

Diversity in primary schools promotes harmony

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For the first time, children as young as 5 have been shown to understand issues regarding integration and separation. The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), confirms that the ethnic composition of primary schools has a direct impact on children's attitudes towards those in other ethnic groups and on their ability to get on with their peers.

The research was a year long longitudinal study with three sets of interviews approximately 6 monthly intervals at 20 schools in Sussex and Kent. Teachers also participated by completing questionnaires. In all, 398 children took part in the study, 218 of these children were from ethnic minorities of whom the majority were of Indian origin. The ethnic minority composition of the schools ranged between 2% and 63%.

Highlighting the challenges faced by immigrant children, the study also showed that those attending schools characterised by higher ethnic diversity experienced fewer peer problems and less prejudice than those attending schools that are more homogeneous.

Researchers from the Universities of Sussex and Kent interviewed children from ethnic minority groups about their attitudes towards themselves, their heritage, culture and their relationships with their peers.

The interviews revealed that the vast majority of children from

immigrant backgrounds wanted to keep their ethnic identity including their language and religious customs but, at the same time, they were keen to adopt as many of the practices and values of the host society as possible. This preference, known as an integrationist orientation, was already clear in children as young as five years old but was even more marked in the older age groups (8 – 11 years).

The research showed that having this integrationist attitude helped children both emotionally and socially: At the start of the study, the researchers found that minority children, particularly 1st generation immigrants, generally had lower self-esteem and were less well accepted by their peers than their white English classmates. But, when interviewed 6 and 12 months later, children with an integrationist orientation showed significant improvements in both these measures.

On the other hand, the researchers also found some evidence suggesting that constantly balancing the demands of their heritage culture with those of the host society took its toll. Professor Rupert Brown, who led the study, said: "Teachers observations revealed that children with an integrationist outlook, particularly those who were 1st generation immigrants, were more likely to be 'teary' and show other symptoms of social anxiety than children who were solely focused on their own heritage. These children also reported more incidences of racial discrimination".

These adverse effects were less common in immigrant children attending schools with a relatively high level of ethnic diversity than in those attending schools with a lower proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities. Indeed, according to Professor Brown, schools characterised by high ethnic diversity had clear social benefits for children regardless of their ethnic background:

"We found that, when the proportion of ethnic minority children in a

school is at least 20%, both ethnic minority children and majority children tended to have higher self esteem, children had more friendships with children from other ethnic groups, and there were fewer problems with peer relationships such as bullying".

Professor Brown concludes: "Our findings add to a growing body of evidence suggesting that the more contact children have with other ethnic groups, the more cross-group friendships they will have and the less prejudiced they will be". This argues against policies leading to reductions in school diversity such as the promotion of single faith schools.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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