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Ethnic mixing in schools creates conditions for much improved integration

In recent years, the evidence base around ethnically mixed schooling making a major contribution in creating the conditions where trust and mutual understanding can better grow has become more compelling. For example, among the key findings of 'Social Capital, Diversity and Education Policy'¹ (2006) by Professor Irene Bruegel of the London South Bank University were that:

'Friendship at primary schools can, and does, cross ethnic and faith divides wherever children have the opportunity to make friends from different backgrounds. At that age, in such schools, children are not highly conscious of racial differences and are largely unaware of the religion of their friends ... There was some evidence that parents learned to respect people from other backgrounds as a result of their children's experiences in mixed schools.' (p2)

In the paper 'Identities in Transition: A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Children'² (2008) by Brown, Rutland & Watters from the Universities of Sussex and Kent found that:

'... the effects of school diversity were consistent, most evidently on social relations: higher self-esteem, fewer peer problems and more cross-group friendships. Such findings show that school ethnic composition can significantly affect the promotion of positive intergroup attitudes. These findings speak against policies promoting single faith schools, since such policies are likely to lead to reduced ethnic diversity in schools' (p9).

In the study 'Do Ethnically Mixed Classrooms Promote Inclusive Attitudes Towards Immigrants Everywhere?'³ by Germ Janmaat (January, 2015) assessed survey data collected from over 100,000 13 and 14 year olds in 38 countries to ascertain whether or not more diverse classrooms make pupils more tolerant towards immigrants and those from different backgrounds. In conclusion the author states that:

'On the whole, the results of this study are welcome news for the advocates of desegregation, as they suggest that ethnically mixed schools are well positioned to promote inclusive out-group attitudes among native students ... in sum, this study suggests that policy makers should consider ethnic mixing as a strategy to promote more inclusive out-group attitudes among the native majority.' (p819-820)

Meanwhile in the 2014 study 'Contextual effect of positive intergroup contact on outgroup prejudice'⁴, Christa and Schmid et al. assessed evidence from 'across seven large-scale surveys' finding that:

'Contact does not merely change attitudes on a microscale ... Rather, contact also affects prejudice on a macrolevel, whereby people are influenced by the behavior of others in their social context.'

¹ <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf>

² <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Identities-in-Transition.-A-Longitudinal-Study-of-Immigrant-Children.pdf>

³ Abstract available at <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/21124/>.

⁴ Abstract at <http://www.pnas.org/content/111/11/3996>. Copy also available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260486355_Contextual_effect_of_positive_intergroup_contact_on_outgroup_prejudice.

Prior research that has prioritized the interpersonal nature of contact has ignored its potential widespread impact. Even individuals who have no direct intergroup contact experience can benefit from living in mixed settings ... These findings demonstrate the policy potential of contact at the context level, because it can be implemented via macrolevel contexts such as mixed schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.' (p3999-4000)

'Are minority status children's cross-ethnic friendships beneficial in a multiethnic context?'⁵ (2014) by Sabahat C. Bagci Adam Rutland, Madoka Kumashiro, Peter K. Smith and Herbert Blumberg of The University of London surveyed two hundred and forty seven pupils of South Asian ancestry in London. It found that while friendship quality, rather than quantity, had direct positive association with children's psychological well-being, a higher quantity of cross-ethnic friendships moderated the negative effects of perceived ethnic discrimination. Earlier research has identified a positive contribution to wider community relations from ethnically mixed schools, whereas this paper emphasised direct benefits for individual pupils.

Meanwhile, the 2001 'Oldham Independent Review'⁶ (otherwise known as the 'Ritchie Report') was commissioned by the Government, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and the local police authority after race riots in the town. It found that 'Educational mixing: This is closely linked to residential, and in our view it is desirable in principle that as many schools as possible, should have mixed intake so that children growing up can learn one another's customs and cultural backgrounds and accept that stereotypes and racism are unacceptable.' (p7)

Observations that ethnically mixed schools help integration are not new however. In 1830, Dr James Doyle, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, said before a Committee of the UK Parliament that:

'I do not see how any man, wishing well to the public peace, and who looks to Ireland as his country, can think that peace can ever be permanently established, or the prosperity of the country ever well secured, if children are separated at the commencement of life on account of their religious opinions. I do not know any measure which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age, and bringing them up in the same schools, leading them to commune with one another, and to form those little intimacies and friendships which often subsist through life. Children thus united, know and love each other, as children brought up together always will; and to separate them is, I think, to destroy some of the finest feelings in the hearts of men.'

While Bishop Doyle's gender biased vocabulary has dated, it is hard to conclude that relations on the island of Ireland today would not be stronger and its history since more peaceful had his prescient comments been heeded. Over 95% of pupils in Northern Ireland today are still educated in either Roman Catholic or notionally protestant schools. The message from history and academia is clear - friendships among young people cross all social barriers when they grow up and learn together.

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About the Accord Coalition

Accord is a campaign coalition of civil society organisations, launched in 2008, that includes religious groups, humanists, teachers, trade unionists, educationalists and civil rights activists. Although Accord's supporters derive inspiration for their values from different sources, they are united in working together to ensure state funded schools respect and uphold civil rights and promote social cohesion, especially on the grounds of religion and belief. More information on its work and growing list of members and supporters can be found at <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/>.

⁵<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjdp.12028/abstract;jsessionid=F7D2E9268E1233DAF9AB578D91B4967C.f02t01>

⁶<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/Oldhamindependentreview.pdf>