Diverse Schools in Conflict Settings: Tolerance and Intergroup Interactions in Nigerian Federal Unity Colleges (FUCs)

Marlana Salmon-Letelier, Ed.D. Fellow in International Educational Development
Teachers College, Columbia University

Significance of Study
This research seeks to understand how young people, in the prime of their identity formation (Erikson, 1968), interact within diverse secondary school settings, and the ways in which they shape their identity formation and tolerance levels for better or for worse. Understanding (a) integrated schools in a tense setting like Nigeria with a complex background that affects intergroup tensions and national unity efforts today and (b) how students are influenced within these schools, can lead to the development of more effective school environments and practices related to intergroup integration. This research will also give more insight into diverse schools in conflict settings and those in areas impacted by Islamic extremism.

Research Questions
1. What is the relationship between attending a Federal Unity College (i.e., unity school) and tolerance levels?
2. If there is a relationship, why is there a relationship?

Why Nigeria?
- Largest country in the world with almost equal numbers of Christians and Muslims (Campbell, 2013; Paden, 2008)
- Three majority ethnic groups: Hausa-Fulani (29%), Yoruba (21%), and Igbos (18%) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016)
- Over 250 smaller ethnic groups
- Overlapping economic, regional, and educational inequalities among ethnic and religious groups
- State with little accountability due to dependence on oil revenue
- Deepening ethno-religious tensions (e.g., Boko Haram)
- "Unity"—widely disseminated term

Theoretical Framework
To explore tolerance levels, ethnic identity, and friendship networks within integrated schools, I draw from intergroup contact theory and extended contact hypothesis:
- **Intergroup contact**, such as that within integrated schools, reduces prejudice across groups (Burns, 2012; Ellison & Powers, 1994, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005; Williams, Jr., 1947). However, intergroup contact can only promote positive relations should certain conditions be in place: (1) equal status within the situation, (2) shared goals, (3) intergroup cooperation, and (4) support from authority (Allport, 1954; Kokkonen et al., 2010; Pettigrew, 1998; Thijss & Verkuyten, 2014; Zirkel, 2008).
- **The extended contact hypothesis** expands upon the intergroup contact hypothesis to include social networks. It proposes that knowledge of a close relationship between an in-group and out-group member can increase positive intergroup perceptions among group members who do not necessarily have close intergroup relationships themselves (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). I question the effectiveness of simply putting students together in the same environment and attempt to understand the aspects of this intergroup contact within this unique setting that relate to tolerance levels which I view as positively correlated with healthy social relations.

Data and Methods
Data gathered during May 2016 in eight secondary schools in and around Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria as part of a shorter version of a longer study that will span the 2017-18 school year. The schools included six FUCs (2 mixed male and female; 2 all-female; 2 all-male) and two state secondary schools (mixed male and female).

This **mixed methods study** involved a survey and student interviews:
- The survey was administered to 170 students using paper and pencil. In order to choose the students, I asked academic administrators to send approximately 6-8 first-year, fourth-year, and fifth/sixth-year students of various backgrounds to me. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. In addition to gathering demographic characteristics, the survey included various questions that attempted to measure tolerance levels, friendship networks, and identities (including ethnic, religious, and national).
- I also conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes – 1 hour. These included eight group interviews and ten individual interviews at four of the schools (18 interviews total). These schools included a mixed male and female FUC, all-female FUC, and all-male FUC, and a state secondary school. At each of these schools I conducted two group interviews: one with six first-year students and one with six fifth/sixth-year students. I kept the students separated by year in order to reduce this power dynamic in the group interview. The group interviews included all of the first- and fifth/sixth-year students who took the survey at that school and were willing and able to participate. After the group interview I then chose two students (one first- and one fifth/sixth-year) at the all-female, all-male, and state secondary school and four students from the mixed male and female FUC (one male and female first-year and one male and female fifth/sixth-year).

Analysis of the survey reveals the following:
- Students at unity schools demonstrate higher tolerance levels on average than students at state schools.
- There is also evidence that ethnic identity could be higher, but this needs further exploration.
- Close friendships show segregation among ethnic groups at both unity and state schools.

Results
Analysis of the interviews reveals the following:
- Students at unity schools appear to emphasize ethnic differences more than those at state schools.
- While on-campus interactions are the focus of unity school students, state school students reference off-campus aspects of life.
- Ethnic and religious diversity among friends is contested across students.
- Dormitories and “living together” in unity schools serve as important interethnic and interreligious meeting points for students.

Implications
The findings in this study indicate the complexity of intergroup contact specifically within the school setting. In contrast with intergroup contact theory and the extended contact hypothesis, time together and level of exposure are important to consider in relation to tolerance and intergroup relations. Studies looking at the relationship between (1) dormitory life among secondary school students and (2) intergroup contact outside of the school day within the context of a boarding school on tolerance levels, have not yet been conducted from what I have found. Understanding these aspects of school life could have major implications for the way intergroup contact is addressed within schools, particularly those within conflict and post-conflict settings. These aspects will be central to my future research expanding upon this study.

Contact Information
Marlana Salmon-Letelier
Teachers College, Columbia University
Email: msl2193@tc.columbia.edu

References