



Integrating refugee children in schools: a mixed-method study on the efficacy of contact-in-school interventions for building positive intergroup relations among refugee and host-society children (IRCis)

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Scientific aims: Within the framework of the project, two integration programs were developed for schools with and without refugees, and their effectiveness was investigated through qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative feedback is very positive and encouraging, and the results of the PhD theses shown here focused on quantitative indicators.



PREPARATORY PROGRAM – IMAGINED CONTACT

Imagined contact hypothesis assumes that even imagining a pleasant contact with an outgroup member can improve intergroup attitudes and contact intentions. This method could therefore be useful in the preparation of host-society children for intergroup contact with their refugee peers (Smith & Minescu, 2022).

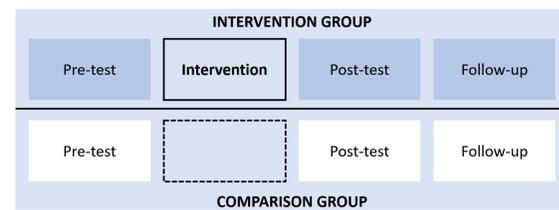
Building upon the findings of previous research and our qualitative study, we have developed and evaluated a program aimed at fostering positive intergroup attitudes through the use of imagined contact.

Intervention consisted of four sessions, and each of them included four steps (in line with Vezzali et al., 2012):



1. The teacher explains the task and introduces the meaning of a word „refugee“.
2. The teacher reads a scenario describing contact with a refugee child, and children continue imagining on their own. Scenarios differed from session to session.
3. Children participate in individual reinforcement of imagined contact effects – writing a description or drawing the imagined encounter.
4. Children take part in the class-level discussion to further reinforce the effects.

A total of 1544 children (age 7-15) from seven Croatian primary schools, not attended by refugee children at the time, participated in the study. Children were divided into an intervention group ($N_i = 827$), which participated in a preparatory program, and a comparison group ($N_c = 717$). Children filled out a questionnaire containing questions related to their attitudes towards refugee children at the baseline and two post-tests.



Multigroup latent change score analyses were used to compare the change in intergroup attitudes and contact intentions between the intervention and comparison groups, separately for children in lower and upper grades. For children in the lower grades (but not in upper grades), results show more positive change in intergroup attitudes in the intervention group, both when examining short-term ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 10.52, p = .001$) and long-term effects ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 5.61, p = .018$). The preparatory program also yielded positive effects for contact intentions of children in the lower grades ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 10.59, p = .001$ for short-term and $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.63, p = .031$ for long-term effects).

Overall, this study suggests that imagined contact can improve children's attitudes and contact intentions towards refugees, but its effects on these two measures seem to be limited to children in the lower grades of primary school. Some of our recommendations aimed at enhancing the efficacy in upper grades are discussed in different project publications. Nevertheless, feedback from the teachers and school psychologists indicates that the intervention was well-received and has helped the teachers to feel more prepared and up to the task when refugee children were later enrolled into their classes.



INTEGRATION PROGRAM – COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Based on the intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), cooperative learning is a paradigm that requires students to work toward a common goal to develop cognitive, motivational, and relational skills and to reduce prejudice towards, in our case, refugee children. In cooperative learning activities, students not only work with a refugee child, but also witness positive contact of their ingroups with a refugee peer. When teachers introduce such an activity in the school, they send a clear message about institutional support for intergroup contact, which is one of the key conditions for success. Therefore, it is expected that the cooperative learning intervention implemented in the classroom may change how students perceive their peers and teachers norms of contact with refugee children.

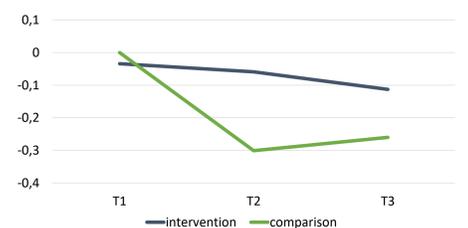
We have developed a cooperative learning intervention suitable for the use in classes attended by refugees who do not understand or speak Croatian language yet. This intervention consists of four workshops: Tower of collaboration, Sign language jigsaw, Tangram jigsaw and Music jigsaw.



The study included 761 children from 53 classrooms in 17 elementary schools, divided into an intervention and a comparison group. The children assessed teacher and peer norms regarding contact with refugee peers before the intervention, immediately after and two months after the implementation of the intervention.

Latent difference models were constructed for each variable, examining the change from pre-test to post-test and pre-test to follow-up, and these changes were then regressed on the intervention status.

Results show that perceived teacher norms remained positive in the intervention group between the pre-test and the immediate post-test, while they declined in the comparison group. The two groups did not differ in long-term changes, nor in the changes in peer norms.



The findings of this study confirm the importance of the teachers' role in the intervention implementation and in the process of integration, highlighting that they can be the bearers of positive changes. Furthermore, qualitative feedback from the teachers and children who participated in the intervention suggests that children enjoyed the activities and that they successfully collaborated despite the language barrier. It should be noted that the integration program was conducted with refugee children who have been enrolled in their classes for a longer period of time, which may explain small effects of the intervention.

Conclusion: Using a scientific empirical approach, we determined that the two refugee integration programs can be effective in facilitating and promoting acceptance of refugee children in Croatian elementary schools and can be used to help the refugee children and their families to integrate within the school system.



Swiss-Croatian Cooperation Programme