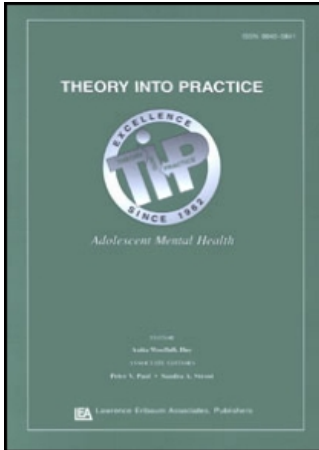


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### Conflict, Contact, and Education in Northern Ireland

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# Conflict, Contact, and Education in Northern Ireland

*This article outlines educational responses to the conflict in Northern Ireland designed to promote intergroup harmony. Current research about the impact of these programs on children and young people is also reviewed to draw conclusions for practitioners in formal and informal educational settings who want to use intergroup contact to implement education for peace in the most effective way. The contact hypothesis has provided the theoretical framework for the majority of educational initiatives in Northern Ireland designed to promote peace, and it is used here to evaluate empirical evidence regarding the impact of such initiatives. In the main this evidence supports the importance of the key conditions for successful outgroup contact as originally proposed by the contact hypothesis. In addition, intergroup anxiety is identified as a factor mediating successful*

*outgroup contact and attention is drawn to the potentially significant role of outgroup contact that is not experienced first hand, but indirectly through reports of relevant others.*

**N**ORTHERN IRELAND IS A DIVIDED society and this is especially true where schooling is concerned with over 90% of children attending either a Catholic or a Protestant school at elementary and secondary level. From the early 1970s, educational research in Northern Ireland indicated potentially harmful effects of denominational segregation as possibly perpetuating negative intergroup attitudes and, ultimately, conflict (Abbott, Dunn, & Morgan, 1998; Cairns, 1987; Darby et al., 1977). Today it is widely accepted that segregation is not the cause of intergroup conflict, but it is believed to play a major role in establishing and maintaining conflict between two communities (Gallagher, 1995). As a result, policies and methods to reduce the level of segregation and to increase opportunities for intergroup contact have been introduced. The importance of this policy can be gauged by the fact that the government has spent millions of dollars in an attempt to improve intergroup relations (Knox & Hughes, 1996). In

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particular, the educational authorities in Northern Ireland have funded a program (Dunn & Morgan, 1999) designed to encourage contact between Catholic and Protestant schools and more recently have funded the development of planned integrated schools. These educational initiatives relate to structural change as well as content and curriculum development, and are loosely based on assumptions derived from social identity theory and the contact hypothesis. This article aims to inform practitioners about the most effective ways of implementing intergroup contact in education in the context of conflict, whether experienced as political violence or as community divisions such as increasing multiculturalism. Although Northern Ireland represents an example of a (post) conflict society, it nevertheless provides a useful context for the broader examination of educational initiatives aimed at promoting social cohesion and peace. The use of an appropriate theoretical framework facilitates the exploration of relevant concepts in Northern Ireland and allows conclusions to be drawn that are relevant to other contexts, including societies with different experiences of peace and conflict.

### Violent Conflict in Northern Ireland

The need to promote contact between groups arises because of the long-standing conflict between the Protestants/Unionists/Loyalists, who wish to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom and make up about 50% of the population, and the Catholics/Nationalists/Republicans, who wish to see the unification of the island of Ireland and make up about 40% of the population (Cairns & Darby, 1998). Though the conflict has lasted for centuries, today it has become a melange of historical, religious, political, economic, and psychological elements. In the last 30 years the conflict was at its most virulent, resulting in many deaths and injuries, plus psychological stress and increased community divisions. In the 1990s a series of cease-fires by paramilitary groups on both sides eventually led to a political agreement that became known locally to Catholics as the *Good Friday Agreement* and to Protestants

as *The Belfast Agreement*. The *peace process*, as it has become known, faces political and military challenges particularly from dissidents in both communities. Therefore, though it could be argued that the violence has (almost) ended, the conflict goes on and the need to promote contact continues.

### The Contact Hypothesis

The contact hypothesis has been the major influence underpinning cross-community programs, including educational initiatives, in Northern Ireland (Hughes & Knox, 1997). In its simplest form, the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Pettigrew, 1986) proposes that bringing together individuals from opposing groups can reduce intergroup conflict "under optimal conditions" (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Allport (1954) suggested four conditions to bring about contact that may lead to reduced intergroup conflict. First, there should be equal status among the groups who meet, or at least among the individuals drawn from the groups. Second, the situation in which intergroup contact occurs should require cooperation between groups or offer common goals. Third, social competition among the groups involved should be avoided. Last, the contact situation should be legitimized through institutional support.

### Contact and Education

In Northern Ireland the segregated structure of the educational system was challenged most pertinently when parents lobbied for the establishment of integrated schools, which would draw approximately equal numbers of Catholic and Protestant pupils, with the "aim of providing for them an effective education that gives equal recognition to and promotes equal expression of the two major traditions" (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, 2004). As a result, the first integrated school was established in Belfast in 1981. Over the last 20 years this movement has grown slowly but steadily (Gallagher, Smith, & Montgomery, 2003) and has led to the establishment of

some 57 integrated primary and secondary schools to date. Today, though still constituting a minority of schools in Northern Ireland and only catering to about 5% of the total pupil population (Gallagher et al., 2003), integrated schools receive government funding and provide an alternative for parents wishing to break out of the straightjacket of segregated denominational-based schooling.

This major structural change was accompanied by changes to the curricular content in a variety of subject areas. The Education Reform Order (1989) introduced a national curriculum taught in all schools in Northern Ireland. This includes a common curriculum for those subjects that are often associated with community relations, such as history and religious education (Arlow, 2003). Most important, all schools are required to incorporate community relations into their teaching through the introduction of the statutory and cross-curricular themes known as Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH; Arlow, 2003; Gallagher, 2003). EMU has been widely criticized since its introduction because of its too narrow content, which focuses on community relations between Catholics and Protestants only; its peripheral nature to the curriculum due to its cross-curricular nature; and, more practically, its lack of sufficient training to enable teachers to cope with controversial issues that might arise (Montgomery & McCully, 2000). Partly as result of these criticisms, new curriculum proposals have been made to promote the introduction of Local and Global Citizenship Education to address previous initiatives' shortcomings (Smith, 2003). In addition to the mandatory curricular changes, a separate voluntary program, known as the School Community Relations Programme, was introduced to promote cross-community contact between Catholic and Protestant pupils from segregated schools.

### Research Evidence

Until recently there had been relatively little consistent research in Northern Ireland relating specifically to the proposed conditions under which contact is believed to be successful (Allport, 1954). As Cairns and Hewstone (2002) pointed out,

little detail is known about the possible theoretical underpinnings of cross-community schemes in Northern Ireland, except that they involve some form of cross-community contact. Hughes and Knox (1997), for example, note that, though conditions such as superordinate goals, cooperation, and equal status are recognized as valuable in practice, they are rarely given strategic priority. The problem lies with the fact that most of the research in Northern Ireland that investigated the impact of the contact hypothesis was outcome oriented rather than process oriented. In our following review we will therefore discuss separately the earlier outcome-oriented research that is often child based (see Trew, 1986, for a review) and the more recent process-oriented research that is largely adult based (e.g., Cairns et al., 1993; Hargie et al., 1999).

### Outcome Research

In general, the early research provided modest but relatively consistent evidence that cross-community contact was positively associated with reducing negative outgroup attitudes. However, questions were raised about the generalizability of such positive outcomes to a broader societal level. As a result, cross-community contact was recommended as a remedy to deteriorating intergroup relations and, sometimes, contact in itself was seen as a measure of success (Cairns & Hewstone, 2002). Often such contact involved short-term educational interventions and were more common in the 1980s. Trew (1986) concluded that, although belonging to different denominations did not preclude the development of friendships as a result of short-term contact, there was no evidence that "contact *per se* will either influence salient political beliefs or have any impact on sectarianism in the society" (p. 105). Trew also pointed out that the quality of cross-community friendships often differed from intra-community friendships in that potentially controversial issues, such as politics or religion, were avoided in conversations.

Since the introduction of the School Community Relations Programme and the development of the integrated education sector, research into the impact of these educational initiatives on pupils' attitudes and social identities has grown steadily,

though no systematic longitudinal research has been conducted (Abbott et al., 1998). One of the first studies (Irwin, 1991) found an increase in the number and duration of intercommunity friendships among current pupils and those who had recently completed their education. Similarly, in a study of integrated and desegregated schools (McClenahan, Cairns, Dunn, & Morgan, 1996), it was suggested that cross-community friendships were increased by intergroup contact. A recent survey comparing pupils from integrated schools with pupils from segregated postprimary schools (Stringer et al., 2000) has gone further and indicated that integrated education positively impacts the quality and quantity of outgroup friendships and pupils' attitudes to integration. Support for these findings has come from a survey of former students at integrated schools (McGlynn, 2001) that also indicated integrated education may impact pupils' social identities by challenging interpretations of group identification.

A recent Review of the School Community Relations Programme (O'Connor, Hartop, & McCully, 2002) explored the nature of cross-community programs in which schools were involved and the extent to which these initiatives were perceived to be successful. Results derived from document analyses and interviews with key figures in education indicated that schools often introduced contact without adequate attention to optimal conditions being met, and teachers sometimes avoided discussions of controversial issues. Additionally, support from senior management and other teaching staff, as well as adequate teacher training, were considered to be crucial for the successful implementation of contact schemes, confirming the contact hypothesis and reflecting previous research.

Regarding curricular initiatives, as part of a wide-ranging review commissioned by the Department of Education to examine the impact and progress of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage, Smith and Robinson (1996) reported that there was limited evidence of direct educational benefits. Schools often only applied a minimalist approach to these cross-curricular subjects by focusing on topics not associated with the conflict and by avoiding controversial issues.

More recently, Kilpatrick and Leitch (2004) conducted a qualitative study to explore the impact of the troubles on the educational experiences of teachers and young people and the impact of educational initiatives aimed at reducing negative outgroup attitudes. Cross-community programs in the surveyed schools rarely went beyond polite exchange or addressed controversial issues. Adequate teacher training was again pointed out as an essential prerequisite for these initiatives to be successful. The research indicated that the long-term sustainability of projects was regarded as a key issue, as was the reduction of intergroup anxiety by strengthening ingroup identity. Intra-community interventions, or *single identity work* as it is referred to in Northern Ireland, is the exploration of social identity and community relations within the community with the aim to strengthen collective self-esteem. Single identity work was perceived to be a useful step before initiating encounters between communities (Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence [JEDI], 2002; Kilpatrick & Leitch, 2004).

Early research focused mainly on quantity of contact as an *input* variable and attitude change as an *output* variable largely in educational settings. More recent research, based either on university students or random sample surveys of the Northern Irish population, takes into account the quality of contact, including positive or negative experiences, and inclusion of discussion of controversial issues (Cairns, Gallagher, & Dunn, 1993; Hargie, Dickson, & Rainie, 1999). In addition, attitudinal change is no longer seen as the only outcome of successful contact, evident in studies exploring a range of possible outcomes such as increased empathy, forgiveness, and perspective taking. Finally, this recent research has attempted to go beyond outcome analyses and to focus on processes by investigating the circumstances that determine when contact will be successful and the mechanisms that influence how positive contact actually works.

### Process Research

Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, and Niens (in press) undertook secondary analyses of data provided by the Northern Ireland Social Attitude

Surveys from 1989 and 1991. The objective was to develop a theoretical model of intergroup contact in the Northern Ireland context. Results were analyzed separately for Catholic and Protestant respondents and path analyses indicated that social class was the best predictor of contact for Protestants whereas education was the best predictor of contact for Catholics. In turn, outgroup contact consistently predicted outgroup attitudes whereas integrated education and outgroup contact were correlated. However, the effect of integrated education on outgroup contact was inconsistent across samples. The measurement of some of the key variables in the original surveys was limited, a problem remedied in subsequent research. Niens, Cairns, and Hewstone (2003) investigated possible antecedents of outgroup attitudes using a contact model proposing intergroup anxiety as a mediating variable for the positive impact of quality and quantity of contact on outgroup attitudes. Results of a random sample survey of the Northern Irish adult population supported the hypothesized relationships between quantity and quality of contact and intergroup anxiety and outgroup attitudes, with intergroup anxiety serving as a mediating variable (Hewstone et al., 2004; Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2003).

Finally, using a retrospective approach, a cohort of undergraduate students at a university in Northern Ireland was surveyed in 1999 to investigate the relationship between quantity and quality of intergroup contact prior to third-level education on social identity and forgiveness (Niens, Cairns, Hewstone, & McLernon, 2003). As expected, the overall quantity of contact and experience with cross-community schemes impacted negatively on group identification and positively on the perceived quality of contact. Integrated education was positively associated with the perceived quality of outgroup contact, though it was not significantly associated with group identification. In turn, the quality of contact was negatively correlated with strength of group identification. Though quality of contact impacted positively on forgiveness, group identification impacted negatively on it (McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004).

The extended contact hypothesis (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997) pro-

poses that intergroup contact can be effective in reducing intergroup anxiety and promoting positive outgroup attitudes even when experienced only indirectly through reports of a significant other. Research conducted by Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, and Voci (2004) explored assumptions derived from this extended contact hypothesis. Results from a student survey and a random sample survey of the Northern Ireland adult population indicated that direct and indirect contact predicted outgroup attitudes, a relationship that was mediated by reduced intergroup anxiety. This has implications for a possible ripple effect from the currently small integrated educational sector.

### Conclusions

From the research evidence reported earlier and research conducted beyond Northern Ireland (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), the practitioner planning to implement cross-community contact schemes or working in a mixed community environment with the aim of promoting positive intergroup relations (such as integrated schools) could draw the following conclusions:

1. Intergroup contact may help to promote a positive outcome if implemented using the optimal conditions that promote altered intergroup attitudes. Generally, research supports the usefulness of Allport's (1954) conditions for the promotion of effective intergroup contact. For contact to be successful, participants of similar status should work collaboratively to achieve common goals.
2. Competitive situations should be avoided.
3. Institutional support in the form of backing from senior management and other teaching staff is also recognized as crucial in successfully implementing intergroup contact, or indeed any kind of value initiatives, in the formal education system (Osler & Starkey, 1998) or teacher training (Ross, 1999).
4. The quality of contact needs to be monitored carefully to ensure that contact with outgroup members is, overall, experienced as positive and friendships are formed. This is particu-

larly important in the light of research emphasizing the need for the contact situation to provide scope for more than a superficial exchange.

5. Intergroup anxiety and social identity appear to be key factors explaining the process through which contact impacts on outgroup attitudes. Reduction of intergroup anxiety could be regarded as one key outcome of intergroup contact and should be taken into account when introducing contact (possibly through employing prior single identity work) and when monitoring the success of contact initiatives.

6. Finally, long-term sustainability of contact appears to be a key issue and is widely acknowledged as such in the literature in Northern Ireland.

Though these factors are relatively well documented, more recent research indicates possible benefits of extended contact that is experienced second-hand through reports of ingroup members. For the practitioner, this would mean providing the opportunity for participants in an intergroup contact intervention to relate their experiences to their peers who have not been exposed to intergroup contact. Because this is the least researched benefit accruing from cross-community contact, it would be necessary to monitor and evaluate this process closely. More research is required to establish the most beneficial sequence in which cross-community contact needs to be introduced in different contexts.

Although this article addresses conflict, contact, and education within the context of Northern Ireland, the research has implications for other practitioners. Northern Ireland has, over the last 30 years, become a useful testing ground for educational practices that can contribute to the reduction of community divisions. As such, it may provide a useful example to other societies, where community divisions and segregation also represent obstacles to social inclusion and harmonious intergroup relations.

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