

**SKILLS
FOR LIFE**

Social Skills for Inter-Ethnic Cohesion



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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

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



















