Cross-Racial Understanding and Reduction of Racial Prejudice

A considerable number of studies since Brown have shown how the social environment of schools affects the attitudes of students from one racial group toward students of other racial groups. Over the past 15 years, research in developmental psychology has documented the

social and developmental benefits of intergroup contact that results from school integration and examined stereotyping, prejudice, and exclusion attitudes in childhood.5

These comprehensive educational studies conclude that a racially integrated student body is necessary to obtain cross-racial understanding, which may lead to a reduction of harmful stereotypes and bias. Racially segregated schools deprive students of these learning opportunities and the available evidence indicates that indirect programs that merely emphasize the transmission of information about other groups but are not able to utilize intergroup contact have little impact on actually changing the behavior of students.6 Like learning new communication skills, the skills needed to relate to students of other racial and ethnic groups require practice.7

7 Janet Ward Schofield, Black and White in School: Trust, Tension or Tolerance? (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989) (showing that behavior changed over time as kids became more comfortable with members of other racial groups and were less likely to avoid them).
about and empathy for other groups are not as easily learned or long-lasting if learned in homogeneous schools.  

In a nation in which the proportion of whites among the school-aged population has declined to less than 60% and is declining by the year, there is growing value to cross-racial understanding and cooperation among individuals of all races. For white students, who, on average, grow up in the most racially separate neighborhoods and remain highly segregated in K-12 and higher education classrooms racially integrated schools provide benefits that many students may not be able to obtain in other ways.  

Recent findings from a survey of high school juniors and seniors in seven major school districts across the nation, including Seattle and Jefferson County, show that white students value interracial experiences and report that their racially integrated schools better prepared them to work and participate in public life in

in their multiracial communities. Additionally, students of all racial groups in integrated schools felt higher comfort levels with members of racial groups different than their own when compared with students in segregated schools. For example, white students in integrated settings have been found to exhibit more racial tolerance and less fear of their black peers over time than their segregated peers.

Teachers believe that building respect for people of other races and cultures is one of the most important goals of education. Many teachers with everyday experience in racially diverse schools believe in the benefits of racial diversity for student learning and as an experience that fosters productive, economic, and civic participation in

14 Alec Gallup, The Phi Delta Kappa Gallup Poll of Teachers’ Attitudes Towards the Public Schools (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1985).
U.S. society. They also state that these benefits are difficult to attain in single-race classrooms.\(^ {15}\) Virtually all teachers (and about 90\% of students) in a recent survey stated that it was important for students of different races and ethnicities to interact, although far fewer believed that this was currently happening in their schools.\(^ {16}\)

The harms to students who are the targets of negative stereotypes and to students who become the unwitting inheritors of such views are well known.\(^ {17}\) Children become aware of racial and ethnic group differences from very young ages,\(^ {18}\) and their developing views of different groups are affected and shaped by others within their social worlds.\(^ {19}\)

Because stereotypes can become deeply...
entrenched as children become adults, early social interactions are important to promote tolerance and reduce prejudice. In addition, the effectiveness of constructive, integrated school settings in reducing the transmission of such stereotypes has been well established.

20 Research focusing on children’s implicit attitudes – attitudes that reflect a racial bias, unbeknownst to the individual expressing the attitudes – has shown that white children attending racially homogeneous elementary schools were more likely to attribute negative intentions to peers based on race when evaluating ambiguous situations in school contexts than were white children attending racially heterogeneous schools. See Heidi Mcglothlin, Melanie Killen, and Christina Edmonds, “European-American Children’s Intergroup Attitudes About Peer Relationships,” British Journal of Developmental Psychology 23, no. 2 (2005): 227-49.

found that the reduction of stereotyping and the increased understanding that racial exclusion is harmful are products of children’s social cognition, perspective taking, empathetic responses, and moral judgments,22 all of which are enhanced in integrated environments.23 These outcomes are especially important in the education context, where stereotypes may inhibit academic interaction and learning by all students.

A recent meta-analysis24 of over 500 prior studies that collectively involved 250,000 participants shows that greater levels of contact among different groups are typically associated with lower levels of intergroup prejudice, and that these effects are consistent and significant for samples of children, adolescents, and adults.25 Although optimal intergroup conditions – such as

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23 Recent research with adolescents in the Los Angeles area has shown that students who are enrolled in schools with high ethnic diversity are more likely to feel safe and experience less harassment in school than are students enrolled in schools with high racial isolation. Jaana Juvonen, Adrienne Nishina, and Sandra Graham, “Ethnic Diversity and Perceptions of Safety in Urban Middle Schools,” Psychological Science 17, no. 5 (May 2006): 393-400.

24 When performing a meta-analysis, researchers attempt to find every study conducted on a particular topic; then, they statistically pool the results to examine the overall patterns of effects and to uncover additional variables that moderate those effects.

equal status between groups, support of institutional authorities, common goals and cooperation – are not necessary for prejudice reduction, larger reductions in prejudice occur when the conditions are established. A related analysis of 198 independent samples from these studies showed that significant, positive effects of intergroup contact typically emerge for samples of children and adolescents in schools, and specifically when the contact involves youth from different racial and ethnic groups. Additional studies show how cross-race friendships that develop through contact in schools encourage broader, positive changes in interracial attitudes. These positive effects accrue regardless of whether participants voluntarily chose to engage in intergroup contact. Collectively these findings suggest that contact among youth from different racial groups promotes positive intergroup attitudes, and such positive outcomes become stronger

27 Tropp and Prenovost, “The Role of Intergroup Contact in Predicting Children’s Inter-Ethnic Attitudes.”
29 This is noteworthy because critics of contact theory suggest that those seeking out intergroup contact might already have lower prejudice, but an analysis that coded whether participants had “full choice” to engage in contact or “no choice” found that the effects of contact were comparably strong for both groups. See Pettigrew and Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” 757-58.
when optimal intergroup conditions are established in the school environment.

Racially diverse schools can be structured in ways that make positive outcomes more likely to occur. Tracking white and Asian students into more advanced classes and black and Latino students into lower-level classes – as studies have suggested disproportionately occurs, regardless of ability – will limit the intergroup contact that produces gains for all in addition to restricting the future success of minority students. Educators can benefit from the considerable research demonstrating how to implement desegregation successfully.

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33 See Willis D. Hawley et al., Strategies for Effective School Desegregation (Lexington, Ma.: Lexington Books, 1983); Erica Frankenberg and Gary Orfield, ed., Lessons in Integration: Realizing the Promise of Racial Diversity in America’s Schools (Charlottesville, Va: Univ. of Virginia Press, in press).