

LLAKES Research Paper 4: Briefing Summary

Title: Classroom Diversity and its Relation to Tolerance, Trust and Participation in England, Sweden and Germany

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Brief outline of subject and context:

The belief in educational circles is widespread that ethnically mixed schools contribute to inter-ethnic tolerance and community cohesion by making sustained interethnic contact possible. This belief certainly motivated the committee chaired by Ted Cattle, who investigated the causes of the racial disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, to explicitly call for admission policies resulting in schools with a mixed ethnic intake. However, research from a variety of national contexts has shown that interethnic contact does not always result in more tolerant attitudes, more trust and more participation. This research explores the relation between classroom ethno-racial diversity and civic attitudes in England, Sweden and Germany using data from the IEA Civic Education Study among 14-year olds.

Key findings:

- In Germany and Sweden native majority children are indeed more tolerant the more ethnically diverse their classrooms are. In England, however, there is no relation between classroom diversity and ethnic tolerance.
- In England there is a negative relation between the average civic competence of ethnic minority children and the ethnic tolerance of their white classmates. In other words, the more competent ethnic minority children are the less tolerant their white classmates are.
- Neither native majority nor minority children are more trusting in more diverse classrooms. In Germany the native majority children are even less trusting in more diverse classrooms.
- Only in Sweden is classroom diversity positively related to participation.

Major implications:

- Classroom diversity is not related in the same way to different civic attitudes. What may be good for tolerance is thus not necessarily good for trust and participation;
- The relation of classroom diversity to civic attitudes differs across countries. This suggests that country-specific factors mediate the impact of classroom diversity. What works in one country may therefore not work in another country.
- The negative relation between minority competence and majority tolerance casts doubt on the concept of tolerance. If the majority can only tolerate and accept ethnic minorities as long as they stay in a subordinate position, then this majority 'tolerance' needs to be critically reviewed. The challenge is to develop a kind of tolerance that is compatible with the principle that British people whatever their background are all full members of the nation and deserve equal treatment.

Approach/Research Methodology:

The research analysed data of the IEA Civic Education Study (Cived). This study consists of a large scale survey conducted in April 1999 among a sample of 90,000 14-year-olds in 28 countries worldwide. In each country 120-200 schools were selected. In these schools the students of one classroom were interviewed. This nested design allows researchers to explore both conditions of the school and of the classroom (such as ethnic diversity) on the one hand and characteristics of individuals (such as social background and gender) on the other. The national samples of England, Sweden and Germany were selected for the research. These samples were composed, respectively, of 3043, 3073 and 3700 students selected in 128, 138 and 169 schools (i.e. classrooms). The research made use of multilevel analysis to explore the relation between classroom diversity on the one hand and ethnic tolerance, trust and participation on the other.

Findings/results/outputs of research

Three broad conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, advocates of desegregation will be pleased to hear that there is some support for the idea that inter-ethnic contact enhances tolerance. Ethnic majority students in Germany and Sweden turned out to have significantly more tolerant views on immigrants the more diverse their classrooms were, controlling for all relevant individual and classroom conditions. This is broadly in line with American research showing that desegregation helps to combat racial prejudice among whites.

Still, the degree of support for the contact perspective is perhaps disappointing if one considers that the classroom, as the micro-environment in which the effect of diversity was assessed, meets all the conditions contact theory holds to be crucial for interethnic contact to have positive effects: in classrooms pupils share common experiences and interact as equals on a sustained and daily basis. However, aside from its positive effect on ethnic tolerance in the two aforementioned countries, diversity was found to be not related or negatively related to trust, and showed a positive link with participation in one country (Sweden) only.

This brings us to the second overall conclusion: the effect of diversity differs markedly not only across civic outcomes but also across countries. In other words, any relationship found between diversity and some civic outcome in America need not apply in other western states, nor can it be assumed that diversity is related in the same way across different civic outcomes within one country.

Particularly striking in our study was the non-relationship between diversity and ethnic tolerance in England, which contrasted sharply with the positive relationship observed in Germany and Sweden. We postulated that the cross-country difference in the relation between diversity and ethnic tolerance *among white students* might be linked to the social status and competences of ethnic minorities. In England the status and competence gap between the white majority and ethnic minorities is small by comparison to Germany and Sweden. Because of this white British students possibly experienced more competitive anxiety (expressed as lower tolerance levels) than their ethnic German and ethnic Swedish peers. The anxiety, moreover, might become more intense the more diverse the classrooms they were enrolled in become. This interpretation would be in agreement with the theory that inter-ethnic contact can actually result in conflict if the majority sees the minority as a threat. Consistent with this perspective we found a significant negative relationship between the tolerance levels of white British students and the average civic competence of ethnic minority students. This finding further suggests that the ethnic tolerance of the majority group is only enhanced by diverse classrooms as long as ethnic minorities are in a subordinate position. As soon as minorities assert themselves and become as competent as the majority, the latter may well become more defensive and intolerant.



The full research paper may be downloaded from www.llakes.org

Information about LLAKES:

The Lifelong Learning in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) Research Centre is funded by the ESRC, and is led by Professor Andy Green. The Centre investigates the roles of lifelong learning both in promoting economic competitiveness and social cohesion, and in mediating the interactions between the two domains. Key areas of research include:

- i) the social and cultural foundations of learning, knowledge production and transfer, and innovation, within the context of a changing economy, and
- ii) the effects of knowledge and skill distribution on income equality, social cohesion and competitiveness.

LLAKES has a programme of inter-disciplinary and mixed method research which addresses these issues at the level of the individual life course, through studies of city-regions and sectors in the UK, and through comparative analysis across OECD countries. The Centre's research is organised around three strands:

- Strand 1, on 'Models of Lifelong Learning and the Knowledge Society,' is led by Germ Janmaat and investigates the impact of lifelong learning systems on economic competitiveness and social cohesion at the national level;
- Strand 2, on 'Regenerating City-Regions: Learning Environments, Knowledge Transfer and Innovative Pedagogy' is led by Lorna Unwin and focuses on communities and sectors;
- Strand 3, on 'Life Chances and Learning throughout the Life Course' is led by Karen Evans and uses longitudinal data to analyse how people manage risk and change at critical points in their learning careers.

The Centre also runs an annual programme of events, including research seminars and conferences.

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Details of the Centre's publications and events programme may be found at www.llakes.org.