



How Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Schools Prepares Young People to Thrive in a Multiracial Society

Linda R. Tropp, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Debates about the value and meaning of public education are not just about report cards and standardized test scores. The hope is that public education will equip youth with what they need to reach their full potential and flourish as the next generation of citizens. To achieve this goal, most people realize that public schools need to teach students to navigate their social environments, contribute positively to their communities, and live and work cooperatively with others in the increasingly complex and diverse society.

But there is growing evidence that the United States is falling far short of this goal. Segregation and racial isolation mark most U.S. public schools. Nationally, most White students attend schools that are more than 70 percent White; and in some regions, nearly half of Black and Latino students attend schools that are more than 90 percent minority and overwhelmingly poor.

The promise of diverse, integrated schools was asserted in the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Since then the social science supporting school integration has only become stronger, revealing the many ways in which contact between young people from different racial and ethnic groups can transform attitudes and prepare them to thrive in a multiracial society.

Building Relationships across Groups Promotes Inclusion and Social Cohesion

Researchers have found many ways to foster inclusive schools:

- **Cross-race friendships** are especially powerful because emotional bonds form that transform people's understandings of social relations and make them more motivated to treat members of their friends' groups as they would treat people in their own group.
- **Cooperative learning strategies** promote both academic success and positive intergroup attitudes. These involve having youth from different groups work together and learn from each other, with support from teachers and school staff.
- **Norms provide youth with important values about cross-group relations.** Students often become more willing to engage in contact with other racial groups when they observe others doing so in their classrooms, schools, and communities, as well as in the media.

Why Contact With Other Racial and Ethnic Groups is So Important for Youth

Children's early life experiences can have long-term consequences. Once formed, attitudes and beliefs about other groups may become harder to change as youth grow older.

Of course, youth must have opportunities to get to know and interact with members of other racial groups for such meaningful cross-race bonds to develop – and diverse schools offer more of these opportunities. Studies of youth in integrated school environments show that those who learn in such schools report greater interest in living and working in racially and ethnically diverse environments when they become adults, and are more likely actually to do so as adults. By contrast, racially isolated schools may limit opportunities for youth to challenge skewed perceptions and assumptions about people from other racial groups.

Connecting Intergroup Relations to Education Policy

Providing opportunities for interracial contact in integrated schools and classrooms is critical for youth development and efforts to foster a just and vibrant nation. With insights from social science, racially integrated schools and classrooms have important roles to play, if the following principles are followed:

- **Ensure that practices make integrated classrooms and high-quality intergroup contact easier to achieve.** Many structures reinforce segregation between communities, schools, and classrooms, limiting both the frequency and quality of intergroup contact students can experience. At the federal, state and district levels, these structures can include school zone and district boundaries, narrow definitions of school quality, and limited interventions to support racial integration. Inside schools, practices like tracking that separate students into different classes based on test performance can lead to racial isolation. Viewing education policies and practices through the lens of maximizing intergroup contact may lead to reforms in how school enrollments and class assignments are designed.
- **Prioritize racially integrated classrooms and high-quality intergroup contact.** Clearly, dismantling the effects of segregation cannot be solely the purview of schools. Yet by recognizing the value of racially integrated classrooms as part of the learning environment, schools can support cross-racial contact and engage families and communities as active partners in building inclusive educational environments. Educators, communities, and students can work together to develop a shared vision of racially integrated schools and advocate for the resources and school conditions needed to support that vision.

As the nation faces rapidly shifting demographics amid rising social tensions, public schools remain one of the few social institutions that have the potential to bring young people together across racial and ethnic lines. Guided by scientific research and civic imperatives, policymakers and other civic leaders can make use the public education system to build bridges and knock down barriers that divide youth from diverse backgrounds in classrooms and schools across the country. By helping children and youth from diverse backgrounds build positive ties with one another, diverse schools can lead the way toward a more successful national future.

Read more in Linda R. Tropp and Suchitra Saxena, **"Re-Weaving the Social Fabric Through Integrated Schools: How Intergroup Contact Prepares Youth to Thrive in a Multiracial Society."** *Research Brief No. 13, Commemorating the 64th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. National Coalition on School Diversity; Linda R. Tropp, Thomas C. O'Brien, and Katya Migacheva, **"How Peer Norms of Inclusion and Exclusion Predict Children's Interest in Cross-Ethnic Friendships"** *Journal of Social Issues* 70, no. 1 (2014): 151-166; Kristin Davies, Linda R. Tropp, Arthur Aron, Thomas F. Pettigrew, and Stephen C. Wright, **"Cross-Group Friendships and Intergroup Attitudes"** *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 4 (2011): 332-351; Elizabeth Page-Gould, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, and Linda R. Tropp, **"With a Little Help from My Cross-Group Friend: Reducing Anxiety in Intergroup Contexts through Cross-Group Friendship"** *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 5 (2008): 1080-1094; and Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp. **"A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory"** *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751-783.