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The Role of School Context in Adolescents’ Attitudes Towards Immigrants and Inter-ethnic Friendships

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The Role of School Context in Adolescents’ Attitudes Towards Immigrants and Inter-Ethnic Friendships

In today’s world, societies are becoming increasingly diverse due to the large number of people migrating to places where they hope to find jobs, security, and opportunities that are not available in their home country. As of 2015, 244 million people lived in a country other than where they were born (United Nations, 2016). Sweden receives its own share of people in the global shift of populations. In 2015, over 162 thousand people applied to obtain refugee status in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2016). Currently, 1.6 million people living in Sweden were born in another country (SCB, 2016), and make up more than 15% of the overall population. The proportion of people of immigrant origin increases to 27% after including children born in Sweden to foreign-born parents (SCB, 2016).

Increasing migration brings its own opportunities and challenges. Immigrants may contribute to the growth and sustainability of the economy. A recent report from the Swedish Employment Agency states that Sweden should continue to accept a large number of immigrants to prevent shortages on the labor market (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2015). On the other hand, ethnic segregation and social integration remain problematic. Negative views on immigrants and increasingly vocalized anti-immigrant ideas are among the major barriers for immigrants to feel welcomed and accepted, and motivated to be part of society (Bayram Özdemir, Özdemir, & Stattin, 2016a). There has been an increase in anti-immigrant political views and ethnically motivated hate crimes in recent years (BRÄ, 2013). Thus, there is a need to counteract negative opinions and promote positive inter-ethnic interactions. But, the question is how?

The answer to this question lies partially in the context where young people develop their attitudes towards “others”. The long tradition of research into where children and youth develop
their opinions about other people from different cultural, religious, and ethnic groups emphasizes the family, the peer group, the school, and society at large as important contexts (e.g., Aboud & Amato, 2001; Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2014). Among other settings, the school has special importance for the development of young people’s views about differences. Around the world, children and adolescents experience most of their social interactions with other youth, and form their friendships in school. In addition, almost all children in modern societies attend school regardless of whether they are native-born or immigrant, and spend a substantial amount of their active daytime in this context. Accordingly, schools are places where positive opinions and behaviors may systematically be promoted for almost all children.

Recognizing these aspects, the Swedish Parliament assigned schools the task of promoting tolerance towards differences. The Education Act (2010:800) states: “schools should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathize so that no one should be subjected to discrimination or other degrading treatment on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief systems, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment” (Lindström, 2013, p. 29). In short, schools make up the main context where youth’s inter-ethnic attitudes and behaviors can be promoted. However, allocating such an important task to the schools cannot ensure the effectiveness of this parliamentary directive. How schools can achieve the task is a burning question, and, unfortunately, scientific research provides relatively little information about which characteristics of the school context may promote inter-ethnic relationships.

In this chapter, we aim to contribute to understanding of inter-ethnic relationships among youth. Unlike most prior studies, we focus on both inter-ethnic attitudes (specifically, positive attitudes towards immigrants) and friendships simultaneously. We took this approach because
positive attitudes can be considered as a precondition for good inter-ethnic relationships, whereas cross-ethnic friendships are concrete demonstrations of existing relationships. In our analysis of inter-ethnic attitudes and friendships, we focus on two aspects of the school: (1) the school’s ethnic composition (i.e., whether the school has a low or high number of immigrants relative to the approximate representation of immigrants nationwide), and (2) teachers’ initiations of discussions of political issues in the classroom. School ethnic composition is an important indicator of whether students have the opportunity to be in contact with different ethnic groups. Teachers’ initiation of political discussions is a precursor to whether students are exposed to ideas and opinions that are not necessarily in line with what they personally believe in and/or hear from their parents at home. We expect that opportunities to be in contact with immigrant peers and experiencing discussions on Swedish and world politics may promote a positive view of immigrants and the development of inter-ethnic friendships. In sum, we ask two main questions: (1) Does school ethnic composition promote positive attitudes towards immigrants and inter-ethnic friendships? and (2) Do teachers’ initiations of political discussions in the classroom promote positive attitudes towards immigrants and inter-ethnic friendships? We also examine whether the effect of school ethnic composition and teachers’ discussions vary in relation to youth’s age and gender, and their parents’ attitudes towards immigrants.

In the following sections, we first provide an overview of existing knowledge about the associations between features of the school (specifically school ethnic composition, and teachers’ behaviors) and youth’s inter-ethnic attitudes and relationships. Then, we present our own research, aiming to address the questions above. Finally, we discuss our findings with an emphasis on the study’s potential implications for schools.
School Ethnic Composition and Inter-Ethnic Relationships

The demographic characteristics of the school context, specifically the school and classroom ethnic composition, have been the primary focus of previous research on inter-ethnic attitudes (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014). Most of the previous research has tested models based on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis. The contact hypothesis presumes that people tend to develop more positive attitudes towards others when they have opportunities for contact with members of the out-group (compared with those with few opportunities for contact). The basic premise of the contact hypothesis is that people are less positive towards the unknown – the people they do not know.

The studies available on the impact of school and classroom ethnic composition on inter-ethnic attitudes and friendships have come to different conclusions. Specifically, several studies have reported that students in ethnically diverse classrooms have more positive multicultural attitudes (van Geel & Vedder, 2011) and positive out-group evaluations (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2013) than those in less diverse classrooms. Similarly, native children have been found to be more likely to be friends with non-native children (van Houtte & Stevens, 2009) and immigrant children (Schachner et al., 2015; Titzmann, Brenick, & Silbereisen, 2015) than those in immigrant-sparse schools. But, contrary to the findings suggesting a benefit of increased contact, there are a few studies that show school ethnic composition to have contrasting or null effects. For example, Vervoot and colleagues (2011) showed that Dutch adolescents tended to have negative out-group attitudes when they were in a classroom where immigrant students outnumbered native youth. In their cross-national study, focusing on 14 year-old adolescents across 25 countries, including Sweden, Barber and colleagues showed that school ethnic composition was not related to youth’s support for immigrant rights (Barber, Torney-Purta, &
Similarly, Dejaeghere, Hooghe and Claes (2012) reported that school ethnic composition did not impact the development of ethnocentric views (i.e., negative attitudes towards immigrants and diversity) among adolescents in Belgium. Taken together, the findings from studies focusing on the role of school demographic composition are mixed. Also, they are not always in line with the contact hypothesis. These mixed findings may be related to overlooking the possible interactions between school ethnic composition and youth’s individual characteristics (e.g., age and gender) and family characteristics (e.g., parents’ inter-ethnic attitudes). In any case, the current studies do not provide a clear understanding of how these different factors work together and influence inter-ethnic relationships. In this chapter, we aim to address this gap in knowledge.

**Teachers’ Role in Inter-Ethnic Relationships**

Teachers generally have more opportunities to monitor interactions among students than other adults. Thus, they have the potential to supervise and influence youth’s interactions with each other. They can be a role model for students, promote openness to diversity through discussions in the classroom, and integrate strategies to promote interactions among students of different ethnic backgrounds into their educational approach. Supporting these arguments, Gniewosz and Noack (2008) found that native German students who were encouraged to express their opinions by teachers were more tolerant towards immigrants. Similarly, Verkuyten and colleagues showed that Dutch students whose teachers emphasized equality and diversity in the classroom, or who discussed racial issues, cultural differences and similarities, were less biased in their evaluations of immigrant (compared with native) peers (Kinket & Verkuyten, 1999; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001). Similar findings have also been reported in large-scale cross-national
studies. For example, a large study of a sample of over 85 thousand students from 25 countries, including Sweden, reported that a classroom climate for open discussion promoted support for immigrant rights among adolescents (Barber, Torney-Purta, & Fennelly, 2010). These findings have been further strengthened by experimental studies. Specifically, an intervention study showed that guiding students to focus on the internal qualities of a person rather than racial differences reduces prejudiced attitudes over time (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999). In sum, these studies suggest that teachers may promote the development of positive attitudes towards immigrants by discussing issues related to diversity and by creating an open classroom climate where students can express their own views.

Nevertheless, there are some important limitations to the current research. First, there has been very little, if not no, focus on whether teachers influence the formation of inter-ethnic friendships. Formation of friendships among native and immigrant youth can be considered as an important indicator of social integration. And, another important gap in the literature is related to whether the impact of teachers’ behaviors is conditional on student characteristics. For example, adolescents may interpret teachers’ messages about diversity differently depending on what they already think and know about “others” (Bigler, 1999). Teachers’ messages may either confirm or challenge existing out-group images. Although the current evidence generally suggests that teachers’ behaviors may promote inter-ethnic attitudes, their role cannot be understood without taking other factors into account. Nevertheless, to date, no study has examined the role of teachers in promoting inter-ethnic relationships while considering various youth characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and parental inter-ethnic attitudes).

**Research questions**
In this chapter, we focus on both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of inter-ethnic relationships. Regarding the attitudinal aspect, we focus on the positive attitudes of Swedish youth towards immigrants. As for the behavioral aspect, we focus on Swedish youth’s cross-ethnic friendships (i.e., having a friend with an immigrant background in the school peer group). We aim to answer the following three questions regarding inter-ethnic relationships:

1. Does school ethnic composition play a role in Swedish youth’s attitudes towards immigrants and their inter-ethnic friendships?
2. Do teachers’ discussions of political issues have any effect on Swedish youth’s attitudes towards immigrants and inter-ethnic friendships?
3. Does the effect of school ethnic composition and teachers’ discussions of politics vary in relation to youth’s characteristics (age, gender, and parental inter-ethnic attitudes)?

Methods

Sample

To answer our questions, we analyzed data from the Political Socialization Study (PSP) that was conducted by the Youth & Society (YeS) research group at Örebro University in Sweden. The original research was developed as a longitudinal study to understand the everyday experiences of young people from age 13 to 30 regarding politics, and to understand how their views on society develop over time. The design and goals of the study are described in detail elsewhere (Ammå, Ekström, Kerr & Stattin, 2009). In the current analyses, we focused on adolescents of Swedish origin. We treated having a Swedish origin as being born in Sweden to parents who were also born in Sweden or another Nordic country (i.e., Denmark, Norway,
Finland. We also focused on adolescents who were in grade 7 (around age 13) and grade 10 (around age 16) when the first data were collected. The same adolescents were asked the same set of questions one year later, when they were in grade 8 and grade 11, respectively. Details concerning the analytic sample are provided in Table 1. Overall, 1416 youth participated in the first data collection. One year later, the research team reached a majority of the participants (84%). We analyzed the data to see if any specific group of adolescents was more likely to drop out of the study. The results suggested that only older adolescents were more likely to drop out. In fact, 79% of the youth in the older cohort participated in the second year of the study, compared with 88% of the youth in the younger cohort. There were no other differences between the youth who remained in the study and those who had dropped out by the second year.

As part of the PSP study, parents of the youth participated in the study every other year. Parents of 912 PSP participants were reached (64.4% of the sample). We tested whether the youth whose parents responded to the surveys differed from those whose parents did not respond on all study variables. We found only two differences: the parents of youth who held more positive attitudes towards immigrants were more likely to answer the survey questions, and the parents of youth who had more immigrant friends were less likely to respond to the questions.

**Measures**

**Positive attitudes towards immigrants.** The adolescents, who were aged 13 to 16, were given five statements that reflect positive views about immigrants and asked to indicate whether they completely agreed, agreed, disagreed, or completely disagreed. An example was: “Immigrants should have the same rights as people born in Sweden” The same adolescents were presented with the same statement one year later. This measure had good inter-item reliability at both year 1 (alpha = .80) and year 2 (alpha = .83) of data collection. The same attitude measure
was also used with the parents of the youth in the first year of the study to assess parents’ attitudes towards immigrants. The reliability of the parent-reported measure was comparable to that of the youth measure (alpha = .82).

**School ethnic composition.** The data were collected from 13 schools. Based on the number of students with immigrant background in the overall school population, we grouped the schools into two categories. Following a previous research procedure (Bayram Özdemir, Özdemir, & Stattin, 2016b), we grouped eight schools with less than 20% of students with an immigrant background into one category, and called them “immigrant-sparse” schools (average number of immigrant students: 11%). The second group comprised five schools with more than 20% immigrant students, and these were called "ethnically-mixed” schools (average number of immigrant students: 40%).

**Inter-ethnic friendship.** The youth were asked to list up to eight friends in school. The youth on average listed around 6 friends in year 1 and 5 friends in year 2 of the data collection. Because these nominated friends were also included in the dataset, we created a new variable, which identifies the number of immigrant friends of each of the Swedish youth participating in the study.

**Teachers’ initiations of political discussions.** Students were asked to report on whether their teachers initiated discussions of political issues in class (i.e., There are teachers in my school who try to involve students in discussions about political issues). The students responded to this question on a four-point scale (1=does not apply at all, 2 = does not apply so well, 3 = applies quite well, 4 = applies very well).

Table 1. Sample size, age and gender of the youth in the analytic sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Age and Gender at Year 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>
### Results

**What Do Swedish Youth Think About Immigrants?**

In figures 1 and 2, we present the findings for each of the five attitude items on both data-collection occasions to provide a detailed picture of youth’s attitudes towards immigrants. We also grouped youth’s responses across the five attitude items as “agree” or “disagree” to facilitate the presentation of what adolescents think about immigrants in general.

Our findings show that when all responses across the five attitude items were combined, around 61% of the adolescents in the first year and 65% of the adolescents in the second year indicated positive views on immigrants. However, there were some variations in youth’s opinions depending on the content of the question. For example, at both waves of data collection, more than three-quarters of the adolescents agreed that immigrants should have the same rights as people who were born in Sweden, and that immigrants who fled from problems in their home country should be welcomed to Sweden. By contrast, less than 50% of the adolescents agreed that immigrants are good for the Swedish economy. Despite these variations in opinions regarding each specific issue, it can be concluded that youth, in general, have positive attitudes towards immigrants. Nevertheless, this conclusion should not overshadow the fact that, at the first wave, more than one in five youth disagreed that immigrants should be entitled to the same rights as in Swedish-born citizens, and that Sweden should welcome people who had fled the problems of their home country. One year later, slightly fewer adolescents disagreed with these
statements, but still around one in every five did not hold positive and welcoming attitudes towards immigrants.

![Figure 1. Youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants in year 1 of the PSP study](image)

![Figure 2. Youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants in year 2 of the PSP study](image)

**Do Swedish Youth Make Friends with Immigrants?**

As stated previously, all the participating youth were asked to list up to eight friends in school. The youth on average listed around 6 friends in year 1, and 5 friends in year 2 of data
collection. For the current analysis, we identified the number of nominated friends with immigrant background for each Swedish youth. Our findings showed that 67% of the Swedish adolescents did not have any immigrant friends. Around 22% of the youth had only one immigrant friend, and very few of them (11.2% at year 1 and 9.7% at year 2) had two or more immigrant friends in both years. Overall, we observed that being a friend of an immigrant peer was not very common among Swedish youth.

**Does School Ethnic Composition Matter For Youth’s Inter-Ethnic Relationships?**

We first analyzed the data to examine whether the youth’s attitudes towards immigrants differed according to school ethnic composition. For this purpose, we compared the average positive attitudes of youth in immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools. Our analysis clearly shows that the adolescents attending ethnically-mixed schools had significantly more positive attitudes towards immigrants than those in the immigrant-sparse schools (see Table 2). We also calculated the effect size estimates (Cohen’s $d$) for the differences across these two groups of schools. The effect sizes indicated a moderate effect of school ethnic composition on youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants. In addition, the gap between students attending immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools was larger one year later. In sum, Swedish adolescents who have the opportunity to make contact with many youth of immigrant background in the school context are likely to have more positive views on immigrants than those who have fewer immigrant youth in their schools.

| Table 2. Differences in the youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants across schools of different ethnic composition. |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                           | Immigrant-sparse | Ethnically-mixed | $F$   | $p$          | Cohen’s $d$ effect size |
| Positive attitudes – Year 1 | 2.66 (.69)       | 2.82 (.64)       | 17.22 | < .001      | .25             |
Regarding inter-ethnic friendships, we found similar differences between immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools (see Figure 3). The Swedish students who attended ethnically-mixed schools were more likely to be friends with immigrant students than those who attended immigrant-sparse schools in both the first ($\chi^2(1) = 28.39, p < .001$) and second year of the data collection ($\chi^2(1) = 29.03, p < .001$). Overall, slightly more than 43% of the Swedish youth in ethnically-mixed schools had one or more immigrant friends in both years whereas only 28.4% in year 1 and 26.4% in year 2 had an immigrant friend in immigrant-sparse schools. It should also be noted that over 56% of the youth in ethnically-mixed schools, and more than 71% of the students in immigrant-sparse schools, had no friends of immigrant background. In sum, ethnic composition of the school matters for the formation of inter-ethnic friendship.
So far, the results have suggested that school ethnic composition is related to both positive attitudes towards immigrants, and having friends with immigrant background. However, there is a need for stronger evidence to argue for the importance of school context. Thus, we examined how youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants and inter-ethnic friendships change over time in immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools.

Regarding inter-ethnic attitudes, we found that youth’s attitudes towards immigrants changed differently according to school ethnic composition, $F(1, 1121) = 5.46, p = .02$. Specifically, youth in ethnically-mixed schools significantly increased in their positive attitudes over the one-year period, $F(1, 794) = 14.50, p < .001$, whereas there was no significant change in youth’s already low positive attitudes in immigrant-sparse schools, $F(1, 327) = 3.21, p = .074$ (see Figure 4).

In a similar way, we examined whether there was a change in Swedish youth’s friendships with immigrant peers over time. The results suggested that there was no change in youth’s inter-ethnic friendships over time in either immigrant-sparse or ethnically-mixed schools.
Figure 4. Changes in youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants over two years in immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools.

To further understand the details, we also examined whether school context has a similar influence over time on inter-ethnic attitudes and inter-ethnic friendships for adolescents with differing characteristics. Specifically, we examined the roles of youth’s age and gender, and their parent’s inter-ethnic attitudes. The results show that, over time, changes in youth’s views on immigrants and inter-ethnic friendship did not vary according to their age or gender, or their parents’ opinions about immigrants.

In an additional analysis, we examined whether the effect of school context differs for adolescents with and without any immigrant friends. We found that youth in immigrant-sparse schools increased in their positive attitudes if they had at least one immigrant friend. By contrast, youth in these schools did not change their view if they had no immigrant friend. On the other hand, all youth in the ethnically-mixed schools, regardless of whether they had an immigrant friend or not, increased in their positive attitudes over time (see Table 3). Overall, these findings provide us with evidence suggesting that Swedish students benefit from being in ethnically-
mixed schools and having an immigrant friend (especially in immigrant-sparse schools) in terms of developing more positive attitudes towards immigrants over time.

Table 3. Changes in positive attitudes over time for youth with at least one immigrant friend in immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School ethnic composition</th>
<th>Having at least one immigrant friend</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>F-test of change over time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant-sparse</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>2.79 (.66)</td>
<td>2.87 (.64)</td>
<td>4.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>2.63 (.67)</td>
<td>2.65 (.68)</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnically-mixed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>2.89 (.60)</td>
<td>3.01 (.66)</td>
<td>4.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>2.80 (.65)</td>
<td>2.93 (.66)</td>
<td>9.78**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01.

Do Teachers’ Initiations of Political Discussions Matter For Youth’s Inter-Ethnic Relationships?

Before we tested our main research question, we examined what students reported about their teachers’ initiation of political discussions in the classroom. Overall, only about half of the students (52.4%) reported that their teachers initiated discussions about Swedish and world politics. In order to understand the differences across school contexts, we examined whether teachers in immigrant-sparse and ethnically-mixed schools initiated political discussions at different rates. Overall, there was a significant difference across schools, $\chi^2(1) = 20.14$, p < .001. Specifically, 61.7% of the youth in ethnically-mixed schools reported that their teachers initiated political discussions in class whereas only 48.5% of the youth in immigrant-sparse schools said that their teachers raised political discussions in class (see Figure 5).
Next, we examined whether teacher-initiated political discussions were related to youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants. Our analysis showed that the students whose teachers initiated discussions on political issues reported significantly higher levels of positive attitudes towards immigrants in year 1 compared with those whose teachers did not discuss politics in the classroom, $F(1, 1371) = 65.41, p < .001$. Even though teachers’ initiations of discussion did not boost the positive attitudes of youth over time, we still observed that youth who experienced discussions had more positive attitudes towards immigrants than those who were not exposed to such discussions in year 2, $F(1, 1371) = 65.41, p < .001$. We further examined whether the effect of teacher-initiated discussions on youth’s attitudes vary according to their age or gender, or their parents’ attitudes towards immigrants. We only observed an effect for age. Specifically, older adolescents had more positive attitudes than younger adolescents when their teachers discussed politics in the classroom in both year 1 ($F(1, 1373) = 5.01, p = .025$) and year 2 ($F(1, 1120) = 7.93, p = .005$). Neither of the other factors influenced the association between teacher-initiated discussions and youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants.
We also examined whether teacher-initiated political discussions were related to youth’s inter-ethnic friendships. The results show that the Swedish youth did not differ in number of immigrant friends according to whether their teachers brought up political discussions in the classroom. These findings were replicated at different levels of age, gender, and parents’ attitudes towards immigrants.

Overall, youth whose teachers discuss political issues in the classroom have more positive attitudes towards immigrants than peers who have not experienced such discussions. Nevertheless, teacher-initiated discussions did not make any difference to inter-ethnic friendships.

Discussion

In this chapter, we aim to understand whether two main characteristics of school context can promote Swedish youth’s inter-ethnic relationships. Specifically, we examined the role of school ethnic composition and teacher-initiated political discussions in the classroom on youth’s positive attitudes towards immigrants and inter-ethnic friendships. In line with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), we expected that Swedish youth in ethnically-mixed schools would both have positive attitudes towards immigrants and be friends with peers of immigrant background. Based on the idea that schools, primarily teachers, have the capacity to transmit civic norms and values systematically to young people and provide them with opportunities to adopt democratic principles (Barber, Torney-Purta, & Fennelly, 2010; Flanagan et al., 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002), we expected that youth whose teachers discuss political issues in the classroom would hold a positive view on people with immigrant background and be friends with their immigrant peers. Our findings lend support to our expectations regarding positive attitudes towards immigrants.
Sweden is among the countries that value equality and human rights (World Value Survey, 2015), and has been ranked as the country with the most integration-promoting polices in the world (MIPEX, 2015). Consistently, our findings show that about two-thirds of Swedish youth have positive attitudes towards immigrants in general. However, there were some major variations in youth’s views in the attitudinal domain. For example, a majority of the youth agreed that immigrants should have the same rights as people born in Sweden, and believed in the importance of having welcoming attitudes towards immigrants, especially those who had fled from problems in their home country. Importantly, there was a slight increase in the number of youths holding these positive attitudes over time. This finding could be a reflection of a strong emphasis on equality in society at large (World Value Survey, 2015) as well as in the school system (Education Act, 2010:800). On the other hand, there is apparent disagreement on certain issues. About half of the youth did not agree that immigration might be good for the Swedish economy and the enrichment of the country’s cultural atmosphere. Disagreement about the potential economic contributions of immigrants may be a reflection of increasing public concerns about unemployment and high welfare dependency among foreign-born citizens (Gustafsson, 2011). Overall, these findings suggest that combining views on different issues may result in overlooking variations in youth’s attitudes.

Although Swedish youth generally have a positive view of immigrants, the flip side of the coin should not be overlooked. One-third of youth do not have positive attitudes towards immigrants. Even more importantly, about one in every five youth did not agree with basic tenets from a human-rights perspective and the emphasis on equality in Swedish society by expressing their disagreement with the statement that immigrants should have the same rights as people born in Sweden. In short, the generally positive attitudes of Swedish youth towards immigrants also
have a dark side. The fact that one-third of youth do not have a positive view of immigrants should be taken seriously in both research and policy.

One important aspect of this chapter is its simultaneous focus on inter-ethnic attitudes and friendships. This approach allowed us to focus on both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of inter-ethnic relationships. Both of these aspects are important for promoting the social integration of people of different background. However, the behavioral aspect, active interaction among people of different backgrounds, is a stronger indicator of social integration than having positive sentiments towards others. Despite the generally positive opinions of Swedish youth about immigrants, two-thirds (or 67%) of the youth in our study did not have a single immigrant friend. A lack of cross-ethnic friendship was more pronounced in immigrant-sparse schools (72%) than ethnically-mixed schools (56%). Even worse, 56% of the youth in ethnically-mixed schools, where on average 40% of the students have immigrant background, did not have a non-Swedish friend. This depicts the presence of socially segregated groups in Swedish schools, which can seriously jeopardize the development of a well-functioning diverse society in the long-term. In these schools, youth may develop stronger in-group favoritism (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001) and prejudice against out-group members. In turn, these negative beliefs may lead to intergroup hostility and engagement in ethnic victimization (Bayram Özdemir, Özdemir, & Stattin, 2016b). If schools are places where youth learn norms of social interaction (van Houtte & Stevens, 2009), we should be concerned that social segregation in schools may be transferred to other settings (such as work life).

A noteworthy finding of the current study is that school ethnic composition matters in terms of what youth think about immigrants and whether they are friends with their immigrant peers. Specifically, we found that Swedish youth in ethnically-mixed schools have more positive
attitudes towards immigrants and more peers of immigrant background than those in immigrant-sparse schools. Importantly, the youth in ethnically-mixed schools became more positive in their attitudes over time, but those in immigrant-sparse schools showed an increase in their positive attitudes only if they had an immigrant friend. The positive longitudinal effect of being in ethnically-mixed schools is the same for youth of different ages and genders, and for youth coming from families with different views of immigrants. Together, these findings suggest that sharing a physical context and having opportunities to interact can promote understanding of others, lead to the development of a positive view of people of different backgrounds, and, in turn, promote social integration.

Another important conclusion to draw from our findings is that teachers’ initiations of political discussions in the classroom play a role in youth’s inter-ethnic attitudes. Youth whose teachers brought up social and political discussions in class consistently showed high levels of positive attitudes towards immigrants compared with those whose teachers did not open-up such discussions. Encouraging students to discuss civic and political issues in the classroom may nurture young people’s civic consciousness (Lenzi et al., 2014) and help them to understand different viewpoints on societal issues, which in turn may change their views on and attitudes towards civic and political issues (Carnegie Corporation & CIRCLE, 2003). However, we should note that around 50% of the adolescents indicated that their teachers do not initiate discussions about politics in the classroom. Such discussions take place more frequently in ethnically-mixed schools than in immigrant-sparse schools. This difference may, at least to some extent, explain our observation of higher levels of positive attitudes in ethnically-mixed schools.

Despite their effect on youth’s positive attitudes, teacher-initiated discussions were found not to play a role in the formation of inter-ethnic friendships. There is one potential explanation
for this observation. Discussions of different perspective may influence how youth think about civic and political matters. However, changing attitudes may not directly be transformed into increased interaction among diverse groups. Teachers may promote the formation of friendships among students of different backgrounds by forming mixed study groups where students can work together, collaborate, and, in turn, have opportunities to learn about their similarities, competencies, and interests. Such a practice may also prevent the development of isolated social networks within classrooms, and exclusion of some youth from peer groups.

What do our findings suggest with regard to improving the inter-ethnic attitudes and friendships of Swedish youth? Being in ethnically-mixed schools is probably a critical factor in promoting inter-ethnic relationships. Nevertheless, neighborhoods are often ethnically segregated in Sweden (Szulkin & Jonsson, 2007), and most students attend the school in or closest to their neighborhood. Such structural barriers may prevent the number of ethnically-mixed schools from increasing. In addition, youth in ethnically-mixed schools may live segregated lives. In fact, even in ethnically-mixed schools, more than half of the Swedish youth in our study did not have any immigrant friend. To overcome these difficulties, some actions within schools could be taken. First, consistent with the current findings, teachers could bring more social and political issues to the attention of students. In these discussions, students may be guided to see the internal qualities of persons rather perceptual differences between them, such as ethnicity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation, to help them become less prejudiced towards others (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999). In addition, teachers could systematically mix up students into groups where they can work on tasks together. Collaboration has long been known to reduce conflict between groups (Sherif et al., 1954). Collaborating to accomplish a common goal can reduce bias against out-group members and lead to the development of a common group identity that is not based on
ethnicity (Dovidio et al., 1997). Such an approach could easily be integrated into day-to-day practices in the classroom, and be applied to extracurricular activities in schools. In addition, such practices may help to diversify students’ social networks in many ways. In sum, schools may assume an important role in helping students develop not only positive views on others but also social interactions with people of different backgrounds. The hope is that the socially integrated climate of the school may eventually be transferred to other settings through the engagement of students in society.
References


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