Teaching Students Perspective-taking to Mitigate Social Exclusion of Refugee Children in Turkey

As the largest host country for Syrian refugees, Turkey has developed many policies to facilitate integration of refugees into host communities. Yet, Syrian refugee children still face social exclusion and violence at school. Researchers are introducing a program that teaches students perspective-taking to evaluate the impact of the curriculum on students’ social behavior.

Policy Issue
There are 25.4 million refugees across the world. Despite the magnitude of this issue, little evidence exists on the impact of policies that address the effects of forced migration. Refugee children are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and violence in schools. Research shows that perspective-taking, or the ability to consider another person’s viewpoint, can increase empathy, lower social aggression, improve trust, and increase social coordination. Can teaching perspective-taking in school facilitate greater integration of refugees?

Evaluation Context
Turkey has received over 3.5 million Syrian refugees, including nearly one million children, since the beginning of the Syrian War in 2011. The country hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, which equals 14 percent of the world’s entire refugee population. The Turkish government has been developing policies to facilitate integration of refugees into society and deter increasing violence against refugees. However, the Ministry of Education has faced many challenges with placing refugee children into state schools, including uncooperative teachers, limited resources, and lack of structured policies to support integration.

Researchers are conducting this evaluation in Sanliurfa and Mersin, two provinces that have recently received a significant number of refugee children. For example, preliminary baseline data shows that at least 10 percent of an average classroom in Sanliurfa is Syrian, while researchers expect this percentage to increase as they re-collect data.

Details of the Intervention
In partnership with the Turkish Ministry of Education, researchers are conducting a randomized
evaluation to measure the impact of a curriculum to teach perspective-taking on student’s anti-social behaviors like bullying, violence, and social exclusion. After discussions with administrators and teachers, and with guidance from the Ministry of Education, a team of pedagogy consultants and elementary school teachers designed a new curriculum that teaches perspective-taking through animated videos, reading materials, and activities guided by the teacher. For example, students will read excerpts from two hypothetical students’ diaries about the first day of school: one by a Syrian student who writes about leaving behind all her friends and the other by a host child.

The curriculum will last at least two hours a week for sixteen to twenty weeks. It is designed to occur during the weekly five hours of extracurricular activity in which the Ministry of Education allows all elementary schools to participate. Researchers randomly selected some schools to receive the program from a sample of more than eighty schools. The remaining schools serve as the comparison and continue with other extra-curricular programs.

In fall 2018, researchers began collecting baseline data and implementing the program, which will end in one year, after which researchers will collect endline data. Researchers are measuring prosocial behavior, social preferences, and non-cognitive skills through incentivized games, self-reported data, cognitive tests, and surveys. Researchers are interested in how a variety of factors (IQ, gender, patience, ethnicity, and share of refugees in the classroom and/or school) impact the program. Researchers are also measuring if the program changes social norms or ethnic preferences, although it is not designed to do so. For a longer term follow-up, researchers are working with local administrators to track families for future surveys.

As this study is the first rigorous evaluation to measure the impacts of integration program for refugee children, the Ministry of Education intends to scale-up the program upon positive results.

**Results and Policy Lessons**

Study ongoing; results forthcoming.