Impact of school-based training on social cohesion for immigrant children in Finland

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Sector(s): Education

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Recent waves of migration to Europe have altered the social policy issues that governments face. In Finland, immigrant families, which increasingly include children, often face barriers to integration including discrimination at workplaces, in schools, and in society at large. Researchers partnered with a local non-profit, Walter, to evaluate the effectiveness of two school-based social cohesion interventions for immigrants' children in Finnish schools.

Policy issue

Recent increases in migration to Europe have altered the social policy issues governments face. Immigrant families, which increasingly include children, face barriers to integration, such as discrimination at workplaces, in schools, and in society at large. For children, the additional barriers of a different language of instruction at school and the introduction of a new set of cultural values can hinder their ability to integrate into schools. However, there is a lack of rigorous research on the impact of school-based programs to reduce discrimination and support social cohesion between immigrant and native communities.

Context of the evaluation

Similar to other European countries, Finland has recently received an influx of refugees. From 1990 to 2018, the percentage of the population of foreign descent increased from less than one to more than seven percent. In Finland, 98 percent of teachers reported that they have intervened in instances of discrimination in [year], while 44 percent of students reported thinking that teachers' responses to bullying and social exclusion were sufficiently prompt and effective [in year].

Researchers partnered with Finnish non-governmental organization Walter, an association that promotes intercultural communication and interaction, especially among children and teachers. The association is run by ethnically diverse Finnish professional athletes and artists. Two of Walter's prominent programs include the KYTKE workshop for students and the CulturED

workshop for teachers.

The KYTKE workshop for students is an annual program which started in 2012. The workshops promote multiculturalism by increasing the quantity and quality of intercultural interactions and enhancing feelings of empathy and respect for others. Meetings run for 60 minutes, are facilitated by current or former Finnish professional athletes and artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and convene groups of 60 students. Workshops begin with an introduction from presenters, followed by short videos, group work, and facilitated conversation.

The CulturED workshop for teachers is a four-hour workshop focused on helping teachers challenge their own stereotypes and prejudices while building their capacity to work in multicultural classrooms. The workshops focus on four topics: stereotypes, marginalization, racism, and Finnish identity. Workshops begin with the presentation of relevant data and statistics from the Finnish context, followed by a short film, group work, and facilitated conversation. CulturED also provides teachers with short videos and a booklet to prepare them to facilitate conversations with their students on the topics covered in the training.

Details of the intervention

Researchers partnered with a local non-profit, Walter, to evaluate the effectiveness of two school-based social cohesion interventions for immigrants' children in Finnish schools. Drawing from the 10 cities with the most immigrant children and three school years (2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23), researchers selected ninety elementary schools with at least 10 immigrant children per grade in grades 5 and 6 to create a sample of 360 grade-school combinations. Researchers assigned either students or teachers at the grade level into one of three groups:

- KYTKE Workshop for students (120 grade-school combinations): immigrant children in this group received only the KYTKE Workshop for students.
- CulturED Workshop for teachers (120 grade-school combinations): teachers in this group received only the CulturED Workshop for teachers.
- Comparison group (120 grade-school combinations): immigrant children in this group did not receive any version of the intervention.

Researchers collected survey data from children and teachers and analyzed administrative data on teachers, students, parents, and siblings. Teacher surveys measured teachers' explicit and implicit bias, trust and integration, and donations to pro-immigrant organizations. Student surveys measured explicit and implicit bias, bullying, soft skills, network data, radicalization, trust and integration, and standardized test scores. The baseline survey took place from August to September of 2020 and the endline survey was conducted annually at the end of each intervention cycle. Finally researchers will partner with the Aalto Behavioral Lab to collect information about teachers' implicit bias in their behavior with students.

Results and policy lessons

Research ongoing; results forthcoming