From co-presence to integration: exploring processes of intergroup contact within shared classes in Northern Ireland.

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In Northern Ireland, as in other divided societies, social commentators and educationalists have advocated intercultural contact as a means of reducing division and promoting social cohesion through the education system. In this regard, initiatives of two types have been introduced: 1) cross-community contact programmes to facilitate ‘mixing’ between pupils who attend separate denominational schools; and 2) fully integrated schools, established with the aim of educating pupils from Catholic, Protestant and other backgrounds in the same institution. Both approaches are informed by an understanding of intergroup contact theory, which suggests that positive contact with members of a different ethnic or racial group should lead to more positive attitudes towards that group as a whole. While an extensive body of survey and experimental research has demonstrated that contact, particularly via cross-group friendship, has a positive effect on attitudes, much less research has explored how contact develops within desegregated settings. Consequently, relatively little is known of the nature of the contact that occurs, the types of relationship that result, and the features of the contact situation that facilitate or impede positive interaction.

This paper seeks to address this gap by reporting the findings of a qualitative study of two shared education projects in Northern Ireland. A recent development, shared education involves collaboration between separate denominational schools to provide joint classes on a regular basis, with the aims of extending the curriculum and creating opportunities for cross-group interaction among students. Using data gathered through group interviews with 60 pupils (ages 14-18), interviews with seven teachers, and classroom observations, this paper explores processes of contact between Catholic and Protestant pupils in shared classes, paying particular attention to the dynamic between the contact situation and pupils’ interactions. The research identifies a number of factors that influence the nature and extent of interaction, such as the composition of the class and the teaching style, and considers the effect of these on the development of relationships. Arguing that the delivery of shared classes tends to prioritise educational imperatives over the promotion of contact, the paper also considers potential modifications to shared education programmes, and to educational policy, to enable both educational and social outcomes to be achieved.