Ethnically mixed schools better for social cohesion, says new study of teenagers' attitudes

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Credit: University of Bristol

Pupils from schools with greater ethnic diversity have more positive feelings towards pupils of different ethnicities, according to a new study of attitudes in English secondary schools from the University of Bristol and the London School of Economics and Political Science.

While pupils tend to have warmer feelings for their own ethnic group, the more mixed the school, the warmer the feelings for other ethnicities, promoting social cohesion.

Nearly 4,000 Year 10 pupils, aged 14 and 15, from 96 English state schools were asked about the warmth of their feelings towards fellow pupils of different ethnicities. They were also asked about their friendships and how many friends they had from a different ethnic background. Social and political attitudes on openness to others were also surveyed. The focus was on three broad groups; White British, Asian British and Black British.

In terms of warmth, the study shows that the warmth of a black pupil for white pupils increases by 1.04 points for each 10 percentage points increase in the share of White pupils in the school. Reciprocally, the warmth of a white British pupil for black British pupils increases by 1.74 points for each ten percentage points increase in the share of black pupils in the school. This reduces the gap between feelings for their own compared to the other group by over 10 per cent.

The study also shows that school composition is more important than local area composition. In local authorities with high fractions of Asian British pupils, for example, White British pupils have substantially and significantly more positive feelings towards those pupils in schools where they are numerous than in schools where they are not. It is the first national study to relate inter-ethnic relations to both school and area composition.

Using the results to examine the effects of a fully segregated school system, researchers considered a hypothetical city with 20 per cent Asian pupils and 80 per cent white. If each went to a school with pupils from only their own ethnic background then 47 per cent of Whites would feel negatively towards Asian, and around 30 per cent of Asians would have a

reciprocal attitude, so overall 44 per cent of pupils in the city would be ill-disposed to the other group. By contrast, in a fully integrated system, overall around 20 per cent of pupils would have negative feelings for other groups.

Social cohesion is high on the political agenda and is central to the recently-published Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper and to the Mayor of London's Social Integration Strategy.

The authors, Professor Simon Burgess of the Department of Economics at Bristol and Professor Lucinda Platt of LSE's Department of Social Policy, commented: "All around the world people tend to prefer their own group - it's a pervasive phenomenon. This paper provides new evidence on the issue of social cohesion which is high on the political agenda. Tomorrow's citizens are today's schoolchildren and time in school has the potential to shape attitudes towards others.

"Encouragingly for policy-makers, our results show that even small moves away from largely mono-ethnic schools towards more mixed ones produce positive changes. It is not the case that anything short of full integration is pointless. The policy questions then focus on how to encourage mixed schools, and how to encourage contact. Of course, neither of these are easy. But our results now quantify just how valuable that is."

More information: Inter-ethnic relations of teenagers in England's schools: the role of school and neighbourhood ethnic composition: www.cream-migration.org/publ_uploads/CDP_07_18.pdf

Provided by University of Bristol

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