



Friendship networks of the foreign students in schools of Barcelona: impact of class grouping on intercultural relationships



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 November 2015

Received in revised form 2 August 2016

Accepted 28 August 2016

Keywords:

Intercultural relations

Intercultural contact

Friendship

Education

School organization

Ability levels

Ability groups

Social network analysis

Social integration

School segregation

ABSTRACT

This paper account for the relational dynamics that take place in high schools: the interculturality level in the networks of foreign students. Relational networks are characterized by their composition based on origin, identifying those exclusively consisting of native students, those in which only foreign students interact, and the intercultural networks themselves, where native and foreign students coexist. At this stage, I analyse the organizational factors that impede the integration of immigrant students in relational networks with presence of native students, as well as other factors that support the establishment of such networks. Specifically, the analysis focuses on how the organization of school classrooms impact the establishment of more or less intercultural relational networks. In short, there is one concern that motivate this paper: the existence of school dynamics that enhance ethnic ghettoization within schools and, therefore, impede social integration.

This research includes the analysis of all students enrolled in the last year of compulsory education (16 years-old) of eight high schools in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (for a total of 664 students from 28 classes). The analytical exploitation is based on a quantitative approach and network analysis (UCINET and Netdraw).

Main findings show that the identification of the classrooms with certain ability levels seems to imply a greater barrier between classrooms, which can lead to a greater or lower relational cohesion within the class, according to school organization. By contrast, ability levels do not have a direct impact on the degree of intercultural contact; although they do exert a significant influence, defining the possibilities of contact between groups.

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1. Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century, foreign students went from representing approximately 2.5% of the school population in Catalan schools and institutions to exceeding 15% (Martínez & Albaigés, 2013), creating certain social tensions and attracting the attention of the political decision-makers. In recent years, as a result of the economic crisis, it seems to have been a relaxation in the political and social concerns that were focused to the enrolment of foreign students, mainly due to the drop of students enrolling during advanced courses and the weakening of the enrolment during the course, but also because the focus of attention has shifted to more fundamental issues, such as the reduction of public expenditure

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on education. Nevertheless, the percentage of immigrant students has remained without major changes, so schools and teachers keep working to meet the challenges resulting from this context.

In the academic field, the binomial education/immigration has been dealt with from different perspectives, with different interests and objectives, where studies that explore the processes of integration and social cohesion stand out, which is also the subject of this project.

Social integration requires a real framework of intercultural contact, and is at the high schools where foreign and native teenagers find these common spaces (Munniksma, Verkuyten, Flache, Stark, & Veenstra, 2015; Wood & Sonleitner, 1996). Based on this idea, there are in the social sciences plenty of studies about segregation among schools, driven by the concern for the effects that ghettoization processes have on the coexistence of native and foreign students and, therefore, on social integration.¹ That said, even in heterogeneous schools we find dynamics of social exclusion, because the creation of educational schools where different profiles of students coexist is a necessary, but not sufficient requirement to achieve a more cohesive society. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that the heterogeneity at the school level is transferred to the closest relational networks, i.e., to the peer group to which students adhere to, foreign students in particular. Despite the relevance of this analysis level, research on within-school segregation is less frequent, mainly due to difficulties with data collection.

It is this less crowded space where this research was carried out. It accounts for the relational dynamics that take place within high schools, paying attention to the interculturality level in the friendship networks of foreign students. Specifically, the analysis focuses on how the organization of school groups impact the establishment of more or less intercultural relational networks.

1.1. Friendship relationships during adolescence

The literature has pointed out that students tend to establish longer lasting relationships with those that share same age, sex, ethnicity, behaviour or academic performance, i.e., relationships, especially the stronger ones, occur among individuals who share the same individual characteristics (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1985; Hallinan, 1978; Smollar & Youniss, 1982). Rubin, Chen, Coplan, Buskirk, and Wojslawowicz (2005: 476) state that from an early age «age and sex are important magnets serving to pull children together. In addition, friends tend to be of the same racial and ethnic background. Thus, from an early age, children are attracted to and choose friends who are like themselves in observable characteristics». Or, as Hartup & Abecassis (2002: 291) synthesize, «No evidence exists to suggest that opposites attract».

The search for homogeneity based on race, ethnicity or origin is, undoubtedly, one of the explanatory variables of greater weight while creating friendship relationships. Hewitt (1986) summarizes much of the research on friendship relationships between young people claiming that the main tendency is to choose friends of the same race and to dismiss those of other racial groups. Barnes (1997), in his study on the Australian minorities, adds some further explanations about what Hewitt said, since despite the fact that interethnic relationships are not the most common ones, he detects just a few cases of complete endogamous closure, i.e. few students have relationships exclusively with students of the same ethnic group, which means that interethnic relationships are quite common. More recent studies (Smith & Schneider, 2000), even with some caution, observe an increasing trend among youths living in multicultural context to choose out-group friends.

But, despite intercultural contact being no exception, Kao and Joyner (2004), based on a longitudinal research to understand the characteristics of interethnic friendships, observed that best friends are more likely to be of the same ethnic group, and when this is not true, there is an observed reduction in the number of shared activities, compared with those developed by two members of the same ethnic group. According to the authors «even when youths manage to break racial boundaries in friendship selection, these friendships face greater challenges than do those between individuals of the same race» (Kao & Joyner, 2004: 557).

Despite the weight assigned to homophily based on ethnicity or origin, we should keep in mind the warning of Moody (2001): «since homophily has been identified on multiple dimensions, an observed preference for same-race friends may be spuriously related to other important friendship dimensions, such as socioeconomic status». This means that the criteria of equality on which relationships are based on (socioeconomic status, popularity, academic performance, gender, behaviour) are diverse, so it is possible that the preference for same-race friends decreases once other similarity variables are introduced in the analysis. In addition, as Fernández Enguita and Gaete (2008) state, other variables may affect the configuration of these relationships. For example, the disparity in the size of the ethnic groups also has an important effect on their density and relational closure. The authors detected higher relational densities among foreigners than among natives, result which they attribute to the fact that the group of natives is broader and, therefore, there are more friendship choices. In a similar vein, Bagci, Kumashiro, Smith, Blumberg, and Rutland (2014), in a very complete analysis and after controlling for a number of variables, observe how «the selection of cross-ethnic friends seemed to increase, as the number of available same-ethnic peers decreased». In other words, ethnic diversity has a positive effect on intercultural friendships, in line with intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954).

¹ Following Lozares, Roldán, Verd, Marti, and Molina (2011), I start from the definition of social integration as a result of the social capital linking, i.e., the relational links that bind subjects in hierarchically differentiated groups. In this case, they are the links that bind foreign and native students, understanding that the latter have access to more resources.

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