

# INTERGROUP CONTACT AT SCHOOL AND ITS EFFECT ON THE SOCIAL IMAGE OF THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

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*Intergroup contact theory considers that continuous interactions among members of majority and minority groups will lead to improvement in relationships among them and change in the social image of minority groups. The purpose of this research is to test how school integration politics, based on this theory, influences the social image of handicapped children. A mixed test on stereotypes was applied to a sample of 333 students from schools with and without integration systems. Results show no significant differences with respect to social image of handicapped children in either of the two conditions.*

*La teoría del contacto intergrupal asume que, bajo ciertas circunstancias, las interacciones continuadas entre miembros de grupos mayoritarios y minoritarios producirá un impacto en la mejora de las relaciones entre estos, así como en el cambio de la imagen social de los grupos minoritarios. El propósito de la investigación es, precisamente, comprobar cómo la política de integración escolar fundamentada en la hipótesis del contacto influye en la imagen social de niños con déficits físicos. Con este objeto, aplicamos una prueba mixta de estereotipos a una muestra de 333 alumnos pertenecientes tanto a centros escolares en condiciones de integración escolar como a centros sin dichas condiciones. Los resultados obtenidos no permiten obtener diferencias significativas en la imagen que sobre los deficientes físicos tienen los niños "normales" de ambas condiciones.*

The interest of social scientists in socially relevant topics such as stereotype, prejudice or the social image of minority groups dates from the turn of the century. However, although this interest has been shared by disciplines such as Social and Cognitive Psychology, Sociology and even Political Science, there is still no clear distinction between these concepts, nor an explicit agreement among authors as regards their approach to them, either theoretically or empirically.

One of the simplest and easiest conceptualisations of the stereotype defines it as a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group created and shared within a culture. However, such a definition is limiting, in that it precludes a much wider and richer articulation of the term.

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It is clear that, in spite of the strong criticisms received, most research on the social image of a given category continues to use descriptive procedures similar to those of, for example, Katz and Braly's (1933) *list of attributes* or some derivation of it. Moreover, such studies have focused on ethnic and racial groups (Taylor, Fiske, Close, Anderson and Ruderman, 1975), national or regional groups, (Sangrador, 1981; Rodríguez, Sabucedo and Arce, 1991; Mesa, Huici and Garriga-Trillo, 1993), and gender stereotypes (Moya, 1990; Morales and López, 1993).

However, more important than the methodological factors or categorical restrictions to which these studies are subjected is the close relationship established -conceptually and empirically- between stereotype and prejudice. This relationship -supported by most of the authors- considers prejudices as negative attitudes towards social groups, and stereotypes as beliefs and sets of traits attributed to social groups that accompany these attitudes. In this sense, Allport (1954) considers that stereotypes

have the role of rationalising intergroup prejudices. In the same line are Harding, Proshansky, Kunter and Chein (1969), for whom stereotypes are the cognitive component of a prejudiced attitude.

The effects that the established link between stereotype and prejudice may have on intergroup relationships is not yet clear. Our purpose is to shed some light on this matter, and to study the effect that contact between "normal" and handicapped children in the school context may have on the handicapped child's image.

The majority of social scientists -concerned about this lack of clarity- have indeed directed their efforts towards the search for and analysis of certain techniques allowing the improvement, or at least change, of social interactions between majority and minority groups. Results from some studies indicate that one of the most effective procedures is *intergroup contact*. This technique works on the assumption that if people manage to make more contact and co-operate more with members of minority and discriminated groups, better relationships will be achieved, and, consequently, there will be a reduction of unfavourable prejudices and stereotypes.

This conception, known as the *contact hypothesis*, has been implemented in numerous contexts, such as industry, the army, residential areas and even in schools. However, although in the original hypothesis (Allport, 1954) the conditions for its effectiveness were specified (same status in all group members, institutional support, common objectives among participants, etc. ...), results from its application were not completely satisfactory. The contact technique applied in segregated schools in the late 1960's and early 1970's neither favoured nor increased interpersonal relations between children from different races. As a consequence of these findings, the contact hypothesis was modified in successive revisions. Cook (1962), for instance, added a series of situational and social factors such as, for example, similarity, and norms and attitudes held among members of the exogroup and the endogroup.

During the sixties and seventies numerous authors continued to add new situational and social factors (Cook, 1979; Amir, 1974), and even personal, behavioural and affective factors (Rokeach, 1971; Geartner, 1975). However, it was Yarrow, Campbell and Yarrow who, in

a field study made in 1973, added a new condition just as fundamental as the previous ones. According to these authors, it is necessary to maintain intergroup contact over a long period in order to achieve its consolidation and, hence, to produce changes in attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes towards the exogroup.

It is, then, the findings of research and the continuous changes and revisions in the original contact hypothesis that have led to reflection on the potential repercussions on the handicapped child's image his/her attendance at schools adhering to the Law of School Integration (*Ley de Integración Escolar*), approved in 1985, may imply.

According to the School Integration Bill, pupils with special educational needs must be progressively incorporated into ordinary schools in which are available the necessary human and material resources, as well as trained teachers able to adapt the school's organisation and learning processes to the different rhythms pupils may have (Hegarty, Hodgson and Clunies-Ross, 1988). Thus, an idea of school integration is derived which goes beyond mere physical integration, and intends to eliminate social prejudices and discrimination against physically handicapped children through daily contact between these and "normal" children.

In sum, the goal of the present study is to test the effects of school integration of the physically handicapped on their social image. In particular, we attempt to find out whether contact in the school environment between children with sensorial deficits and "normal" children has any influence on the stereotype of the physically handicapped; that is, on the social image of those children with organic or bodily disorders, such as the blind, the disabled, the deaf, and so on. According to our predictions, it should be expected that the "normal" pupil's stereotype of children with sensorial deficits will be significantly different depending on whether or not they attend schools with a School Integration policy, and also depending on their sex.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

333 pupils from 14 different schools on the island of Tenerife in Spain's Canary Islands formed the sample. 150 went to schools with a School Integration policy and 183 to schools where such a policy did not operate. Mean age was 13.05 years old, and all were taking the

7th-year E.G.B.<sup>1</sup> course. 161 pupils were girls and 172 boys. Number of pupils per classroom was 23.

### **Instruments and procedure**

A mixed test on stereotypes was used, which was comprised of 18 traits and 20 behavioural descriptions (see Appendix 1), all of which referred to the physically handicapped. Subjects were asked to reflect their opinion about handicapped people through those descriptions and traits. They responded to the sentences by describing behaviours on a 1 to 5 scale, with the end values ranging from *absolutely agree* to *absolutely disagree*. Subjects responded *yes* or *no* to the traits. In both cases, sentences and traits, half were positive and the other half negative. Internal consistency rate was 0.61 for sentences and 0.64 for traits.

Descriptions and traits were selected from the results of a normative study made in two schools (one with school integration conditions, the other without). A stereotype test was used with questions such as *What do you think the physically handicapped are like?* and *What do you think people think about the physically handicapped?* In answering these questions they had to use traits and sentences, either positive or negative. To make the questionnaire, we selected from the total of sentences and stereotyped traits those resulting from a frequency count, taking into account three dimensions: *relationship with others, appearance and character, and school activity*.

Once the questionnaire had been drawn up, the next step was to apply it in each of the selected schools. Introduction of researchers and giving of instructions was carried out in classrooms. Time for testing in all the schools in which we worked was approximately one hour.

### **Results**

In order to find out whether there were significant differences in the "normal" children's stereotype of the physically handicapped depending on their attendance or not at School Integration schools and on their sex, we made a difference of means calculation for behavioural descriptions and a difference of percentages calculation for traits.

<sup>1</sup> E.G.B. stands for *Enseñanza General Básica* (Basic General Instruction), which comprises 8 one-year courses of school education.

### **Results on stereotype of the physically handicapped in integration versus non-integration condition**

In the Student's "t" test applied to each of the sentences, no significant differences were found in the image that pupils from integration and non-integration situations had of the physically handicapped. Something similar occurred when we analysed the percentages of subjects responding *yes* in each of the traits. As can be observed in Figure 1 (see Appendix II), in only one of the 18 traits was there a significant difference between pupils in integration and non-integration schools.

As can be seen from Figure 1 (see Appendix II), the

### **APPENDIX I BEHAVIOURAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED**

They share things with others.  
They hold up the normal progress of the class.  
They work well in class.  
They like playing with the others.  
They often get angry with the others.  
They tolerate being made fun of by their schoolmates.  
They use their defects to take advantage of the others.  
They like being with the others.  
They blame the others for their defects.  
They know how to cope with any kind of situation.  
They live in a different world from the rest.  
They always do what the teacher says.  
They evoke pity in the others.  
They like being nice to the others.  
They are made fun of by the others.  
They behave well in class.  
They have no interest in life.  
They have more courage and aspirations than the rest.  
They evoke fear in the others.  
They feel inferior to the rest.

### **TRAITS IN THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED**

Studious	Lazy
Affectionate	Humble
Intelligent	Dirty
Sad	Kind
Careful	Clumsy
Poor/pathetic	Nice
Sensitive	Envious
Ugly	Loving
Sincere	Irritable

trait *sensitive* is significantly different for pupils in contact with physically handicapped children, compared to those who do not have school contact with them ( $z = -6.68$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ). Thus, pupils attending non-integration schools consider that physically handicapped children are more *sensitive* ( $P_{ni} = 80.1\%$ ) -that is, they easily let themselves be ruled by their feelings- in comparison to pupils attending non-integration schools ( $P_{in} = 44.6\%$ ).

#### *Results on stereotype of the physically handicapped in relation to stereotypers' sex*

In contrast to what was previously found, when we took into account sex we found a greater number of significant differences. Specifically, one for the sentences and five for the traits. Thus, as is shown in Figure 2 (see Appendix II), the sentence *the physically handicapped tolerate being made fun of by their schoolmates* was found to be more significant in boys' groups than in girls'. The mean score obtained for this sentence by males in integration and non-integration conditions is significantly different ( $t_{(169)} = -2.13$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ). However, such a difference is not significant in female groups.

Indeed, we can observe in Figure 2 that males attending non-integration schools consider that *the physically handicapped tolerate being made fun of by their schoolmates* ( $M=3.7$ ) more than males attending schools where integration has been introduced ( $M=3.3$ ).

However, although within female groups it is also those belonging to non-integration schools who more strongly support the view that the physically handicapped tolerate being mocked ( $M=3.6$ ), such a score is not significantly removed from that found in the integration context ( $M=3.5$ ).

With respect to traits, we found 5 significant differences between pupils with and without school integration but, as shown in Figure 3 (see Appendix II), only for female groups. Thus, we find that traits such as *studious* ( $Z = -2.95$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ), *affectionate* ( $Z = -2.29$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ) *poor/pathetic* ( $Z = 2.39$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ) *envious* ( $Z = -8.28$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ) and *irritable* ( $Z = 2.15$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ), used to describe the physically handicapped, are perceived significantly differently by female pupils from integration and non-integration schools, while no difference was found between male pupils from the two conditions.

As Figure 3 (see Appendix II) indicates, female pupils not attending schools where there are physically handicapped children consider that the latter are more *studious* ( $P_{ni} = 90.1\%$ ), *affectionate* ( $P_{ni} = 97.6\%$ ) and *envious* ( $P_{ni} = 86.8\%$ ) than do female pupils from integration schools.

However, the opposite occurs with the traits *poor/pathetic* ( $P_{ni} = 26.9\%$ ) and *irritable* ( $P_{ni} = 38.5\%$ ) which female pupils from the integration context more often use to describe their physically handicapped schoolmates.

With respect to males, the percentages obtained for each of these traits are not significantly different in subjects from the integration and non-integration conditions.

## DISCUSSION

The results of our work indicate that contact between handicapped and "normal" children through school integration is not sufficient to modify or alter the social image of the former. These results, somewhat disappointing in terms of the effectiveness of the School Integration policy, coincide with something Allport had already noted in 1954. According to Allport, intergroup contact works under certain circumstances. It is not enough to simply put "handicapped" and "normal" children in the same classroom, much less if they are individuals with a physical handicap, as in our study. The mere fact of sharing the same space, the same teacher, the same time-table, similar school activities and even the same schoolmates is not enough to alter the image held with regard to a minority group. In our case, intergroup contact does not change the image of the physically handicapped: the stereotype was not modified by the fact of having handicapped schoolmates.

Moreover, when we took pupils' sex into account, we did not find any differences or changes in the image or stereotype held of our target group, in either of the two integration conditions. However, in contrast to our work, in a study by Gottlieb and Gottlieb (1977) on stereotypes and attitudes about the mentally and the physically handicapped, it was found, on the one hand, that the physically handicapped are stereotyped more positively than the mentally retarded, and -most importantly- on the other, that girls have more favourable

stereotypes of and attitudes towards handicapped girls than handicapped boys. The same is true in the case of boys' attitudes.

On the other hand, our results contrasted with those from research by Slavin and Madden (1979) and Stephan and Brigham (1985) on the introduction of contact in the school environment, in that they did not confirm the effectiveness shown in those studies. How, then, can we explain the scarcity of the effect that current school integration has on the image of the physically handicapped? We believe that there may be various reasons of a practical nature. Firstly, the conditions required for any contact situation to be effective were not satisfied; for example, equal status between those involved in the contact, its promotion by the authorities, pleasantness of the context, participants pursuing the same goals, etc. Secondly, contact was limited to a very short period. In this sense, research such as Cook's (1979) and Gerard's (1983) on schools with racial segregation suggest that contact situations produce positive effects in the long-term. Thirdly, the deficits suffered by these children (deafness in most cases) are not striking enough to have an effect in their schoolmates' opinion of them. Studies on the "solo status" (Taylor, 1978) would support this idea, since only in the case that the handicapped child stands out from the group would he/she attain the status of a stigmatised minority, necessary for generating a real conflict or an exclusion response from the majority. In this sense, the type of deficit of children attending those schools in which we worked (deafness), did not constitute a sufficiently salient stimulus to create the "solo" character and, hence, to produce such a discrimination process. Fourthly and finally, it is still too early to attempt to evaluate the results of a quite recent integration policy. The Ministry of Education and Science, in its assessment of the Programme of School Integration of the Handicapped, published in 1990, recognises this fact. The results of our study do not suggest that the application of this programme has been an "educational failure", but show that neither has it been as effective as expected. This corroborates what was stated previously: it is necessary for intergroup interaction to take place over a long period for it to be effective.

## APPENDIX II

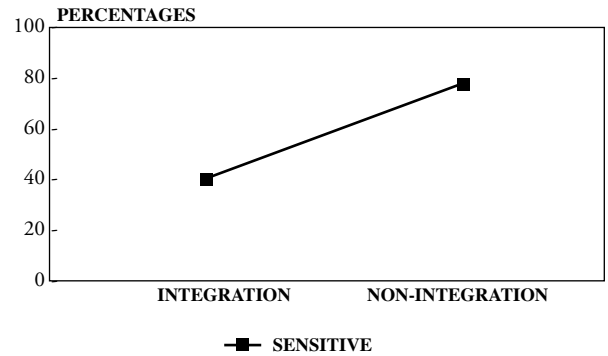


Figure 1: Percentage differences for the integration and non-integration school groups.

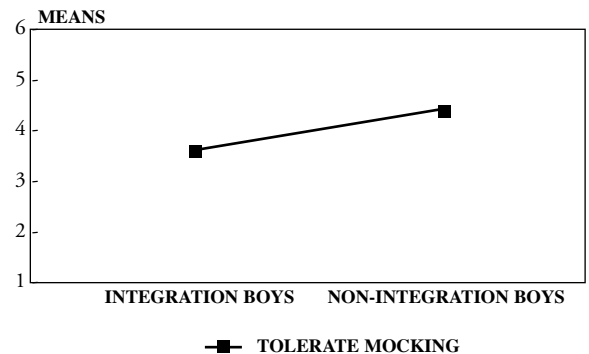


Figure 2: Mean differences for boys in integration and non-integration school groups.

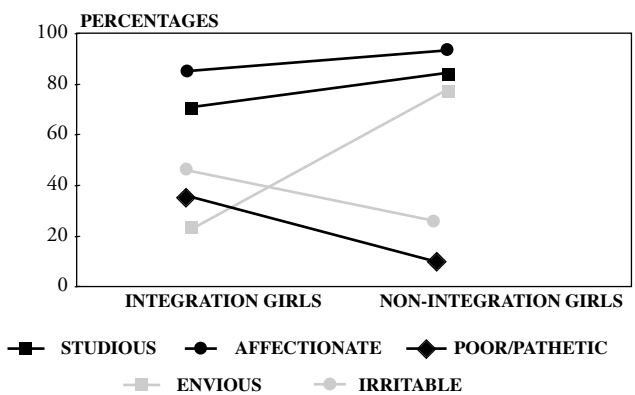


Figure 3: Percentage differences for girls in integration and non-integration school groups.

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