

Children and ‘Others’

Project Aims

In Macedonia, recent initiatives have emphasized the development of civic identities through education. Recent *Helping Kids!* research can help to inform the development and expansion of this programming in schools. Specifically, our research emphasises how identity, including civic-related, may have implications for helping across group lines.

Children begin to recognize names, symbols and social cues at surprisingly early ages. This recognition is shaped by their environment, and has implications for children’s attitudes and behaviours toward people from other groups.

In societies suffering from long lasting conflict and division, this can be vitally important to understand and can affect intergroup relations for years to come.

Helping Kids! explored these questions with 219 children (5-11 years old) from Macedonia. We asked about different symbols and icons commonly accepted as either Macedonian or Albanian. We also asked children about their interactions with, and what they thought about and felt toward children from the other ethnic background.



Intergroup Preferences, Contact and Sharing

In our research in Macedonia, children as young as six showed an awareness of and preference for the symbols of their own ethnic group. For example, children preferred seeing their own ethnic flag by itself compared to both their own and the other group’s flags flown jointly.

When asked about being near children from the other group in a number of different ways, the least preferred options were going to the same school and sitting next to each other.

Yet, more time spent with ‘others’ was associated with a willingness to be close to them (e.g. living in the same town and street, going to, sitting together, being friends). The more comfortable they were with living near children from the ‘other’ background, and the more time spent around ‘others,’ the more stickers participants shared with cartoon children from the other background. The more participants said they had friends and positive experiences with children from the ‘other’ background, the more they said they trusted, liked and wanted to play with them.

MEET THE TEAM

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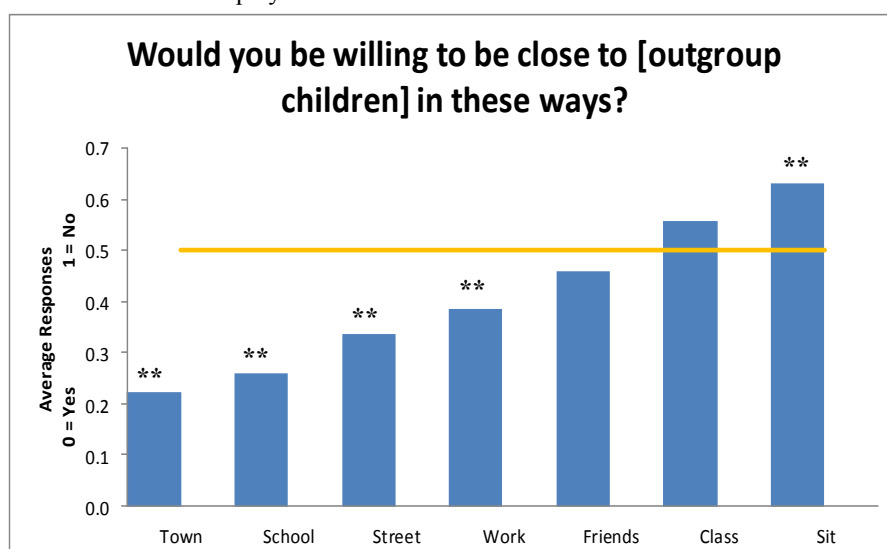
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Adult Interviews

To better understanding the children's responses, we interviewed key stakeholders including practitioners, educators, parents, and NGO workers. From these interviews, a few key topics or themes came to light.

STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES are valuable for children from different backgrounds to have contact with others. Interviewees highlighted that activities should take place in a safe and balanced space. For example, where children have a safe and trustworthy relationship with the adults and the use of languages and resources is balanced between groups.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS are a problematic factor during interethnic contact. Beyond the inability to communicate with each other, the presence or dominance of one language over the other also hinders the creation of quality interethnic relationships. Interviewees noted the importance of schools addressing this concern.

ADULT ROLE MODELS, and the lack thereof, were widely referenced during the interviews. Children often reflect the outlooks and positions of the teachers, parents and other adults around them. Interviewees also discussed wider

societal role models, from the media to politicians. They highlighted the need for structural examples of interethnic equality and collaboration, like the distribution of resources.

"The outcomes of the contact situations depends on the adults and their inter-personal communication. Children need to trust the teachers and the setting to be 'safe' so that positive interethnic communication is facilitated."

Policy Recommendations

- Considering the early ages at which children develop awareness and preference for symbols of their own ethnic group, work on promoting intergroup relations should start as children begin school.
- There is a need for contact programmes that create opportunities for meaningful interaction and give space and impetus for children to form personalized individual relationships (friendships).
- Programmes should build on children's understanding of the symbols of the other group to work towards building mutual acceptance of ethnic symbols and a more inclusive civic identity with symbols acceptable to both groups. Such examples can be promoted through textbooks, school iconography and in contact encounters.
- Teachers and practitioners need support in building "safe" spaces for contact where children all feel that they have the same status and can jointly work towards achieving mutually meaningful goals.
- Support the teachers and the schools staff to serve as positive role models for mutual interactions and promote schools as spaces for enjoyable mutual encounters, rather than spaces for exclusively one group.

Thank You!

"Schools do not reflect our authentic multicultural reality; there is discrepancy between what is served in schools and what we expect from kids when they are adults and active citizens."

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About Helping Kids!



We are continuing to expand and develop our international projects exploring Children's Empathy and Prosocial Behaviours within a Developmental Intergroup Framework; or for short, Helping Kids!

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