

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 | J-PAL

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 1.23 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 12 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.

EVALUATION

Researchers partnered with the Ministry of Education in Turkey to evaluate the UEO curriculum. They randomly assigned 40 elementary schools in the districts of Şanlıurfa and Mersin in southeastern Turkey to use the program, while an additional 40 served as the comparison group and continued with the status quo curriculum. The 80 schools that participated in the evaluation included approximately 7,000 children in grades 3 and 4 (aged 8–12), 18 percent of whom were refugees.

The program used interactive activities and games to encourage students to consider others’ perspectives. It took place during official extra-curricular time in the school day in the 2018–2019 school year; elementary school teachers are encouraged by the Ministry of Education to use up to five hours per week for socially useful activities that do not fit elsewhere in the curriculum. In November 2018, researchers conducted trainings to prepare 124 teachers for the introduction of the curriculum. In the trainings, teachers learned about cognitive development, participated in an interactive workshop to learn the curriculum, and received electronic and physical implementation kits.

Researchers collected data from administrative logs recording incidents of violence, friendship network analyses measuring friendships between students of different ethnicities, achievement tests measuring academic ability, and psychometric tests measuring socio-emotional skills, social norms, and ethnic biases. Researchers also conducted short games with the children through which they measured prosocial behaviors like trust, cooperation, and altruism. Students earned tokens throughout the course of the games that could be traded for small gifts. Some of the games included choosing how many tokens to send to either anonymous classmates or anonymous students from another school to measure trust and cooperation. After playing these games, children were given the opportunity to donate bonus tokens to an anonymous child from another school as a way of measuring altruism. Some children were not told the ethnicity of this anonymous child, while others were told that the child was a Syrian refugee, to measure how children took ethnicity into account when making their donation.

TABLE 1. THE “UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER” CURRICULUM

The “Understanding Each Other” program aims to foster social cohesion and establish a healthy learning environment through perspective-taking activities that encourage students to consider the perspectives of others. Created by a multidisciplinary team of educators, pedagogical consultants, and multimedia developers, it includes both written and video-based activities and games. For example, children might read a sample diary written from the perspective of a refugee student and another from the perspective of a student from the host community. The curriculum never explicitly mentions ethnicity, though ethnicity can be inferred in some activities. Instead, it encourages tolerance toward all individuals, regardless of how they might be different.

TOPIC	PURPOSE	LEARNING OUTCOME
1. What is empathy?	Introducing students to the concept of empathy.	Students learn what kind of character trait empathy is.
2. Getting to know emotional cues	Teaching students to recognize social cues.	Students learn to make inferences from social cues.
3. Different people, same emotions	Conveying to students that we are all similar in our emotions.	Students learn that all individuals share emotions like pain, happiness, and embarrassment.
4. Understanding my friend	Teaching students to solve problems by adopting the perspective of another.	Students learn a problem-solving strategy by adopting another’s point of view in a familiar scenario.
5. Understanding the feelings of creatures	Teaching students that animals, like humans, also need to be understood and respected.	Students learn that not only humans but also animals need to be understood and respected.
6. Understanding unsaid thoughts	Fostering the ability of understanding and problem-solving in social interactions by making inferences from social cues.	Students learn to understand other individuals in social situations.
7. Injustice and its solution	Teaching students to exhibit a principled attitude when they witness wrongdoing.	Students learn the importance of opposing anti-social behaviors in principle.

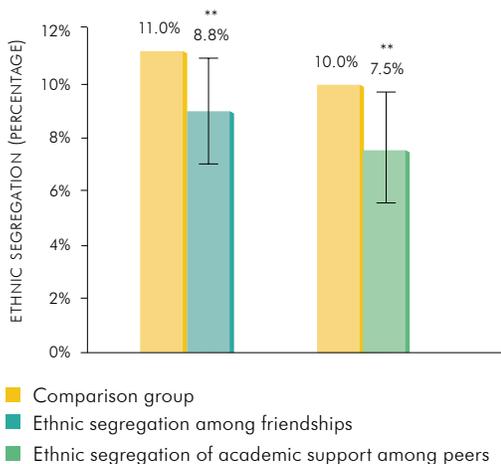
RESULTS

The “Understanding Each Other” curriculum improved students’ perspective-taking abilities and decreased impulsivity. Children from the program demonstrated a 0.27 standard deviation increase over comparison children in their ability to understand others’ perspectives. These children were also 0.07 standard deviations less impulsive than comparison children and could therefore better reflect on the positives and negatives of a decision before acting on it. The program’s encouragement of these socio-emotional skills seems to have been helpful for preventing conflict and improving social cohesion.

The curriculum lowered incidents of violence. Perhaps because of students’ improved socio-emotional skills, classrooms with the program experienced 1.23 fewer incidents of violence between peers in a ten-day period than classrooms without the program (a 65 percent decline). Children who participated in the curriculum were also less likely to be a victim of conflict, from 1.5 occurrences in a ten-day period among comparison students to 0.75 events among students who participated in the program (a 50 percent decrease). The curriculum had a different effect on the experiences of different ethnic groups: refugee children, but not host children, reported fewer incidents of bullying.

The program encouraged students to be more inclusive and reduced ethnic segregation. Refugee children who attended UEO lessons were 7 percentage points more likely to form a friendship with a host classmate than comparison students. They were also 12 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. Overall, ethnic segregation among both friends and those giving academic support to others was 2.2 and 2.5 percentage points lower (a 20 and 25 percent decrease), respectively, in classrooms that used the curriculum. UEO was more effective at increasing friendships and emotional support for refugee children than for host children.

FIGURE 1. THE UEO CURRICULUM REDUCED ETHNIC SEGREGATION AMONG PEERS

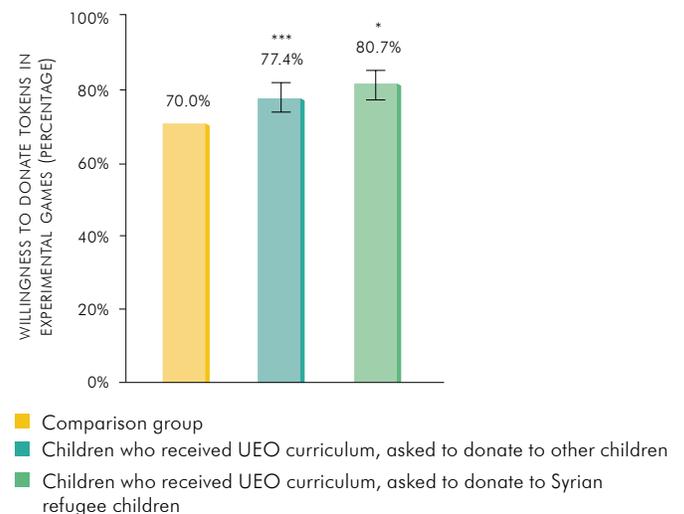


Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***) , 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

Children demonstrated more socially positive behaviors after the program, including an increase in trust, reciprocity, and altruism. Children from the program were 4.4 percentage points more willing to cooperate with classmates (an 8 percent increase), although they were not more willing to cooperate with anonymous students from other schools. The program also increased children’s altruism: Children from UEO classrooms were 7.4 percentage points more likely to donate bonus tokens to other children (an 11 percent increase), and 10.7 percentage points more likely to do so if they were told the recipient was a Syrian refugee (a 15 percent increase).

The curriculum improved refugee children’s Turkish language skills. Refugee children who participated in the program scored 0.14 standard deviations higher on Turkish exams than those who did not. This suggests that inclusive learning environments that encourage inter-ethnic friendships are crucial to creating opportunities for migrant children to learn a host country’s language.

FIGURE 2. THE UEO CURRICULUM INCREASED STUDENTS’ ALTRUISM



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***) , 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

¹ Alan, Sule, and Seda Ertac. “Belief in Hard Work and Altruism: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment.” Working Paper, November 2017.
² Alan, Sule, Teodora Boneva, and Seda Ertac. 2019. “Ever Failed, Try Again, Succeed Better: Results from a Randomized Educational Intervention on Grit.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. 134, no. 3 (August): 1121–1162. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz006>.
³ Alan, Sule, and Seda Ertac. 2018. “Fostering Patience in the Classroom: Results from Randomized Educational Intervention.” *Journal of Political Economy* 126, no. 5: 1865–1911.

POLICY LESSONS

Classroom time can be used to teach not only academic skills but also soft, or non-cognitive, skills. Several other studies from Turkey demonstrate the viability and importance of teaching children socio-emotional skills in the classroom and suggest such skills may be particularly malleable in children. In addition to perspective-taking, these skills may include altruism¹, grit², and patience³. More research is needed to better understand the best way to implement pedagogical methods to teach these types of skills to children.

One of the socio-emotional skills from which children may benefit is the ability to evaluate the perspectives of others. Perspective-taking is associated with lower social aggression, higher trust, and higher social cooperation. As educators focus more on activities that teach socio-emotional skills, they should consider perspective-taking to be one of these important skills.

When classrooms serve an inter-ethnic group of students, using extracurricular time to teach positive social skills may ease integration. As classrooms become more ethnically diverse, it is increasingly important to find methods of encouraging social cohesion. Using designated extracurricular time to explicitly focus on prosocial behaviors may increase students' ability to positively relate to others and learn in these diverse environments.

ONGOING RESEARCH

The researchers are currently collecting follow-up data to determine whether these results persist in the long-term once students enter middle school and interact with a different set of classmates in a new environment.

Featured Evaluation: Alan, Sule, Ceren Baysan, Mert Gumren, and Elif Kubilay. "Building Inter-Ethnic Cohesion in Schools: An Intervention on Perspective Taking." Working Paper, January 2020.

Further Reading: Alan, Sule, and Seda Ertac. "Belief in Hard Work and Altruism: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment." Working Paper, November 2017.

Alan, Sule, and Seda Ertac. 2018. "Fostering Patience in the Classroom: Results from Randomized Educational Intervention." *Journal of Political Economy* 126, no. 5: 1865–1911.

Alan, Sule, and Seda Ertac. 2019. "Mitigating the Gender Gap in the Willingness to Compete: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 17, no. 4 (August): 1147–1185. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvy036>.

Alan, Sule, Teodora Boneva, and Seda Ertac. 2019. "Ever Failed, Try Again, Succeed Better: Results from a Randomized Educational Intervention on Grit." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134, no. 3 (August): 1121–1162. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz006>.

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Suggested Citation: J-PAL Policy Briefcase. 2020. "Understanding Each Other: Improving Inter-Ethnic Cohesion in Schools in Turkey." Cambridge, MA: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab.

This research was made possible by:

Partners: Turkish Ministry of Education

Funders: IPA's Peace and Recovery Program, J-PAL's Crime and Violence Initiative and European Social Inclusion Initiative

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