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The link between school ethnic composition and civic attitudes.

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Background

The authors of the Cattle Report, which was commissioned by the British Home Office, claimed that ethnically segregated schools have contributed to the racial tensions and disorders in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley and explicitly called for admissions policies with a cap on the proportion of pupils of the same cultural or ethnic background at 75 per cent in schools in multi-cultural areas.

Research Questions

This presentation focuses on the link between classroom ethnic composition and civic attitudes

Methods

A combination of qualitative and multilevel analysis is used to explore the relation between the ethnic composition of classrooms and civic attitudes. The study makes use of the IEA Civic Education dataset and the inequalities dataset.

Frame

Putnam (2007) has observed that two contrasting theoretical perspectives apply when investigating the impact of ethno-racial diversity on civic attitudes: the conflict and the contact perspective. In the conflict perspective, the relative size of the minority group (or groups) is crucial. The larger this size, the more members of the dominant group will feel threatened, the tighter will be their in-group bonding and the more prejudiced they will become vis-à-vis the minority group(s) (Quinlan, 1995). According to Blalock (1967), this regularity applies because a growing share of minority groups in the population increases the competition over scarce resources between groups and gives minority groups more opportunities to mobilize politically and challenge the privileges of the dominant group. By implication, hostility to out-groups should be minimal in homogenous settings.

By contrast, the contact perspective postulates that isolation breeds stereotypes. Prejudice can be overcome and intercultural understanding can be enhanced if groups mingle and interact. However, inter-group interaction only yields such positive outcomes if it occurs (1) on the basis of equality, (2) in settings of common experiences and common objectives, and (3) on a frequent, lasting and intensive basis (Allport, 1954). If these conditions are not met, inter-racial contact can produce the very opposite of tolerance and racial equality, as is illustrated by the system of Apartheid in post war South Africa.

It could be argued that these conditions apply above all in the micro environment of the classroom or school. In a diverse class pupils of different ethnic groups cannot avoid interaction on a daily basis, are equal in status (at least nominally) and share the same school experience. Thus, we would expect the contact perspective to receive much support from micro-level studies in educational settings.

This presentation will assess the explanatory power of both perspectives by confronting them with empirical data.

Research findings

The presentation will focus on England, Germany and Sweden. We found a positive effect of classroom diversity on ethnic tolerance in Sweden and Germany, which is in agreement with the contact perspective on inter-ethnic relations. In England, however, no effect was found. More generally the effect of diversity was found to vary substantially across the three outcomes of interest and the three countries examined

References

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