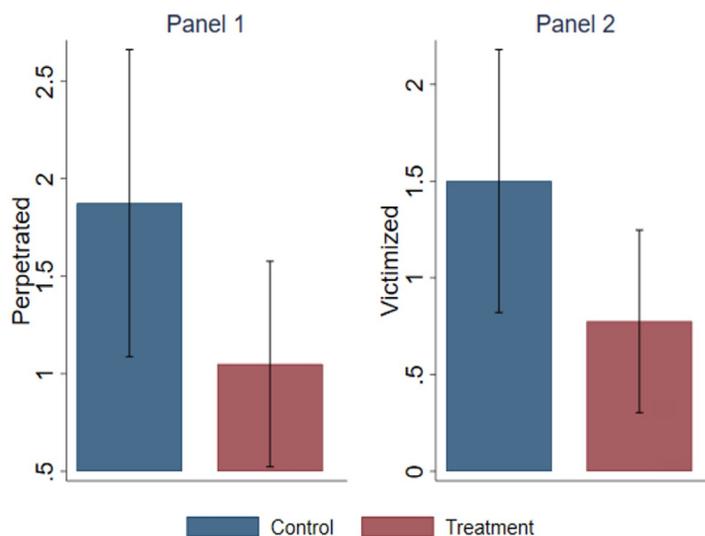


2.4. Results: Program Effect on Peer Violence and Victimization

The program had an impact on peer violence and victimization (see Figure 6). The figure depicts the number of high-intensity disciplinary episodes that took place in the school ground in a given ten school days, collected via a diary log. Here, the term high-intensity refers to severe conflicts involving perpetrators and victims. The first panel shows the number of events that were perpetrated in a 10-day window. The second panel the number of events where a child was victimized in a 10-day window.

The program significantly reduced the number of violent events perpetrated (see Figure 6). There were, on average, 1.88 events recorded in 10 days in control schools. The treatment effect of -1.23 fewer events implies a substantial (about 65 percent) decline in such events. The program also significantly reduced the number of events that victimized children. While the number is 1.50 events in the control group, it is about 50 percent lower (0.75 fewer events) in the treatment group. This result ensures that the program did reduce peer violence but did not do so at the expense of making treated children more vulnerable to victimization. The latter would be a concern if the program made treated children more susceptible to victimization by encouraging them to show understanding toward their peers in a generally violent environment. We find that, on the contrary, the program lowered the risk of being a victim in a conflict by keeping children away from conflict.

Figure 6. The Program's Effect on Peer Violence and Victimization



2.5. Results: Social Skills and Prosocial Behavior

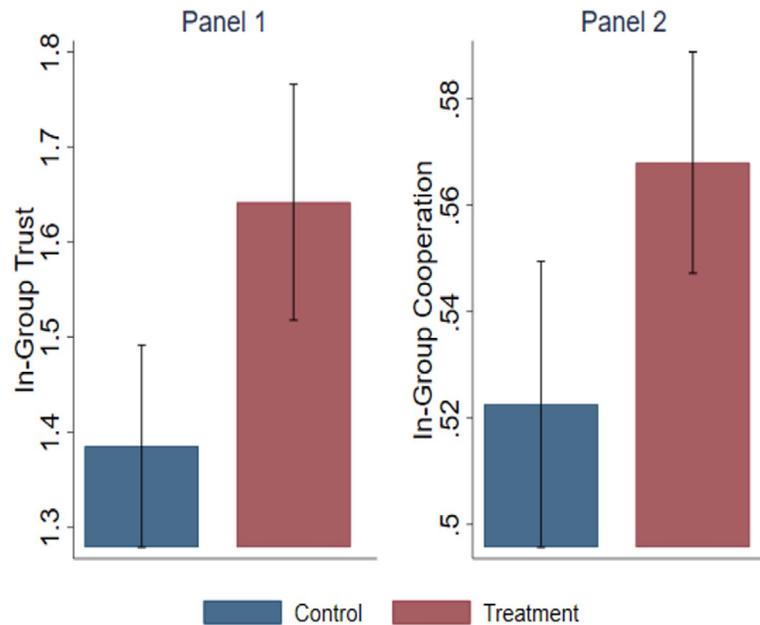
An essential feature of a cohesive environment is the prevalence of prosocial behavior in social interactions. Trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and altruism are the best-known prosociality indicators studied by economists in lab and field settings. We measured prosocial behavior via an incentivized trust and cooperation games played in classrooms. Trust game (Berg et al., 1995) involves two participants that are anonymously paired. For this game, we paired each child with an anonymous classmate. Children are endowed with four tokens, which can be converted into small gifts in our gift basket at the end of the session. A child takes the role of a sender or a receiver in this game. The sender must decide how many of his/her tokens to send to his/her anonymous classmate (the receiver). The amount the sender chooses to send, which may also be zero, is tripled by the experimenter and then given to the receiver. The receiver makes a similar choice - returning some amount of the now-tripled tokens to the sender, which may also be zero. Our measure of trust is the number of tokens sent to the anonymous classmate, which varies between zero and 4 with higher values indicating higher trust.

Similarly, we elicited the degree of cooperation between classmates using a version of the Prisoner's Dilemma game. This game also involves two participants to be anonymously paired. Children are endowed with three gift tokens for this game. The game involves choosing a card that is either green or orange simultaneously. A child's payoff depends on both the color of the card he/she chooses and that of his/her pair chooses. If both students in a pair choose orange, both remain in status-quo, which is three tokens each. If different colors are chosen, the one who chooses the orange card triples his/her payoff, and the one who chooses green loses all his/her tokens. The cooperative outcome is when both students choose green, in which case both double their earnings and gain six tokens each. We refer to the binary choice of a green card as the "cooperative" action.



The program has a strong effect on trust and cooperation in the classroom (see Figure 7). Panel 1 shows that while control children choose to send on average 1.38 tokens to their anonymous classmates, treated children send 0.28 extra tokens, implying a 21% increase in trust due to the program. Similarly, as depicted in Panel 2, while 52% of control children choose to cooperate, the program increased the propensity to cooperate by 4.4 percentage points.

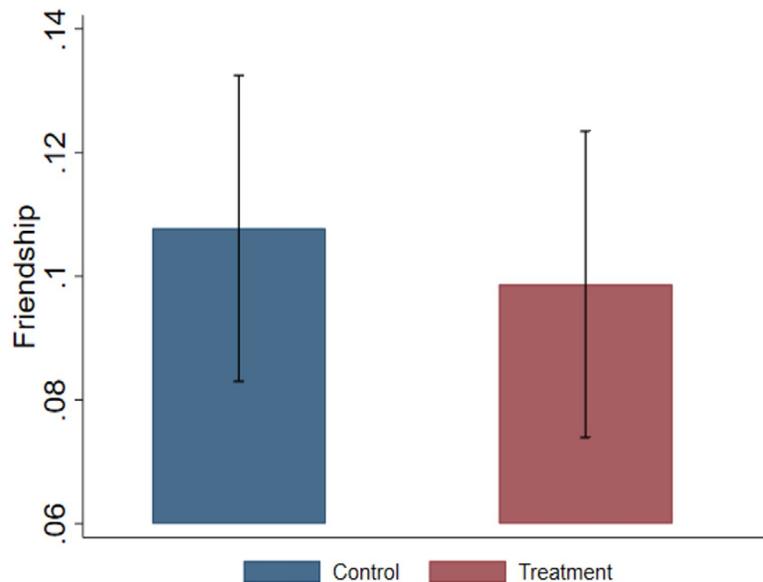
Figure 7. The Program's Effect on Cooperation and Trust



2.6. Results: Social Exclusion and Ethnic Segregation in the Classroom

A crucial component of the evaluation design is to elicit social network ties to construct various social exclusion and ethnic segregation measures to be used as primary outcomes. To construct a measure of ethnic segregation in the classroom, we utilize the idea put forward in (Schelling, 1969). Specifically, we construct a segregation index for each classroom as the difference between the expected proportion of inter-ethnic ties, based on the theoretical probability of randomly formed inter-ethnic ties and the observed proportion of inter-ethnic ties, based on the observed distribution of ties. Our segregation index lies between -1 and 1, with higher values indicating higher levels of ethnic segregation. Given the baseline segregation of 0.11, the estimated program effect implies a 20% decline in ethnic segregation in the classroom (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. The Program's Effect on Ethnic Segregation



Even though not targeted directly by the program, we were not surprised to see that the program's positive impacts on inter-ethnic relationships spilled over refugee students' achievement outcomes. We estimate a striking 0.13 standard deviation improvement in refugee children's test scores in the host country's language. We believe that the social inclusion of treated refugee children likely responsible for this remarkable result.

2.7. Potential Mechanisms

We explore several mechanisms that might explain these powerful and promising results. While we conjectured at the outset that the program would improve cohesion indicators by enhancing children's perspective-taking ability, we acknowledged that there might be other channels. For example, the program may have improved social norms in the classroom or reduced ethnic bias by promoting tolerance toward individual differences. Similarly, the program may have increased children's ability to control their impulses and, therefore, lowered aggression and victimization.

Finally, even though it only targeted their perspective-taking ability, the program may have increased children's empathetic concern toward others. Exploring each of these channels, we find that, in addition to increasing perspective-taking ability, the program lowered children's impulsivity. It also reduced their ethnic bias with some moderate improvement in reported social norms. We find no program impact on children's empathetic concern.



3. Policy Implications

Well-developed social skills are essential to building cohesive and conflict-free communities. Public education is an ideal setting to achieve this goal by targeting areas where parental input is inadequate to shape children’s social skills.

Educational policies that target social and emotional skills may take various forms, such as curricular reforms, pedagogical transformations, and teacher-focused actions. In this report, we document the effectiveness of an exemplary curricular approach to developing social skills in a high-stakes context. Curricular programs, such as “Understanding Each Other,” may go a long way in building inter-ethnic cohesion in at-risk schools by improving children’s social skills and encouraging prosocial behavior on school grounds.

The mass migration from the global South is far from being the problem of a single country. Latin America and the Caribbean are no exception. While conducted in Turkey, the lessons drawn from this evaluation study are relevant for contexts outside Turkey, including the Americas.

Many host countries are taking the lead to accommodate refugees by making radical changes in their education systems. The eventual success (or failure) of these efforts will have tremendous implications for the social fabric of countries at risk of facing high influxes of displaced people in the coming years. A unique country experience where high-quality interventions have been put to the test can provide lessons of global value.



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