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Commemorating the
64th anniversary of
*Brown v. Board of
Education of Topeka.*

Research Brief

Re-Weaving the Social Fabric through Integrated Schools: How Intergroup Contact Prepares Youth to Thrive in a Multiracial Society

By Linda R. Tropp and Suchi Saxena

SUMMARY

Schools remain one of the few social institutions that have the potential to bring youth together across racial and ethnic lines. New social science research demonstrates the importance of fostering sustained interracial contact between youth in order to prepare them to thrive in a multiracial society. This brief aims to summarize much of this new evidence, with special attention to its practical implications for the social relations and contexts within schools.

“The legal system can force open doors, and sometimes-even knock down walls, but it cannot build bridges. That job belongs to you and me. The country can’t do it. Afro and White, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, our fates are bound together. We can run from each other, but we cannot escape each other. We will only attain freedom if we learn to appreciate what is different, and muster the courage to discover what is fundamentally the same. America’s diversity offers so much richness and opportunity. Take a chance, won’t you? Knock down the fences, which divide. Tear apart the walls that imprison you. Reach out. Freedom lies just on the other side. We shall have liberty for all.”

—Thurgood Marshall, Liberty Medal acceptance speech delivered July 4, 1992

Key Takeaways:

- In order to prepare youth to thrive in a multiracial society, social science demonstrates the importance and value of increasing opportunities for youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to have sustained contact with one another.
- Fostering cross-racial friendships, implementing cooperative learning strategies, and promoting supportive norms in schools and among peers are some of the factors that are likely to enhance the positive effects of contact.
- Providing youth with opportunities to experience meaningful intergroup contact is especially important because children’s early life experiences can have long-term consequences for their developing intergroup attitudes and beliefs. It also helps to reduce anxiety about difference, builds capacity for empathy and caring about others, develops leadership competencies and plants seeds for social change.
- To foster effective interracial contact in schools, ensure that policies and practices make integrated classrooms and high-quality intergroup contact easy to achieve, and prioritize racially integrated classrooms and high-quality intergroup contact within the processes of teaching and learning.

When we reflect on the value and meaning of public education, we often think about much more than students' report cards or scores on standardized tests. Like numerous educators, community leaders, and policymakers across the country who seek to transform the educational experience of students, we hope that public education will prepare students to flourish as our next generation of citizens.¹ As part of those lessons that may be deemed "essential to good citizenship,"² we want students to learn how to navigate their social environments, to contribute positively as engaged members of their communities, and to live and work cooperatively with others in our increasingly complex and diverse society.³ These lessons have particular urgency amidst the current volatile and fragmented racial and political climate of the U.S.

But there is growing evidence that we are falling far short of these goals. While growing numbers of parents prefer diverse schools for their children – believing that racial diversity enhances learning environments⁴ and that navigating difference helps to prepare children for living in a diverse society⁵ – segregation and racial isolation are thriving in U.S. public schools.⁶ Although White students make up roughly 50 percent of public school enrollments, nearly 20 percent of all U.S. public schools have few to no White students enrolled.⁷ Nationally, most White students attend schools that are more than 70 percent white.⁸ In some regions of the United States, nearly half of Black and Latino students attend schools that are more than 90 percent Black and/or Latino and have extremely concentrated levels of poverty.⁹ High levels of racial isolation exist even within racially diverse

urban centers, like New York City, one of the most segregated school systems in the nation.¹⁰

Despite the many structures fortifying racial and economic segregation across the U.S., many Americans continue to fight for diverse, integrated schools where youth from all backgrounds can learn and grow together.¹¹ Socioeconomically and racially integrated schools help students to discover their commonalities, and to acknowledge meaningful differences in perspective and experience,¹² which can enhance mutual understanding and foster inclusion and participation in a multicultural democracy.

This is the broader promise of the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which was decided 64 years ago and made the legally sanctioned segregation of U.S. public schools unconstitutional. Included in the testimony for this case was a statement signed by more than 30 social scientists¹³ that highlighted key research findings of the time and laid bare the distorted sense of reality facing American children attending racially isolated schools. More than 10 years later, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (more commonly known as the Kerner Commission) identified systemic failures in education restricting opportunity for students of color, and urged that, "education in a democratic society must equip children to develop their potential and to participate fully in American life."¹⁴

While the lessons and legacy of *Brown* continue to be battled out in school boards and courtrooms across the nation, the social science supporting school integration has only become stronger over

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the last several decades. Contemporary social scientists have discovered many new lines of evidence that support the value of racial integration in schools. This brief aims to summarize much of this new evidence, with special attention to social relations and contexts within schools, where youth could benefit greatly from opportunities to build bridges across the vast richness of our country's diversity.

Contact Between Groups: What Is It, and How Might It Be Best Achieved?

Social science has demonstrated the importance and value of increasing opportunities for youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to have sustained contact with one another, in order to prepare them to thrive in a multiracial society. In this work, *contact* typically refers to face-to-face interactions among members of distinct racial and ethnic groups. Decades of research including experimental,¹⁵ longitudinal,¹⁶ and meta-analytic¹⁷ studies provide evidence that greater contact between different racial and ethnic groups can reduce prejudice and promote more positive intergroup relations. It is not sufficient for students from different groups to simply be present in the same spaces; to yield such encouraging outcomes, educational environments must ensure that students from different backgrounds have

opportunities to cultivate meaningful relationships across group boundaries.

Researchers and educators alike have sought to identify the kinds of contact that are most conducive to reducing prejudice and promoting positive intergroup relations. More than a half-century of research has identified several factors that help to facilitate positive outcomes from intergroup contact.

Fostering Cross-Racial Friendships. Research suggests that prejudice is especially likely to decrease when contact takes the form of friendship between members of different racial groups.¹⁸ Experimental evidence supports this finding, as does research with children¹⁹ and adults of many ages.²⁰ Theory suggests that friendship contact is powerful because of the emotional bonds that develop through close cross-group relationships: these bonds transform people's understandings of relationships between groups, such that they become more motivated to treat members of their friends' groups as well as they would treat members of their own groups.²¹ These trends serve as an important reminder that not all types of contact are equal, and that relatively superficial forms of contact may carry less weight in changing our attitudes. Rather, the more we cultivate close, meaningful relationships across group lines, the more likely it is that contact will be effective in reducing prejudice.

"It is clear to me that racially integrated schools are necessary but not sufficient. We must ensure that our classrooms are integrated, and even beyond that, activities are intentionally designed to bring students from different racial or ethnic groups, socio-economic groups, and special education status together into regular, meaningful contact that can lead to the ultimate outcomes of empathy and caring for others to achieve social change."

—**Anda Adams**, Ed.L.D., Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction, Cambridge Public Schools (Cambridge, MA)

Of course, children must have opportunities to get to know and interact with members of other racial groups for such meaningful cross-racial relationships to develop. Cross-racial friendships are typically more common in schools with greater racial and ethnic diversity;²² for instance, White children in ethnically diverse schools and classrooms are more likely to perceive that children from different ethnic groups can become friends, and to select children from other ethnic groups as potential friends.²³

Implementing cooperative learning strategies.

Cooperative learning strategies encourage youth from different groups to work together and learn from each other, with explicit support from teachers and school staff. Numerous studies have shown that having children work together and

learn from each other not only promotes greater academic success, but also fosters positive intergroup attitudes and relations among diverse groups of children in the classroom.²⁴ These strategies might be used both within and outside of the classroom, by encouraging youth from different backgrounds to collaborate in identifying and creating solutions for community-based challenges, such as designing playgrounds, painting murals, taking care of gardens in their schools and neighborhoods, or organizing collective action around important civic and political issues.

Promoting supportive norms in schools and among peers. The norms youth perceive in the context of their schools also provide important information regarding the degree to which friendships across group lines are deemed valuable

“It is not enough to simply put children from different backgrounds in the same space and say, ‘Play!’ We need to support them in building friendships across differences. The social systems that are set up to make us feel we are separate are incredibly strong. We must be intentional if we are to come together.”

—**Lara Mendel**, Co-Founder/Executive Director, The Mosaic Project (Oakland, CA)

“At Community Roots, we have been actively working for years to create spaces for our families where identities can be shared, stories told, and perspectives honored. We find that some of the most important work we can do, particularly in light of the divisiveness we see around us, is to create small intimate spaces where families can get to know one another and spend time with other members of our community. We do this through programs like, but not limited to: Family Art Making, COOKS [a collaborative cooking class], Family Sports Night, Book Clubs, and Discussion Groups. Schools have the capacity to provide the space where, with meaning and intention, communities can be built. Our families are an essential part of that building process and should be considered integral to the overall growth and vibrancy of the community.”

—**Sahba Rohani**, Director of Community Development, Community Roots Charter School (Brooklyn, NY)

or appropriate. When students perceive that teachers and principals support positive cross-ethnic relations, they themselves report greater interest in developing cross-ethnic friendships over time.²⁵ Additionally, the norms students perceive from their peers and classmates can further shape

their interest in cross-ethnic relations; for example, perceiving inclusive norms from peers – that kids from their own racial group would like to become friends with kids from other racial groups – uniquely contributes to their own interest in developing cross-ethnic friendships.²⁶ Together,

Greater contact between different racial and ethnic groups can reduce prejudice and promote more positive intergroup relations

Factors that help to facilitate positive outcomes from intergroup contact:

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1. FOSTERING CROSS-RACIAL FRIENDSHIPS
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2. IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES
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3. PROMOTING SUPPORTIVE NORMS IN SCHOOL AND AMONG PEERS

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“Schools play a significant role in forming cultural norms that help to shape our society. It is not just about academic rigor and achievement—it is about the ideas, values and norms children pick up, and how that will impact the person she or he becomes. These things are perceived by parents to have a profound impact on their children’s level of success and life outcomes.”

—**Christie Huck**, Executive Director, City Garden Montessori (St. Louis, MO)

these findings suggest that youth may be more willing to engage in contact with other racial groups – and to experience the kinds of transformations described above corresponding with greater contact experience – the more they perceive support for cross-racial contact in their school environments.

Other research indicates that youth gain additional information about prevailing social norms through observing the behaviors and interactions of others.²⁷ For instance, youth may observe how people from different racial and ethnic groups interact with each other in their classrooms and schools, as well as in their communities and in the media.²⁸ Research shows that, even when they do not have direct contact experience with other groups, simply knowing that their same-race peers and classmates have cross-race friends can improve intergroup attitudes and encourage youth to express more interest in intergroup contact.²⁹ This finding reveals that benefits of racial integration can be achieved both when children themselves develop cross-race friendships, and when they observe others' cross-race friendships in their social environments.

Why Is Intergroup Contact So Important For Youth?

Providing youth with opportunities to experience meaningful intergroup contact is especially important because children's early life experiences can have long-term consequences for their developing intergroup attitudes and beliefs.³⁰ Indeed, once formed, attitudes and beliefs about other groups may become harder to change as children grow older.³¹ Additional research suggests that White people who report having had contact with Black people during their childhoods report less racial prejudice as adults.³² Longitudinal studies with White children and adolescents also show that greater numbers of cross-race friendships predict more positive attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities over time.³³

Some of the greatest long-term benefits of intergroup contact have been identified through studies of youth in integrated school environments. Youth from different backgrounds who learn in racially and ethnically diverse schools report greater interest in living and working in racially

“During and after the Ferguson uprising in 2014, people in St. Louis were reeling. Ferguson sparked more discussion about race than I ever thought was possible in St. Louis—a place of deep segregation and inequity, and where race and racism were rarely publicly acknowledged. At City Garden, we had been working to actively acknowledge racism and its impacts for several years. I remember talking with some of our junior high students during that time, all of whom were scared and had lots of questions about what was happening. All of these children had been in our integrated school environment since kindergarten or first grade, and they knew one another like family. The foundation of their friendships helped them to understand one another's experiences and feelings in a profound way. Our White students were able to feel the genuine terror and heartbreak that our Black students were feeling, and our Black students were able to see our White students as real people who are struggling to understand their racial history and how to work for positive change.”

—Christie Huck, City Garden Montessori

and ethnically diverse environments when they become adults,³⁴ and are more likely to choose to live and work in integrated spaces later in life.³⁵ For Black students, attending an integrated school often provides access to new information and opportunities, which can positively impact their educational aspirations and expectations, as well as their educational and occupational attainment.³⁶ By contrast, experiencing racial isolation in school

settings may limit opportunities for youth to test beliefs about anticipated hostility in their relations with people from other racial groups,³⁷ contributing to continued racial isolation and undermining efforts to build social cohesion in our multiracial democracy.

Thus, numerous lines of research indicate that the positive effects of intergroup contact reach far



Contact's crucial role in transforming our responses toward other groups

- REDUCING ANXIETY ABOUT DIFFERENCE**
- BUILDING CAPACITY FOR EMPATHY & CARING ABOUT OTHERS**
- DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES**
- CATALYZING SOCIAL CHANGE**

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"I had always honored diversity and thought that prejudice was wrong but I had never really thought about it. I just had more white friends. I just happened to live in a place with more white people. The Mosaic Project made me realize that this was not just a coincidence."

—10 year-old Mosaic Project participant

beyond its role in prejudice reduction; in a number of ways, contact appears to play a crucial role in transforming our emotional and behavioral responses toward other groups.³⁸

Reducing anxiety about difference. Put simply, the more we have contact with members of other groups, the less anxious we feel in relation to them.³⁹ Longitudinal survey studies in the U.S., Europe, and South Africa with high school and university students show that positive contact between students from different racial and ethnic groups predicts lower levels of anxiety in relations with them. This effect is important because as we feel less anxious in relation to other groups, we become less prone to stereotyping them⁴⁰ and more willing to reach out across group boundaries and interact with them.⁴¹

Building capacity for empathy and caring about others. Research also shows that having greater contact with other groups can enhance our willingness and/or ability to empathize with them.⁴² Emotion-based aspects of empathy involve concern for others and compassion regarding what they experience.⁴³ Both longitudinal and meta-analytic studies indicate that empathy toward other racial groups can be nurtured through intergroup contact, and that its ability to build empathy helps to explain why contact contributes to reducing racial prejudice.⁴⁴ As people develop relationships

with members of other groups, and begin to feel more psychologically connected to them, they often come to see the plight and experiences of members of those groups as increasingly relevant to their own lives.⁴⁵ Thus, the more that youth experience contact with diverse others, the more they can grow accustomed to practicing empathy and broadening their circles of moral concern.⁴⁶

Developing leadership competencies. Contact between groups can also help to prepare youth for collaboration and leadership across lines of difference. According to the National Research Council, students need three different types of knowledge and skills – cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal – to successfully navigate the learning tasks of school and the unpredictable multilayered challenges of life beyond school.⁴⁷ From business leaders to psychologists, many have argued that the experience of living and learning within a racially diverse environment is critical to developing the individual leadership competencies prized by employers and necessary for effective civic engagement.⁴⁸ People who attend racially diverse colleges are considered valuable assets to organizations, because they are likely to possess greater ability to work well with diverse others, understand others' needs, facilitate creative approaches to problem-solving, and to contribute to positive work environments through reducing incidents of discrimination.⁴⁹ Research has shown

“For students, these discussions (about race) come naturally because they have been having them since kindergarten. At four and five years old, they learn about one another’s families, talk about the differences they see, and reflect on the similarities that make them all human. They are learning to build trust through their conversations about their identities and the way that they problem solve by hearing one another’s perspectives. By second grade, the trust has deepened and they have internalized what it means to be an ally and practice the language of speaking up for someone else.”

—Sahba Rohani, Community Roots Charter School

particular benefits of cross-cultural and leadership competencies among White students who attend colleges with positive racial climates and racially diverse student bodies.⁵⁰

Catalyzing social change. Moreover, contact between groups has the potential to cultivate the seeds of social change, particularly among members of historically advantaged racial groups. In the U.S., longitudinal research shows that greater numbers of inter-racial friendships predict Whites' increasing support for affirmative action over time,⁵¹ and having in-depth conversations with a person of color can enhance Whites' willingness to acknowledge racial privilege.⁵² Multiple studies have also shown that White Americans who report close friendships with Black Americans not only report more empathy regarding what Black people experience in the U.S., and more anger regarding how Black people in the U.S. are treated, but also report greater interest and participation in protests for racial equality and justice.⁵³

Implications

Taken together, the social science evidence demonstrates that greater contact between groups predicts lower racial prejudice and many other positive intergroup outcomes. Racially integrated schools and classrooms can play crucial roles in promoting positive effects of intergroup contact, by

providing opportunities for children from different groups to interact and become friends, and by establishing norms that support diversity and inclusion across groups.

Much like the social scientists who advocated for integrated schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, we believe that interracial contact between youth in integrated schools is critical to their social development, and to fostering a just and vibrant nation. Indeed, as Michael Rebell notes, "In light of the rapid demographic changes that are taking place in our schools and in the society at large, the future of our democratic system truly will be at risk if large segments of the population continue to be treated unequally and do not feel that they are part of a common culture and share a common destiny."⁵⁴ When designed thoughtfully and intentionally, racially integrated schools and classrooms can create the relational environments that prepare students to navigate racial difference, and to thrive in and positively contribute to a multiracial society.

Schools have important roles to play in shaping the educational contexts in which students' contact experiences occur. Thus, we encourage policymakers and education leaders to: **Ensure that policies and practices make integrated classrooms and high-quality intergroup contact easier to achieve.** Plenty of structures reinforce racial and socioeconomic

"Our students are keen observers of the world around them, and just hearing one student walk into their seventh grade math class and comment, 'Where did all the white students go?' tells us we need to do something different. Our job is to hold high expectations for all students and we undermine that as soon as we start to use a few data points to make decisions about students' abilities that then set their course in schooling for the foreseeable future. We have both the responsibility and the ability to do better by all of our students."

—Anda Adams, Ed.L.D., Cambridge Public Schools

segregation between communities, schools and classrooms,⁵⁵ limiting both the frequency and quality of intergroup contact students can experience. At the federal, state and district levels, these structures can include how school zone and district boundaries are drawn, narrow definitions of school quality, and a lack of interventions to support racial diversity, which can exacerbate racial segregation and the disparate educational experiences for youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.⁵⁶ At the school level, practices like tracking that separate students into different groups based on academic performance can lead to racial isolation across classrooms.⁵⁷ Viewing education policies and practices through the lens of intergroup contact research may help to break down these barriers, by shifting how school enrollment and student assignment policies are designed, both within and between schools, and by redefining what outcomes are valued by schools.⁵⁸

Prioritize racially integrated classrooms and high-quality intergroup contact within the processes of teaching and learning. Clearly, dismantling the effects of racial segregation and fostering positive intergroup contact cannot be solely the purview of schools. Yet, by recognizing that racially integrated classrooms are valuable aspects of the learning environment, schools can prepare teachers and school leaders to realize high-quality intergroup contact as part of their practice and encourage families and community stakeholders to be active partners in the work of building inclusive educational environments.

Educators, communities, and students can work together to develop a shared vision of racially integrated schools in order to advocate for the resources and school-level conditions needed to support that vision.

Our choices 64 years ago were clear, and are clearer now going forward as our nation faces rapidly shifting demographics and rising social tensions. Public schools remain one of the few social institutions that have the potential to bring students together across racial and ethnic lines.⁵⁹ Guided by scientific research and civic imperatives, we can utilize our public education system to build bridges and knock down the barriers that divide youth from diverse backgrounds in our classrooms and schools.

“I am convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don’t know each other, and they don’t know each other because they don’t communicate with each other, and they don’t communicate with each other because they are separated from each other”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking at Cornell College, Iowa, 1962

Author Bios

Linda R. Tropp, Ph.D., is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. For more than two decades, Dr. Tropp has studied relations between racial and ethnic groups and worked with national organizations to promote racial integration and equity in U.S. schools.

Suchi Saxena, Ed.L.D. is an education consultant working in collaboration with leading national organizations to catalyze leadership and funding towards realizing diverse, equitable and inclusive schools. Dr. Saxena is committed to ensuring that all kids thrive, and to driving equity and innovation across the American education sector.

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Additional Resources:**Everyday Democracy**

<https://www.everyday-democracy.org/>

Ideas and tools for community engagement and change

The Jigsaw Classroom

<https://www.jigsaw.org/>

Provides steps for implementing cooperative learning strategies in the classroom

The Mosaic Project

<https://mosaicproject.org/>

Provides trainings in diversity and inclusion, team building, and effective communication

The Public Good

<http://www.tc.columbia.edu/thepublicgood/>

Helping schools tap into the educational and social benefits of diversity

Roots ConnectED

<http://www.rootsconnected.org/>

Sharing practices in inclusion and integration through workshops and consulting

Teaching Tolerance

<https://www.tolerance.org/>

Educating for democracy with world-class materials and a community dedicated to diversity, equity and justice.

***The National Coalition
on
School Diversity***

The National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSd) is a network of national civil rights organizations, university-based research centers, and state and local coalitions working to expand support for government policies that promote school diversity and reduce racial and economic isolation in elementary and secondary schools. We also support the work of state and local school diversity practitioners. Our work is informed by an advisory panel of scholars and academic researchers whose work relates to issues of equity, diversity, and desegregation/ integration.

For these and other publications and more information on the National Coalition on School Diversity see: www.school-diversity.org

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