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Inhibitory Control, Social Cognition, and Peer Social Competence among Children with and without a Migration Background in Italy

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Abstract: Executive functions and social cognition (i.e., the mental operations that underlie social interaction) are essential for children's successful interactions, yet their role in peer social competence among children with and without a migration background is still underexplored. This study investigated the influence of inhibitory control and two domains of social cognition (theory of mind and facial emotion recognition) on children's peer social competence exploring moderation by children's migration background. First graders in Italy (n = 321, M age = 6.4 years, 45% girls, and 39% with a migration background) completed standardized tests, while teachers rated students' peer social competence. The results indicated that immigrant-origin children were perceived as being less socially competent than their non-immigrant counterparts. Among children with a migration background, better inhibitory control and facial emotion recognition skills were linked to increased peer social competence. Following the presentation of these results, we will discuss the implications for both developmental theory and practice.

Keywords: social competence; migration background; inhibitory control; theory of mind; emotion recognition; children

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1. Introduction

Social competence refers to the efficacy with which one can use social interactions to achieve personal goals through their capacity to initiate and maintain positive social relationships [1]. It is a multidimensional construct based on a variety of social skills (e.g., the inhibition of impulsive behavior, perspective taking, the recognition of facial emotional expressions, etc.) that must be used adaptively according to specific situations [2] in order to pursue successful social interactions [3]. Previous research has indicated that young children who are able to interact successfully with their peers and use social signals effectively are less likely to develop behavioral and emotional problems over the primary school years and beyond [2,4]. On the contrary, children who lack such skills more frequently experience peer rejection [5], social anxiety, bullying [6], and aggression [7].

Developmentally, the transition to primary school represents a particularly challenging period for children with regard to the refinement of social competence, as they enter a new environment where they need to learn how to build significant relationships with peers and teachers, deal with frustrations and conflict, and engage in group activities requiring adherence to rules and social norms [8]. This process can be more difficult for children from immigrant families, who often lack the second language and pre-literacy skills necessary to adjust to school demands and have had few opportunities to interact with their ethnic majority peers due to cultural and socioeconomic barriers [9]. Indeed, there is evidence that children with a migration background tend to exhibit less social competence and more behavioral problems than their nonimmigrant peers [10]. Possible explanations for these phenomena include cultural differences in parental socialization

practices concerning the management of social relationships, challenges related to the family migration process (e.g., acculturative stress, discrimination, and social exclusion), and poor social capital [11]. Yet, little is known about the correlates of peer social competence among ethnic-minoritized and -majoritized children entering primary school, especially in relation to socio-cognitive and emotional skills that undergo substantial changes at this age. This knowledge is paramount with respect to providing information to prevention and/or intervention programs aiming to reduce the risk of disparities between children with and without a migration background in terms of psychological and school adjustment [12].

The current study sought to address this gap by (1) comparing levels of teacher-rated social competence in relation to peers between children from immigrant families and their nonimmigrant counterparts in Italy and (2) examining the associations of a key component of executive functions, i.e., inhibitory control, and two domains of social cognition, namely, theory of mind (ToM) and facial emotion recognition (FER), with peer social competence among first graders with and without a migration background.

1.1. Inhibitory Control, Social Cognition, and Peer Social Competence

Executive functions (EFs) play a key role in the development of children's social competence [13]. They comprise a series of interconnected and interdependent processes that are responsible for intentional behaviors whose aim is to achieve goals in an articulated and flexible way [14], functioning as an integrated supervisory and control system [15].

Among EF processes, inhibitory control is the most widely studied with regard to links with social competence, especially in early childhood [16]. The ability to manage behaviors and emotions according to societal expectations plays an important role in school adjustment and achievement because it serves as a key internal resource for young children faced with the social challenges presented by a classroom. In the first grade, as the learning environment becomes increasingly structured, children who are unable to pay attention to or control their own behavior may develop relationship difficulties with peers and teachers [17], while those who present good control skills tend to present a good degree of social competence [18]. However, research examining the associations between inhibitory control and social competence has yielded conflicting results. Some studies have shown that preschool-aged children with inhibitory control deficits have low levels of social competence or related difficulties [19,20] that can persist over time [21], whereas others failed to replicate these findings [22,23]. It has been suggested that the associations between inhibitory control and social competence become more pronounced as children reach kindergarten and early elementary school ages due to the increased ability to inhibit a strong dominant response in favor of a subdominant one to reach current and future goals [24]; however, more studies are needed to shed light on this issue, especially among ethnically diverse first-grade students.

Social cognition can be defined as the mental operations that underlie the interpretation and response to social stimuli, including mental state attribution, the recognition of affect, attributional style, and social perception [25]. Among social cognition processes, theory of mind (ToM), that is, the ability to understand one's own and others' mental states and to predict the feelings and behaviors of others [26], plays a pivotal role in the presentation of positive social skills [27]. By the age of 5, children have a 'basic' understanding of beliefs and desires, but investigations conducted in the past decade indicate that this ability develops well into middle childhood and early adolescence [28]. In particular, scholars suggest that individual differences in ToM explain variability in social competence with respect to peers in addition to other cognitive factors, such as language and EF [29]. In support of this view, previous studies have indicated that successful performance on ToM tasks positively correlates with children's ability to coordinate peer social interactions and with teachers' ratings of social behavior [30–32]. However, other studies did not find any significant difference in the ability to pass ToM tasks between children with positive peer evaluations and 'rejected' children [33], lending support to the view that individual differences in ToM trump differences in general cognitive processes and, therefore, do not

result in any significant associations after controlling for language and EFs [34]. Another possible explanation of this inconsistency is related to the source of information used to assess children's social competence, as there is evidence that different raters (e.g., parents, teachers, etc.) may provide different evaluations [35].

An additional relevant domain of social cognition is children's ability to recognize facial emotional expressions (FER), which play a role in social competence [36]. FER include the ability to recognize and label one's own and others' emotions, tie them to situations, understand their causes, identify familial and cultural display rules, and recognize disparities between outward displays and felt emotions [37,38]. The ability to recognize nonverbal emotional cues is positively associated with better peer relationships and higher levels of social competence, while inferior emotional recognition skills are associated with social difficulties and withdrawal [39]. Indeed, being able to recognize emotions through facial expressions is necessary for the development of more advanced emotional comprehension skills, as this ability may provide information that can help to help a child to establish early social networks and peer relations [40]. Although little research has examined FER among immigrant-origin children, there is evidence that the FER–social competence link is observable in both individualistic and collectivistic societies despite differences in emotion socialization [41].

In summary, the empirical evidence disseminated thus far suggests that inhibitory control and social cognition processes are important correlates of social competence. Yet few studies have simultaneously examined their contribution to peer social competence among first-grade children. Razza and Blair [42] investigated the relationships between EFs, ToM, and teacher-rated social competence in a longitudinal study involving five- to six-year-old children from low-income families assessed in preschool and kindergarten. The results showed that ToM was an independent predictor of social competence, even after accounting for EF, and was identified as a possible mechanism through which early EFs may affect later social competence.

1.2. The Role of Migration Background in Social Competence

Children's social competence is influenced by cultural values and beliefs, which guide parents' child-rearing practices and socialization goals [43]. Children with a migration background might be challenged in their social competence development as they navigate between microsystems (i.e., school, family, and neighborhoods), which are often characterized by different cultural norms, values, and behaviors, during social interactions [44]. To date, conflicting data on social competence among children with a migration/ethnic minority background have been reported. The bulk of the corresponding studies found lower levels of peer social competence among these children, especially when originating from Asian cultures [45], which is a pattern that can partly be ascribed to different cultural expectations concerning the development and manifestation of sociability [46]. Children with a migration background tend to fall further behind their peers in terms of measures of social competence [45,47], although this could be related to teacher bias in assessing children's social competence that is precipitated by the adoption of solely the perspective of the educational setting. On the other hand, mounting evidence is indicating the potential beneficial effects of having an immigrant background on peer social competence because children from immigrant families are exposed to different experiences and sets of values and learn diverse and complementary social skills [12,48]. Children with a migration background may rely on a wide variety of predictions that allow them to interpret others' emotions and intentions and express emotions in different languages and contexts [49]. The possibility of relying on better EFs (see [50]) may boost their capacity to balance and integrate different perspectives and select appropriate behaviors according to a given context, resulting in appropriate social behaviors [51,52]. Thus, it is possible that exposure to culturally diverse environments may be an asset in relation to children's social competence with respect to peers, but more research is needed to uncover the mechanisms involved in these associations.

1.3. The Current Study

Although the extant research has provided important contributions to our understanding of the factors underlying children's social competence [53,54], little is known about the influence of inhibitory control, ToM, and FER on first graders' social competence with respect to peers, especially among children with a migration background. This is surprising given that peer social competence in the transition to primary school is particularly important for children who might face additional challenges compared to their nonimmigrant peers in terms of school adjustment, peer socialization, and exposure to different cultural norms and expectations. Hence, this study addressed two main research questions:

RQ1. *Do children with and without a migration background differ in terms of their levels of social competence with respect to peers as assessed by their teachers?*

Previous research has yielded contradictory findings, with some studies reporting less peer social competence among immigrant-origin children compared to their ethnic majority counterparts, particularly when rated by their teachers [47,55], while others found similar or greater competence in this developmental domain due to increased cognitive resources among immigrant-origin youth (e.g., EFs [12]). Hence, no a priori hypothesis has been formulated in this regard.

RQ2. *Are children's inhibitory control, ToM, and FER linked to teacher-rated peer social competence, and, if so, do these associations vary as a function of children's migration background?*

Based on the literature reviewed above, we expected inhibitory control, ToM, and FER to be positively related to first graders' social competence in relation to peers, especially in light of existing evidence suggesting that these associations are consolidated during primary school years [56]. With regard to moderation, to the best of our knowledge, no study has considered this issue in the context of peer social competence among first graders. However, it is reasonable to expect that the associations of inhibitory control, ToM, and FER with social competence in relation to peers would be stronger for children with (vs. without) a migration background given that these children are exposed to multiple languages and environments that may facilitate perspective adoption, social problem solving, and the inhibition of automatic responses in order to adapt their behaviors to social expectations [52].

In our analyses, we also controlled for gender, receptive vocabulary, and parental education, as these variables have been shown to be associated with children's peer social competence [57]. Specifically, peer social competence is typically higher among girls compared to boys [58], and receptive vocabulary is positively related to measures of peer acceptance and socio-metric status [59]. Additionally, children from lower-SES families tend to exhibit less social competence, although such findings are not clear-cut [60].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 321 first graders (Mean age = 6.4 years; SD = 3.8 months; 145 girls) recruited via contacts with three primary schools in a middle-sized town in northeastern Italy. Teachers received a standardized questionnaire concerning children's peer social competence at school (described below), while parents received consent forms and a questionnaire on language exposure and demographic information. Teachers and parents completed the questionnaires at their own convenience during the testing phase.

Based on information collected through the questionnaires completed by parents, it was determined that 126 children were of immigrant descent, i.e., they had at least one parent born in another country. Of these, 114 (90%) were born in Italy (i.e., constituting the second generation), whereas the remaining originated from Albania, Moldavia, Sri-Lanka, Colombia, Vietnam, Canada, and China. The children with a migration background had been exposed and/or were still exposed, to some extent, to an additional language other than Italian (L2), including Romanian (n = 29), Filipino (n = 16), Arabic (n = 14),

English (n = 14), Chinese (n = 6), Bengali (n = 6), Albanian (n = 5), Spanish (n = 5), Nigerian (n = 5), Indian (n = 5), Singhalese (n = 4), Serbian (n = 4), Persian (n = 4), Vietnamese (n = 4), French (n = 4), and Hebrew (n = 1). At the time of data collection, children raised in multilingual families had received significant continuous exposure to both languages and at least 2 years of formal language education provided in educational settings. In terms of parental education, we found the following percentages: regarding mothers, 4% completed primary school, 6% completed middle school, 68% completed high school, and the remaining 22% earned a higher degree than high school; regarding fathers, 7% completed primary school, 11% completed middle school, 65% completed high school, and the remaining 17% earned a higher degree than high school.

Preliminary analyses indicated that the two groups of children were balanced in terms of age and gender, but immigrant-origin children were on average about 1 month older than their nonimmigrant peers ($t(1, 319) = -2.07$, $p = 0.049$, Cohen's $d = 0.23$). Moreover, Italian-origin mothers and fathers reported, on average, having two more years of education than parents of children with a migration background ($t(1, 319) = 3.62$, $p < 0.001$, and Cohen's $d = 0.41$; $t(1, 319) = 3.49$, $p < 0.05$, and Cohen's $d = 0.39$, respectively).

2.2. Procedure

Trained psychology graduate students tested each child individually in a quiet room during the school day. Tasks were administered in a fixed order, which is preferred for the investigation of individual differences (see [61]). Each child was tested over three sessions scheduled on consecutive days, each lasting approximately 30 min, at the end of which time the experimenters thanked the child for participation and rewarded him or her with free playtime. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of [removed for review] (protocol n. 2673) and performed in accordance with the principles expressed in the Declaration of Helsinki. Only children with signed parental consent participated in the study.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Outcome Variable

Peer social competence. A subscale from the Self-Perception Profile for Children-Teacher Report (SPPC-TR; [62]) was used by teachers to rate children's social competence at school. The SPPC-TR is a multidimensional measure designed to evaluate children's global self-worth and self-perceptions of adequacy across different areas of the self. It contains six subscales tapping five specific domains (scholastic competence, social competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct) in addition to global self-worth. Each subscale contains 6 items, totaling 36 items. For each of the five specific domains, the teacher rated the child's actual behavior with respect to each area (not how he/she thinks the child would answer). For the purpose of this study, we used the Social Competence subscale, in which teachers indicated their perceptions of the degree to which the child has friends, feels popular, and feels that most kids like them.. Items were scored as either 1, 2, 3, or 4, where a score of 1 reflects the lowest perceptions of competence, and 4 reflects the highest perceptions of competence (range 6–24). The reliability reported in the manual, which was evaluated by calculating Cronbach's alpha, is 0.78, whereas the internal consistency for this study sample was $\alpha = 0.92$.

2.3.2. Independent Variables

Inhibitory control. The Day-and-Night test (FE-PS 2–6; [63]) was used to assess children's ability to suppress a dominant response related to perceptual stimuli while selecting and executing a competing, conflicting response. This test contains two decks of cards: the first of which contains 8 cards depicting a chessboard and 8 cards depicting an X, while the second of which contains 8 cards depicting a sun and 8 cards depicting a moon. Under the baseline condition, the tester trains the child to say 'day' when there is an X card and 'night' when there is a chessboard card. Under the inhibition condition (i.e., Stroop

condition), the child must say the word 'day' when viewing a card depicting a nighttime sky and 'night' when she/he is shown a picture of daytime sky. Each child completes 16 trials for each condition that are scored from 0 (incorrect) or 1 (correct). Two different scores are calculated in both conditions: accuracy (range 0–16) and speed (in seconds). Total accuracy is obtained by subtracting accuracy in the baseline condition from performance in the incongruent condition (range = −16 to 16), whereas speed is determined by subtracting the time spent in the two conditions. We used the "difference score" as an indicator of inhibitory control. The reliability of this task for this study sample, which was evaluated using calculating Cronbach's alpha for individual trials, was 0.85.

Theory of Mind. ToM was investigated using a subtest from the NEPSY-II battery [64]. The subtest comprises a verbal and a contextual task (range of scores = 0–25). In the Verbal task, questions are based on verbal scenarios with (6 items) or without (11 items) pictorial support. The subtest measures children's understanding of beliefs, intentions, others' thoughts, ideas, and comprehension of figurative language. The contextual task measures a child's ability to relate an emotion to a given social context. In this subtest, the child first sees pictures with a target girl in different social contexts whose face is hidden and has to select, among four photographs depicting the girl expressing different emotions, the one showing the emotion she is feeling in that context. The child needs to infer the girl's emotion based on the social context and not her face. Reliability reported in the manual, which was evaluated using calculating Cronbach's alpha, is 0.82, whereas it was 0.86 for this study sample.

Facial emotion recognition. We used the NEPSY–II Affect Recognition subtest (devised for ages 3–16) to assess children's ability to recognize emotions. This subtest included 35 items and assessed the ability to recognize several emotional states (happy, sad, angry, fearful, disgusted, and neutral) from photographs of children's faces in four different tasks. Task 1: the child stated whether two pictures depicted faces with the same affect; Task 2, the child selected two pictures of faces with the same affect from among 3 to 4 pictures; Task 3, the child selected one of the four faces that depicted the same emotion as a face at the top of the page; and Task 4, the child was briefly shown a face and then selected two pictures that he/she thought represented the same emotion. The total score ranged between 1 and 25 for children aged 6 or younger and between 1 and 36 for children aged 7 or older, with higher scores reflecting better ability to match the same emotions. Raw scores were converted into standard scores (M = 10; SD = 3) reflecting each child's ability in relation to his/her own age. Reliability of this task for the study sample, which was evaluated using calculating Cronbach's alpha, was 0.81.

2.3.3. Control Variables

Gender, parental education, and migration background. Parents completed a short questionnaire on language exposure and demographic information, through which we derived the genders and migration statuses of the children participating in the study and the parents' education levels.

Italian receptive vocabulary. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Revised) (PPVT-R; [65]), which was adapted and standardized for the Italian language [66], was used to assess children's receptive vocabulary. The adapted versions maintain the same procedure as the original version, but they introduce changes to the lexical material (e.g., in relation to the order of words and the exclusion/inclusion of words) to obtain a similar level of difficulty. It consists of a list of words presented to participants who are asked to indicate which, out of four pictures, best represents the target word. The items are presented in order of increasing difficulty. We found a basal level when the participant gave eight consecutive correct answers. Testing continues until the participant obtains six incorrect answers in eight consecutive items (ceiling level). Raw scores correspond to the number of correct answers minus the number of errors (range 0–175); age-specific standard scores (M = 100; SD = 15) are provided in the manual. Reliability, evaluated using the split-half procedure as

reported in the manual, is 0.88, whereas the internal consistency for this sample, evaluated using the split-half procedure, was 0.95.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables and their correlations for each group of children. We used standard scores for receptive vocabulary, the raw total score for children's peer social competence rated by teachers, the accuracy score for inhibitory control, and raw scores for ToM and FER. Performance on the majority of tasks covered a large range of scores, and none suffered from ceiling or floor effects. Additionally, the distributions of all the variables approached symmetry.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables for children with (n = 126) and without a migration background (n = 195).

Variables	Children with Migration Background Mean (SD)	Children without Migration Background Mean (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Italian receptive vocabulary	82 (16)	100 (15)	-	0.17 *	0.24 **	0.39 **	0.33 **	0.15 *
2. Parental education	14.6 (2.6)	13.4 (2.3)	27 **	-	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.14
3. Inhibitory control	−0.96 (3.1)	−0.62 (2.3)	−0.04	−0.10	-	0.31 **	0.03	0.16 *
4. Theory of mind	14.5 (3.2)	15.8 (2.8)	0.36 **	0.26 **	0.01	-	0.21 **	0.11
5. Facial emotion recognition	16.3 (4.1)	17.7 (3.7)	0.23 **	0.10	0.01	0.14	-	0.16 *
6. Peer social competence	11.5 (9.4)	17.6 (4.9)	0.21 **	0.05	0.01	0.06	0.20 *	-

Correlations are presented for children with a migration background (above the diagonal) and without a migration background (below the diagonal). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.; SD (standard deviation).

For the children with a migration background, peer social competence was significantly and positively correlated with Italian receptive vocabulary and FER (r = 0.21 and r = 0.20, respectively). A pattern of significant correlations emerged between Italian receptive vocabulary, ToM, FER, and parental education, whereas no correlation emerged with inhibitory control.

Among the children without a migration background, we found significant and positive correlations between Italian receptive vocabulary, inhibitory control, and FER and peer social competence. Additionally, a pattern of significant positive correlations emerged between Italian receptive vocabulary, inhibitory control, and social cognition processes (0.24 < r < 0.39). Inhibitory control, ToM, and FER were interrelated, and parental education was only correlated with children's receptive vocabulary (r = 0.17).

3.2. Group Comparison

Regarding our first research question concerning group differences in children's peer social competence, a univariate ANOVA indicated that teachers perceived children with a migration background to be less socially competent with respect to peers than their nonimmigrant counterparts ($F(1,319) = 57.8$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta 2p = 0.15$, Cohen's $d = 0.81$).

3.3. Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was used to examine the associations of inhibitory control, ToM, and FER with children's social competence in relation to peers. To assess the potential moderating effects of migration background, interactions between this variable and the inhibitory control, ToM, and FER were also added to the model. We included gender, parental education, and Italian receptive vocabulary as control variables.

The results are reported in Table 2. Standardized beta coefficients (Sβ) are reported.

Table 2. Multiple linear regression results incorporating children's peer social competence as a dependent variable.

Measure	Sβ	SE β	*t* Value	*p*-Value
Gender	0.068	0.778	1.341	0.181
Italian receptive vocabulary	−0.069	0.026	−1.090	0.276
Parental education	0.055	0.158	1.035	0.301
Migration background	−0.918	5.06	2.820	0.005
Inhibitory control	−0.043	0.146	1.578	0.115
Theory of Mind	−0.007	0.136	−0.021	0.983
Facial emotion recognition	0.024	0.104	2.856	0.004
Inhibitory control × migration background	0.183	0.293	−2.414	0.016
Theory of mind × migration background	0.028	0.260	−0.108	0.913
Facial emotion recognition × migration background	0.552	0.206	−2.442	0.015

N = 321; Migration background was coded as follows: 0 = without MB and 1 = with MB.

The model explained nearly 19% of the variance (F 10,310 = 8.432; $p < 0.001$). In this model, migration background and children's ability to recognize facial emotional expressions were significant and independent predictors of children's peer social competence. Additionally, the two-way interactions between migration background and inhibitory control and between migration background and FER were significant. To test the interaction effects, we performed tests of the simple slopes using the Interactions package of the R software [67].

As shown in Figure 1, simple slope analysis indicated that among children with a migration background, higher (vs. lower) inhibitory control and better (vs. worse) facial emotion recognition skills were related to increased peer social competence (B = 0.59, SE = 0.21, and $p < 0.01$; B = 0.55, SE = 0.16, and $p < 0.01$, respectively), whereas among children without a migration background, teacher-rated peer social competence was high irrespective of their levels of inhibitory control and facial emotion recognition abilities (B = 0.12, SE = 0.21, and $p = 0.57$; B = 0.05, SE = 0.14, and $p = 0.73$, respectively).

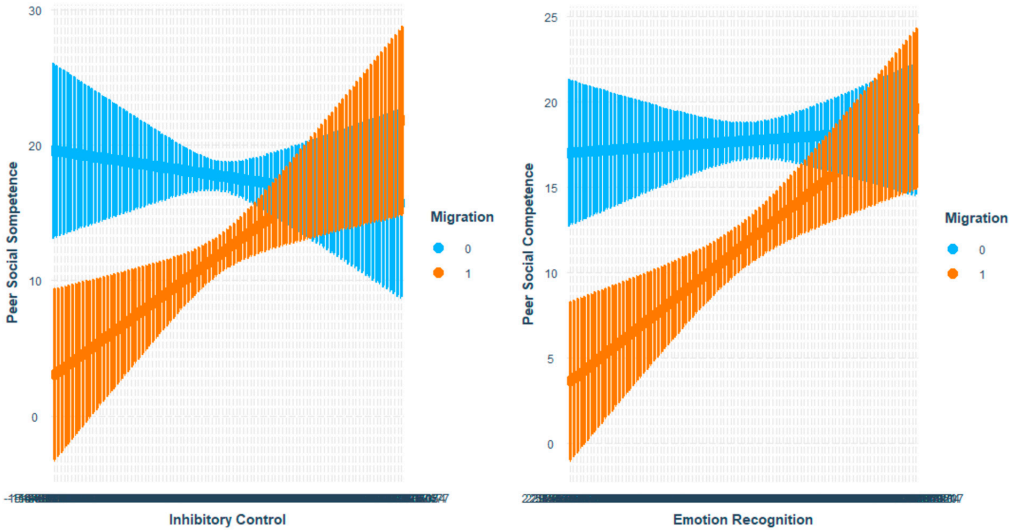

Figure 1. Simple slope analysis of significant interactions.

4. Discussion

This study extends the current literature on the correlates of social competence in childhood by analyzing the contribution of EFs and social cognition processes to this important developmental domain among first-grade children with and without a migration background. By conducting this study, we have attempted to overcome some of the

limitations of previous work, such as the paucity of research on positive social outcomes and on the transition to primary school [68]. Although social competence and relationship skills are increasingly important predictors of success in school [69] and a fulfilling life [70], socioemotional skills and behaviors are almost completely absent from current indicator reports about children [71]. To date, most research on children and adolescents with a migration background has focused on internalizing and externalizing problems [72], whereas much less is known about their social competence, especially in countries other than the United States or Canada [12].

In this study, we compared levels of teacher-rated social competence in relation to peers between the two groups of children and assessed the contributions of a key component of EF, namely, inhibitory control, and two domains of social cognition (ToM and FER) to peer social competence, exploring moderation by migration background. Our results indicated that children with a migration background were rated by their teachers to be less socially competent than their nonimmigrant counterparts. Increased receptive vocabulary and FER ability were linked to greater peer social competence in both groups. In addition, among children with a migration background, better inhibitory control was linked to increased peer social competence, while levels of peer social competence were high among nonimmigrant students irrespective of their inhibitory control and social cognitive skills.

Our first research question concerned possible differences in how teachers perceived their students in terms of how they relate to their peers in a school context. In line with studies reporting a disadvantage in this developmental domain among immigrant/ethnic minoritized groups (e.g., [45]), we found that children with a migration background showed lesser social skills than their nonimmigrant peers, for which there was a non-trivial effect size. There are at least two possible interpretations of this finding. First, it has been documented that the transition to primary school can be particularly challenging for children with a migration background due to a lack of pre-literacy skills, limited opportunities for intergroup contact with ethnic majority children, and difficulties regarding second language acquisition [73]. Hence, these children may experience peer rejection, which can negatively influence their overall capacity for school adjustment [74]. Second, it could be that teachers' assessment of children's social competence may be influenced by children's general cognitive or verbal ability. A growing number of researchers have recognized that there is a relationship between verbal ability and social competence [75]. Gresham and Reschly [76] proposed that social competence involves both social skills (e.g., interpersonal skills, displaying appropriate behaviors, etc.) and adaptive competencies (e.g., academic achievement, language development, and physical ability). Gallagher [75] asserted that social competence can only be conceptualized in the context of language. She noted that language and social ability are interdependent and that communication can only be understood within a given social context and vice versa. Rice, Hadley, and Alexander [77] found that in ratings, teachers described children with language difficulties as being less intelligent and socially competent. Thus, the fact that first- or second-generation immigrant children generally have a lower mastery of a society's language [78] might have contributed to the between-group differences assessed by teachers. Furthermore, it has been shown that teachers tend to misjudge immigrant students' classroom behaviors and skills [79,80] due to implicit prejudice and stereotypes, which can also lead to self-fulfilling prophecy effects. Hence, even though these findings could be interpreted as reflecting real, existing group differences, the less-favorable teacher perceptions of immigrant-origin children may also indicate an underestimation of these children's perceived social skills.

Our second research question was intended to probe the contributions of inhibitory control, ToM, and FER to children's social competence in relation to peers, exploring moderation by migration background. The findings revealed that an increased ability to recognize facial emotional expressions was linked to greater social competence as rated by teachers, supporting previous research reporting that children's accuracy in detecting facial cues related to different emotions plays an essential role in social competence as it facilitates the understanding of others' emotional states, allowing one to regulate their

behavior accordingly [81]. However, contrary to our expectations, we did not record any significant effect of inhibitory control or ToM on the outcome variable. Regarding the inhibitory control, previous research has shown that children who are able to control their impulses according to situational demands tend to interact more successfully with peers [82]. In our study, this ability seemed to play a role only among children with a migration background, serving as a protective factor in the context of potential difficulties related to marginalization or less popularity within a classroom. This result is in line with previous research suggesting that effortful control may protect children from poor social outcomes [83]. In relation to ToM, the available evidence suggests that being able to imagine others' mental states is linked to better social competence, although the findings are mixed, with some researchers failing to replicate this pattern [84]. The null results found in our study may reflect the shared links of ToM with language ability, which was controlled for in our analyses. Indeed, it has been suggested that the associations between comprehension of false beliefsand social competence reported in prior research are often spurious as they reflect children's verbal ability [85]. Another possible explanation is the difference in the measurement of social competence and ToM in available studies.

In terms of moderation, while the levels of peer social competence were high among the nonimmigrant students irrespective of their inhibitory control and social cognitive skills, the results indicated that among immigrant-origin children, better inhibitory control and FER skills were related to greater social competence, whereas low levels of these abilities were linked to decreased teacher-rated peer social competence. In other words, the beneficial role of children's ability to control their impulses and to recognize facial emotional expression in their successful interaction with peers was evident only among children with a migration background. This pattern supports the view that against these children's potential vulnerability in relation to their school adjustment, which is attributable to a number of environmental stressors (e.g., acculturative stress, perceived discrimination, low social capital), EFs and social cognitive processes may represent important resources that boost their social skills [79], even at this delicate developmental stage, when EFs are not yet fully evolved [14]. Our results are in line with those of previous studies showing that bilingual exposure promotes better performance in selected aspects of EFs, such as inhibitory control [86,87].

Specifically, these children's everyday exposure to multiple languages and cultural milieus may facilitate the inhibition of automatic responses as well as the identification of facial emotional cues to adapt their behaviors to different social expectations and situations experienced at home and at school [52]. This effect, however, was not found for ToM, indicating that this complex ability may interact with other variables not considered in this study (e.g., empathy, self-regulation, etc., [88]) o explain levels of peer social competence among first graders with and without a migration background.

5. Conclusions

Overall, our study provides novel evidence concerning the influence of inhibitory control, ToM, and FER on children's social competence in relation to peers, highlighting patterns of associations that differed as a function of a migration background among first-grade children. However, some limitations need to be acknowledged when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow for the drawing of conclusions regarding causality. Longitudinal studies assessing the variables associated with peer social competence over the primary school years are warranted in order to shed light on how changes in EFs and social cognition processes may influence the unfolding of children's social competence in relation to peers in this crucial developmental period. Second, the outcome variable was rated exclusively by teachers, raising the possibility of informant bias [89]. Ideally, future studies may include parent, self, and/or peer-report measures to obtain a more complete picture of children's social competence in relation to peers given that behavior can be situation-specific and different raters may observe behavior at different times and in different contexts [90,91]. Moreover, observational methods in the

school context might be useful to increase ecological validity [92]. Third, the children of immigrant descent analyzed herein originated from several countries, thus preventing us from addressing possible effects of cultural background on the study variables due to issues of statistical power. As there is evidence that social skills are differentially emphasized and valued across cultures [93], further research may focus on specific ethnic groups in order to disentangle the influence of immigration and culture-related variables on first graders' social skills and the correlates of peer social competence. Fourth, although EFs also include cognitive updating and flexibility, in our study, we focused solely on inhibitory control given its theoretical and empirical relevance in modeling children's ability to control their impulses in response to social expectations. Furthermore, only one task was used in this work to assess inhibitory control in order to limit children's fatigue. Since previous research has shown that experimental measures address relatively specific processes, future research should include more tasks to assess inhibitory control. Also, the other two components (i.e., attentional shifting and cognitive flexibility) may be measured to ascertain the specific contribution of each EF to first graders' peer social competence.

Despite these limitations, our findings contribute to a better understanding of the factors involved in how children with and without a migration background interact with their peers in the transition to primary school. In light of their potential disadvantage in terms of social competence in the school setting due to both teacher bias and migration-related factors, early interventions targeting social competence may be useful in order to reduce behavioral and emotional problems among children throughout their primary school years [3,4]. Furthermore, school-based training programs addressing inhibitory control and FER skills would help boost immigrant-origin children's ability to successfully interact with peers. Indeed, being effective in social interactions requires children to learn how to master many skills that underlie social competence, such as perspective adoption, social problem solving, and facial emotion recognition. More research is needed to identify additional variables that may promote social competence among both immigrant-origin and non-immigrant children, especially in the presence of poor inhibitory and emotional recognition skills.

To conclude, our study has shown the importance of assessing peer social competence at the beginning of primary school and the role of EFs and social cognition processes, thereby allowing for the increased comprehension of the possible differences between children with and without a migration background.

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