

# Intergroup Contacts: From Theory to Practice

By Benoit Côté, Associate Professor

Département de psychologie, Université de Sherbrooke

The main theoretical base for the organization, implementation and evaluation of intergroup twinning is **intergroup contact theory**, which appeared in the 1950s in the United States, and afterwards in a broad range of contexts like Northern Ireland (between Catholics and Protestants), in the Middle East (between Israelis and Palestinians) and in South Africa (between “Whites” and “Blacks”).

Studying the desegregation of schools in the United States, American researchers came up with the first broad outlines of the following hypothesis:

**Under certain favourable conditions, the more contact there is between members of different groups, the more the latter will learn to understand each other and the less discrimination there will be between them.**

According to this theory, which has been tested and validated many times, a series of conditions must be present during intergroup meetings so as not to create negative outcomes like reinforcing stereotypes, prejudices and intergroup discrimination.

## Three classic conditions: Safeguards to prevent twinning from getting out of hand

The members of the two groups must:

- A) perceive that they have a **common goal** that brings them together, that they need to cooperate in order to attain it
- B) be on an equal footing, **have equal status**
- C) be surrounded by people who **value harmonious intergroup relationships**

### A) Sharing a common goal

The first condition for a successful intergroup contact is the members of both groups must have a REAL REASON to be together. “Why have they come together?” “Why should they participate in what the teachers suggest to them?” And in situations of intercommunity tension, “Why extend a hand to those they don’t like?”

It is important to make sure that the members of the two groups perceive that they have a common goal that brings them together, and that they depend on one another; in other words, they need the members of the other group to attain this goal.

In concrete terms, instead of establishing contacts in which the members of the two groups only have to spend time together, as in an outing to a cinema, theatre or *cabane à sucre*, one creates situations in which they need the knowledge or skills of others—for example, their linguistic competency, their knowledge of the city, or music in another language.

It is also essential to avoid assigning tasks that are too small, that do not call for the contribution of all participants. For example, during a treasure hunt, a single member may play all the roles or take on all the tasks (reading signs, taking notes, etc.). The others then tend to remain off to the side and not feel the interest or need to come into contact or interact with others.

### *Cooperation activities*

It is important, of course, to avoid intergroup competition, which is recognized as heightening intercommunity tensions, but to foster cooperation activities.

In concrete terms, young people can have a natural tendency to want to compete with the members of the other group, particularly in sports. This type of situation must be avoided as much as possible, for it can quickly create negative effects. Indeed, whenever there is competition there is a losing team and, of course, disappointed students who may want to even the score. In such cases, there are also viewers whose allegiance goes to one or another of the teams, a situation that can only reinforce distinct identities.

It is preferable to emphasize and plan cooperative activities. If not, there is competition, for example, to win a prize. One must ensure that each team includes members from both groups.

### **B) The perception of equal status**

This condition is very important. It is very difficult to bring together people who feel that they are perceived as “inferior” by the members of the other group. This feeling may lead them to censor themselves or to claim equal rights, instead of collaborating towards a common objective.

Note that it is the perception that counts, not the reality. In factual terms, both groups may be equal when it comes to rights; but if they do not perceive themselves this way, if they feel that there is a difference, this perception then becomes their reality.

### *Languages*

In language exchanges, the status of the languages is what is important. The students must, for example, FEEL that both languages are on an equal footing. Activities then alternate between one language and the other; the teachers speak in both languages and attribute equal importance to each. The final work (texts, songs, sketches, etc.) will be in both languages, in an equitable fashion. In short, both languages must be stressed and recognized as equally beautiful, important and useful.

### *Socioeconomic and regional discrepancies*

There may also be discrepancies between the two groups on the socioeconomic or regional levels, as between people from urban areas and those from the regions. It is in the teachers' interest to grasp these differences and to plan strategies for neutralizing them. A teacher could, for example, ask well-off students to leave their cell phones or MP3 players at home while they are meeting with another less favoured group. Another teacher could stress the regional skills (the ability to drive a snowmobile, for example) that the people from urban areas do not have.

### **C) Valuing harmonious intergroup relationships**

In order to offset peer or family pressure that could, in some cases, breed tension between groups, it is important that those in a position of authority, i.e. the teachers and guides, say explicitly in meetings that the objective of exchanges is to establish harmonious relationships between the two groups.

In concrete terms, at the beginning of each meeting, teachers can reaffirm that their intention is to establish positive relationships between the students of both classes, and that they expect the members of both to conduct themselves in a positive manner.

#### **Anxiety: An inevitable issue to be dealt with**

Over the past 50 years, numerous studies have helped to identify a wide range of conditions conducive or inimical to intergroup meetings. For more details on these studies, please consult the bibliography. They are too long to present here, but one of them is absolutely essential.

#### **The sworn enemy of intergroup meetings: Anxiety**

**Teachers must therefore make it a priority to reduce anxiety to a minimum.**

Research and practical experience have very clearly shown that the level of anxiety is the main obstacle to building bridges between groups. When people are anxious, they tend to be less open to difference, to place more value on what they know, and to take fewer risks. In the context of interlinguistic meetings, **anxiety during the use of the second language** must be the chief concern. Those who FEEL more competent in their second language will take more risks, will interact more with others and, overall, will have more and better quality contacts with the members of the other group.

The teachers must plan their “ice-breaker” activities at the beginning of the meetings, to make the atmosphere more relaxed. **Laughter is the best remedy for anxiety**: it is therefore to the teachers’ advantage to plan for pleasant activities. Moreover, they can **state that it is not serious to make mistakes in one’s second language**, that one must not expect to be perfect before interacting with the members of the other group.

#### **Mechanisms that maximize intergroup meetings**

As mentioned above, many research studies and practical experiences have shed new light on the processes associated with intergroup contacts. Among these, three cognitive mechanisms can be very useful for teachers who want to provide a successful exchange experience for their students.

Three **cognitive mechanisms** that maximize intergroup contacts:

- A) the **personalization** of relations
- B) the emergence of **a common identity** that brings together the participants
- C) **positive feelings** with respect to the other group

It is important to thwart the process of labelling that is, emphasis placed on group belonging that sets the two groups in opposition to one another (for example, belonging to a group of “francophones” or “anglophones.”) To enable the protagonists to sidestep this “opposition,” one either leads them to meet at a personal level or to find a sufficiently inclusive common identity, so that everybody feels that they belong.

### **A) Personalization**

According to this approach, it is fundamental that individuals approach one another from a personal perspective. Thus it is no longer a question of “francophones” or “anglophones,” but of Audrey, Danny, Alice, etc. Students must be encouraged to look beyond the category someone belongs to, and make it a habit to look for the “person” who is standing before them.

In concrete terms, students must have an opportunity to better understand the “others” on a personal basis: who they are, what they like, where they come from, etc. Sufficient time must be set aside to ensure that these meetings will allow for a personal exchange and not only the performance of tasks.

### **B) Common identity** (or supracategorization)

According to this approach, it is inevitable that relationships will be centred, from one day to the next, on belonging to distinct categories. However, it is possible to transform these “us against them” categories into a more inclusive “us.” For example, even if some people are “francophones” and others are “anglophones,” they can all be “Montrealers.”

In the context of exchanges between young people, it seems important that this sense of belonging be neither too concrete nor too abstract. It would be preferable to establish or to reinforce a common meaningful identity for them (as supporters of the Montreal Canadiens hockey team, for example) or close to them (the “All Dressed” team made up of two students from Ms. X’s class and two students from Mr. T’s class).

### **C) Positive feelings**

Finally, in order to change the perceptions that people have of a group, we tend to provide information about its members. For example, we think we can change feelings about immigrants by saying that they have not come here to “steal our jobs” but to stimulate our economy. We note, rather, that the emotions are more effective than cognitions for changing attitudes with respect to individuals. In other words, **it is easier to change the attitudes of a person toward a category of individuals by**

**having that person enjoy a positive experience with these individuals, instead of giving information about the group.** If the contact experience enables students from different groups to laugh together, to have fun and to feel that the “other” is useful, this serves as a springboard for a change of attitude.

Once these feelings have been felt, the principle of “cognitive dissonance” will do the rest of the work. The students will attempt to have cognitions, feelings and behaviours that are consistent with one another. If they develop positive feelings toward the members of the other group, they will potentially change their cognitions and behaviour so that these are consistent with the new feelings.