

Research Underpinning the Linking Process: Creating Confidence in Contact

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The Schools Linking project provides opportunities for *meaningful positive* social contact.

Schools Linking has drawn on psychological research and theory in the design of its programme, to ensure that the project is characterised by meaningful, positive social contact.

Merely bringing children together is not enough...

Psychological research has shown that merely bringing together children from different backgrounds in a room or school is *not enough* to generate meaningful interactions across group lines. We know this from looking around any ethnically, racially or culturally diverse secondary school: self-segregation, where young people are drawn to friendships with children from the same background as them, is the preferred mode. Given the chance, many young people will eschew opportunities to form friendships with young people from different backgrounds to them, and 'stick to their own'. This propensity to form friends with 'people like me' strengthens as young people move through adolescence. But we know that having diverse friendship groups has so many benefits: it is associated with positive attitudes towards diversity, increased prosocial behaviours across group lines, better understanding and more acceptance of difference.

What does research tell us?

Over 60 years of intensive research has identified specific conditions that are required to ensure contact between individuals from different backgrounds has a big impact.

Key research findings and theories are as follows:

1. **Optimal conditions for contact:** Allport (1954) identified key conditions that are essential for optimal intergroup contact: equal status of the groups involved, support from authority figures, the contact situations should involve activities that promote cooperation and a common goal, and there should be opportunities for individuals to form friendships.
2. **Preparation for contact:** More recently researchers have been considering how to best prepare individuals for encounters with others from different backgrounds to them, to ensure the encounter runs smoothly, with maximal impact on attitudes and behaviours of the individuals involved, potentially leading to sustained and high-quality relationships. Interacting with someone from a different background can induce anxiety among individuals, and lead to avoidance behaviours (such as lack of interaction, infrequent eye contact etc). Preparation for future contact situations is essential in order to ensure individuals take up opportunities for diverse social mixing and have positive and meaningful relationships that cross group lines. This is particularly the case for individuals (including children) in low diversity settings with little experience of diversity.

Turner and Cameron (2016) emphasise the importance of ‘confidence in contact’, that is confidence that one can engage in intergroup interactions successfully. Confidence in contact is thought of as a state of readiness for positive contact whereby children have the necessary confidence, skills, beliefs and experience for successful, positive and meaningful intergroup contact. Young people with confidence in contact will, we argue, be more likely to have positive cross-group interactions that turn into high quality cross-group friendships that are maintained over time. Key aspects of confidence in contact are: low anxiety about the interaction, positive expectations about the interaction with the outgroup (i.e. they want to play with me), perceived intergroup similarity, and high self-efficacy for intergroup interactions. Confidence in contact can be developed through learning about the other group in a safe space, increased knowledge of the other group, and increased perception of similarity.

3. **Common ingroup.** Gaertner and colleagues argue that when two (or more) groups come together, resulting attitudes and behaviours towards the other group are likely to be more positive when the individuals perceive themselves as belonging to one common group.
4. **Importance of perceived similarity:** Perceived similarity (and difference) is thought to be a main driver of prejudice in children and push young people to favour members of their own group in terms of sharing resources, attitudes, and friendships choices. Contact is most impactful when differences are examined, and respected, and similarities are explored and emphasised.

The Linking programme delivers good practice on incorporating the above research findings in their **programme structure, content and evaluation.**

Teacher Training:

In order for School Linking to be effective in facilitating positive social contact it is essential that pupils are supported by teachers who are confident in the linking process, knowledgeable about the project, prepared to handle any sensitive topics, and who can provide role models for positive social contact. The Linking Network

training ensures teachers embody these characteristics through extensive and varied training, and a chance for teachers to meet ahead of the School Linking days. We know that contact is more likely to be successful if there is support from authority figures. Psychological research has shown that pupils are sensitive to their teachers biases and racial attitudes, even in their nonverbal behaviour. Linking Network have included teacher training to ensure teacher support (i.e. authority figures) for the linking project is obvious to the children involved.

Programme structure:

A real strength of the Linking Project is its preparation phase, where the students begin to get to know one another through exchanging letters, emails, videos, resources. This low risk form of initial contact enhances students ‘confidence in contact’, meaning when they actually interact with members of the other school, they feel prepared and confident that they can engage in an interaction with someone from the other school successfully. They will expect the other school to want to interact with them, there will be reduced anxiety. The careful choice of activities prior to the

linking allows students to ask questions, challenges misconceptions (e.g. curiosity questions and answers) and emphasises similarities.

The activities that the Schools Linking Network have introduced prior to the first meeting are essential for ensuring positive, meaningful contact at the first meeting and beyond.

Equal status: In order for meaningful and positive interactions to occur, both groups should have equal status. School Linking embeds this principle in their practice in a number of ways. Firstly, both groups practice games and tasks ahead of time to ensure equality in knowledge and expertise. Secondly, the linking occurs at a neutral venue so both groups are guests. Thirdly, teachers meet ahead of time to share information and plan activities so teachers in both groups also have equal status.

Structured & supported interactions. School Linking provides support for teachers in running these events via facilitators, who help run the day, and prepare the activities. This is essential. When schools come together it is essential that teachers are allowed to focus on supporting their pupils and facilitating positive and meaningful interactions.

Programme Content:

The interaction between the pupils is just one element of this project, and it is supported by a number of extension activities that encourage positive attitudes towards diversity (through reading books and poetry about diversity) and allow children to reflect on their experiences,



allowing children to explore perceived differences and similarities. There are also self-reflection tasks, which are important for developing confidence in contact, so that young people can transfer the skills they have developed in this setting, to future diverse situations.

Cooperation and common group: Cooperation and common goals are essential for building positive and meaningful relationships across group lines. This principle is embedded in the content of the Schools Linking programme through the activities and games the children engage in.

Evaluation:

School Linking has strategically embedded evaluation at key points in the linking process. The perspectives of teachers and facilitators are gathered, and these capture the impact of the linking on teachers and pupils. The evaluation taps into the key aspects of confidence in contact, and the characteristics of positive and meaningful contact as outlined above.

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