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# Social capital and cultural distance as predictors of early school dropout: Implications for community action for Turkish internal migrants

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of rural to urban migration on early school dropout from compulsory education through effects of social capital drawn from community, in a sample of Turkish youth. The loss of community-based sources of social capital may be the underlying reason for significantly lower levels of school attainment of immigrant youth in comparison to native youth in culturally diverse societies. In the present study, with a sample of 764 adolescents, we show that rural to urban migration at school age (5–15 years) increases a child's odds of dropping out from compulsory education about 103% compared to when the child is not migrated, above and beyond other significant structural risk factors like child labor, having an illiterate mother and no stable house income. The effect of migration on dropping out is significant for adolescents who migrated to the metropolitan Istanbul, but not to other less developed cities, which are similar to the immigrants' home cities in terms of socio-economic and cultural milieu; 94.5% of migrants to Istanbul but 74.5% of migrants to other cities had dropped out. Positive student–teacher relationship as a form of school social capital increased the odds of staying in school by 65% for migrants to Istanbul. We suggest that social capital factors are critical in the educational attainment and acculturation of migrant children. Interventions should target immigrant children, their families and the communities they live in.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of rural to urban migration on school dropout through effects of social capital drawn from the community. “Community” is increasingly regarded as an important source of social capital for migrants helping them to have access to social capital. Indeed social capital and community are frequently seen as synonymous (Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siera, 2008). Migration disrupts the socially structured relationships in communities. Migrant populations develop strategies or processes which have been studied as “acculturation” (Berry, 1980), “assimilation” (Gordon, 1964), “socio-cultural and psychological adaptation” (Ward & Kennedy, 1994, 1999), or “adjustment” (Richardson, 1979), depending on the discipline and theoretical paradigm. These concepts vary, but the social psychological process itself is rather similar: it is the reconstruction and renegotiation of the socially structured relationships and identity following transition to a different culture (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Social capital, though not consistently defined, is linked to the “relations among persons” on whom an individual can draw support (Coleman, 1988). Social capital theory is key to the understanding of effects of migration on a wide range of social outcomes, one being acculturation. The crucial point is that socially structured relations between individuals in social groups (e.g. families,

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schools, neighborhoods) are sources of social capital that increase the capabilities of individuals in the process of acculturation (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996). Acculturation strategies occur as a process and are set in a broader socio-cultural context (Ward, 2008). To help us better understand the socio-cultural context of migrants' acculturation environment, resources and provision of social capital is crucial.

Coleman's (1988) analysis of school dropout revealed that the frequency of residential mobility has the strongest overall effect on school dropout. Compared to non-migrants, migrants are significantly less likely to complete high school and more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment and occupational status (Hagan et al., 1996). These results are consistent with recent studies of the effects of migration on educational outcomes and supports Coleman's argument that "for families that moved often, the social relations that constitute social capital are broken at each move" (1988, p. 113). Migration leads to a loss of community-based sources of social capital. Family's capacity to provide compensatory social capital in the form of parental support and involvement may not compensate this loss, since the family itself suffers from the ill-effects of migration.

The social capital explanation for the negative association between migration and school performance is that migration damages and sometimes completely severs acculturation and social ties that "inhere in the family relations and in community and that are useful for cognitive or social development of a child" (Coleman, 1990). Along these lines this paper aims to look at the effects of community both at the level of family, neighborhood and school as a provider of much needed social capital in the disrupted environment of migrant children. Rather than employing a generalized notion of social capital and assuming equivalence with community, it may be more helpful to distinguish between the different types and levels of social capital and resources that communities provide. Provision of social capital at the level of school and family leads to different educational outcomes. Students' performance in school is enhanced by strong social connections both within and between families. For example, when parents have a close relationship with the child, they can monitor the child's school progress closely, to reinforce expectations, and to provide guidance for school-related matters. Similarly students and parents who are connected with the school and community receive additional information about the performance of the child. Norms regarding school performance are stronger and more consistently enforced in communities with strong ties. Social ties with family and community can be consequential for students' performance in schools (Coleman, 1988). In addition to the parent-child connection, children have ties to teachers, peers, and community members. Students may also be affected by parents' loss of connection to the school and community. In short, migration affects the maintenance of all of these community connections.

### 1.1. Rural to urban migration in Turkey

People migrating both across national borders and within a country share common problems such as participating in the labor-market and accessing the healthcare, social and educational systems in the new communities and societies they move to. Globally, researchers from different disciplines are striving to understand the short-term effects of migration and long-term integration prospects of immigrants to the social and economic contexts in the host countries (Valverde & Vila, 2003). Education of the young migrants is one of the most important challenges that require large scale policy development and implementation. All children have the right to education (Article 28, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). However, research has shown that, in many countries with diverse populations, immigrants on average have lower levels of school attainment than the natives (Glick & White, 2004). For example, by 2003, in the U.S.A., 13.4% of the natives (aged 25 or more) but 33% of immigrants who had immigrated within the past 10 years had not completed high school (Glick & White, 2003). Similarly, in Sweden, 92% of the native pupils, but 64% of the newly migrated pupils received final grades from compulsory education that qualified them to continue at the upper secondary level (Böhlmark, 2003).

Migration results in processes such as loss of access to traditional means of livelihood, inability to benefit from citizenship rights, and inability to benefit from the right to education and from educational opportunities, together with housing problems, poverty, child labor. All these problems result in social exclusion (Yukseker, 2007). Rural to urban migration in Turkey has always been one of the crucial social and political issues. Turkish society has experienced rural to urban shifts dramatically starting in the second half the 20th century (Kagıtcıbası, Cemalcilar, & Baydar, 2009). Industrialization in large cities and the introduction of agricultural machinery in rural areas brought about an internal migration from rural to urban areas and from Eastern Turkey to Western Turkey (Akse, Gun, Irmak, & Cengelci, 2007). According to the 2000 population census, nearly 28% of the population was born in a different province than they now reside in.<sup>1</sup> This ratio goes up to 62% for Istanbul, a major province that has drawn migrants for years. Starting with 1950s and well into the 1970s rural to urban migration was the dominant pattern in Turkey. In the later periods rural to urban migration slowed down and urban to urban migration became the dominant pattern. The unstable political climate of the 1980s brought a different pattern of migration, namely the internal displacement. Internal displacement took place in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey between 1984 and 1999 due to the armed conflict between Turkish military and the Kurdish separatist movement in the region. Internally displaced persons (IDPs), who originally had resided in villages were resettled in Eastern and Southeastern city centers, and a

<sup>1</sup> Turkey is also a major migrant sending country—mainly to European countries. About 5 million Turkish people live in foreign countries, approximately 4 million in the EU countries. First generations of these migrants are mostly from rural areas, with low education and without professional qualifications (OECD, 2008).

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