The Presence of Contact Conditions in a Magnet School

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“If children of different races and economic and social groups have no opportunity to know each other and to live together in school, they cannot be expected to gain the understanding and mutual respect necessary for the cohesion of our society.”


Introduction

When Milo Sheff took legal action against William O’Neill, the Governor of the State of Connecticut, it was disclosed during the proceedings that a major city’s school system had many inequalities. Some of these inequalities included a high concentration of students “at-risk” of lower educational achievement. In comparison to the opportunities given to students in suburban districts, the “at risk” students in city schools resulted from minimal resources available and the racial, ethnic, and economic isolation of the students. In 1996 the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that children from the inner city were receiving an inadequate education in the public schools. As a result, these children were being denied their right to an equal educational opportunity (Sheff v. O’Neill: Revised Complaint, 2002). It was also accentuated during the events of the court case that to preserve social order and stability schools have to be recognized as an important socializing institution that teach shared values. These shared values are made vulnerable when children attend racially, ethnically, and economically isolated schools.

One effect of the Connecticut Supreme Court case of Sheff v. O’Neill was the implementation of Magnet Schools that were projected to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation by providing voluntary integrated school opportunities to inner-city students. The purpose of these Magnet Schools is to bring together students from districts surrounding the city and build a desegregated environment, thereby reducing racial, ethnic, and economic isolation (Memorandum of Decision, 1999, p. 4). With this
elimination of racial isolation children are able to share their values and foster more positive inter-racial attitudes and relations with peers. The magnet school program accommodates students from PK through Grade 12 and offers a high-quality curriculum that supports educational improvement. After spending some time researching students’ interracial attitudes in city and suburban high schools for my psychology thesis, I thought it would be interesting to research the same issue of interracial attitudes and behaviors in an elementary magnet school environment.

An Elementary Magnet School that follows the philosophy of the Montessori Method promotes the integration of students and reduces racial, ethnic, and economic isolation while basing its educational plan on the self-formation of the child (Lillard, 1996). The Montessori Magnet school in this study is one of the schools brought to the inner city after Sheff v. O’Neill to desegregate the public education system. It has progressed from a small cooperative town program that integrated city and suburban children to a state public magnet school that now merges students from twenty surrounding city districts. Incorporating 282 students from ages 3-12, the Magnet School fosters an environment that is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse where children are given the opportunity to actively learn while being encouraged to explore and self-discover using the Montessori Method of education. Based upon the purpose of the Magnet School this paper will question whether a magnet school environment is effective in fostering positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors.

Desegregation

Desegregation has been a social issue prevalent in America’s education system since the turn of the 20th century when Brown v. Board of Education (1954) ruled that
“separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Stephan, 1980, p. 16). Over the last fifty years there has been a gradual process of desegregating the schools in America and giving every child their right to an equal educational opportunity. In America, education is the fundamental resource that allows one to improve the quality of her life and the old cliché “school will set you free” still rings true for many Americans. Yet desegregated educational institutions are still being criticized for not implementing and maintaining a truly integrated school (Cohen 1980). The issue of whether mere contact through desegregation of social groups is enough to promote a harmonious environment is still under debate. Studies have shown that desegregation alone is not enough to promote the positive interracial attitudes and behaviors that would result in the understanding and mutual respect necessary for the cohesion of society.

Over the last few decades there have been many laws, programs, and institutions established in an attempt to alleviate the segregation problem throughout the United States. It is believed that bringing social groups together and initiating contact that would otherwise be avoided is enough to promote positive interracial attitudes and behaviors. Even though this movement is portrayed as a positive one for isolated social groups, extensive analysis shows that desegregation or contact between social groups is not always successful. Research on desegregation shows that contact alone between different social groups is not sufficient to promote positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors (Allport 1954; Amir 1969). As a consequence values are not being shared that would preserve social order and stability.

The occurrence of mere contact has always been scrutinized by researchers who believe that contact alone is not enough to enhance mutual respect between social groups
and therefore reduce prejudice. However, there are those who believe that mere contact between people or social groups is enough to affect the beliefs one holds about that other person or social group. Yehuda Amir (1969) states the following:

Such a view would maintain that men are basically good and seek understanding and mutual appreciation. If only one had the opportunity to communicate with the others and to appreciate their way of life, understanding and consequently a reduction of prejudice would follow. (p. 320)

Some social organizations base their foundation on the premise that mere contact is enough to produce better attitudes and relations. Such organizations include international exchange programs and international seminars. The Olympic Games, an international institution in its own right, offers endless opportunities for mere contact between different social, racial, and ethnic groups. This institution is seen as an effective organization that appears to produce better attitudes and relations and prevails over prejudice and negative attitudes among its competitors (Amir, 1969).

When social groups find themselves in a more intimate setting that seeks personal contact between members, like a school classroom, mere contact and its effectiveness for producing better attitudes and relations is called into question. Research shows that mere casual contact is not sufficient to change attitudes; the contact must be on a more intimate and personal level in order for more than just positive relations to be made (Miller & Brewer, 1984). The premise behind effective contact experiences involves a more individual and cooperative experience; "one's behavior and attitudes toward members of disliked social category will become more positive after direct interpersonal interaction with them." (Miller & Brewer, 1984, p.2). There have been many theories pertaining to
the most favorable direct interpersonal contact experience that will allow more positive
and less negative interracial attitudes and behaviors to develop (Sherif, 1966). However,
there seems to be a general consensus amongst researchers that certain criteria must be
met in order for positive effects of contact occur. (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998;
Williams 1947 as cited in Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Contact Theory

Gordon Allport (1954) was one of the first authors to address contact theory in his
book, The Nature of Prejudice. In the beginning of his book Allport attends to the issues
of human prejudice and how the term "prejudice" originally meant a favorable or
unfavorable feeling toward something without warrant. Today, a person who has a
negative view of another without just cause is perceived as being prejudiced,

...man has a propensity to prejudice. This propensity lies in his normal and
natural tendency to form generalizations, concepts, categories, whose content
represents an oversimplification of his world of experience. His rational
categories keep close to first-hand experience, but he is able to form irrational
categories just as readily. In these even a kernel of truth may be lacking, for they
can be composed wholly of hearsay evidence, emotional projections, and fantasy.
(p. 27)

It was on the assertion that people have a proclivity to prejudice that Allport hypothesized
the Contact Theory:

Prejudice...may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and
minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if
this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports...and provided it is of a sort
that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between
members of the two groups. (p. 281)

Allport’s research of men in the military and in industrial settings showed that
negative prejudices are reduced only when these certain conditions are met. The
hypothesis asserts that mere-contact is not enough to bring about positive interracial
attitudes and behaviors. The positive effects resulting from contact that foster positive
interracial attitudes and behaviors occur only when certain criteria are met within the
inter-group contact environment. The four criteria include: equal group status within the
situation, common goals, individualized contact, and the support from authorities.

Equal group status within the situation has been claimed to be one of the most
important of Allport’s conditions for positive interracial attitudes and behaviors (Amir;
1969; Pettigrew, 1998). This particular criteria contends that all members of the in-group
“expect and receive equal status in the situation” (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 66). In a
desegregated school environment this means that all students have equal representation
and equal attention from the teacher regardless of what social group they represent before
entering the classroom. Cohen and Lotan (1995) have found that unless status
differences such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class are eradicated in the classroom
setting a student’s learning process can be adversely affected. Slavin (1985) analyzes
cooperative learning as a method that could promote equal status in the classroom.
Cooperative learning methods such as Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD),
Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT) or Team-Assisted Individualization (TAI) have been
found to improve the opportunity for equal status in the classroom, “… cooperative
learning methods create a new basis for perceived similarity among dissimilar students.
The assignment of students to teams automatically gives them a common identity.” (p. 57)

In a classic study by Sherif (1966) involving two groups of boys at a campsite, equal status in a situation proved to be essential for positive attitude changes to occur. In his experiment Sherif intentionally caused hostility between two groups with the expectation that by creating the opportunity for a more personal contact, such as eating lunch together or watching movies, the friction between the two groups would subside to allow for a more egalitarian environment. This proved to be unsuccessful at first and not until the groups were given a challenge to overcome and were forced to work together was common identity or equal status established.

The second contact condition pertinent to improving interracial attitudes and behavior is common goals. There needs to be an active, goal-oriented effort that initiates cooperation between group members (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Pettigrew, 1998; Schofield, 1989). Schofield defines cooperation as “working with others for mutual benefit” (p. 85) and states that cooperation can lead to positive relations between group members. However, there is a consensus among most researchers that cooperation should not entail any form of competition. When cooperation becomes competitive it can inevitably reinforce tensions and have no reversal effects on negative attitudes and behaviors. Johnson, Johnson, and Maruyama (1984) state that collegial cooperative learning is essential to the improvement of interracial attitudes and behaviors, “A cooperative, compared with a competitive or an individualistic, learning situation promotes greater cross-ethnic and cross-handicap interpersonal attraction.” (In Miller & Brewer, 1984, p. 202). Common goals would be present in a school that promotes an
environment where children are given the opportunity to actively learn and which accommodates each student’s special interests and intensive desire to excel in certain academic areas.

The third condition is inter-group cooperation, commonly referred to as individualized contact. This is a condition for contact that promotes intimate personal contact between two individuals. Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) describe inter-group contact as face-to-face interaction between members of clearly distinguishable and defined groups. In order for individualized contact to be effective, the face-to-face interaction must be more than mere glances across a room. Even in an environment that clearly defines the other conditions of Allport’ theory, intolerance of members of other groups can remain rampant if individualized contact is not established (Sherif, 1966).

The individual characteristics of an in-group member have to be perceived on a more intimate level in order for the stereotype to be eliminated,

…[if the contact situation] is of such a nature as to promote association of a sort which reveals enough detail about the member of the disliked group to encourage seeing him as an individual rather than as a person with stereotyped group characteristics.” (p. 97)

It is therefore the quality of the interaction and not the mere interaction itself that is crucial to eliciting more positive interracial attitudes and behaviors.

The final criterion that is essential to Allport’s (1954) contact conditions for improving in-group relations is support from authorities. In the educational institution authority figures include the Principal, the administration, the teachers, the assistant staff, and in most favorable environments the parents of the students. These authority figures
may show support for the institution in different ways but the members of the in-group, the students, must be able to recognize that the support is present. When support from authority figures is apparent then “inter-group contact is more readily accepted and has more positive effects” (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 67). Amir (1969) addresses an example of support from authority and positive attitude change in desegregated housing projects. When people were placed in housing projects that were racially mixed and supported by the official policy of the housing authority, there was evidence of more positive interracial attitudes, and less prejudice and stereotyped opinions among its residents. If students are aware that there is support from authorities within the school then they are likely to engage in behaviors that are more readily accepted and therefore improve their attitudes toward their peers from other races.

Thesis

The achievements of a Magnet school education and its effects on promoting positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors will be analyzed using the Contact Theory introduced by Gordon Allport (1954). Allport’s hypothesis states that mere contact is not enough to bring about positive inter-racial attitudes. Positive effects of contact that would foster positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors occur only when certain criteria are met within the contact environment. The four criteria include: equal group status within a situation, common goals, inter-group cooperation, and support from authorities. Based on these four key conditions I will examine whether the Magnet school classroom encourages positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors. Even though the philosophies of a Magnet school and a Montessori education differ in their interpretation of the
successful education of children, I expect to show that a magnet school is effective in fostering inter-racial attitudes and behaviors.

Method

Participants

After speaking with the Principal of the Montessori Magnet School, I was given permission to do qualitative research on a sample of children in one of the school’s classrooms. The particular classroom in which I was permitted to do the qualitative research was an upper elementary classroom.

The entire sample included 12 students, aged 9-12 years, who attended the Montessori Magnet School. The classroom was comprised of 58% Black students, 33% White students, and 9% Latino students. The gender of the students was not a significant factor for this research and was therefore not included in the profile of the students.

I conducted qualitative research during 1-hour blocks of observation time spanning two days as well as spending additional blocks of time taking notes and collecting relevant information from the Principal and the teachers. In order for contact conditions to be measured and to assess the promotion of positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors, I set out to measure the four criteria from Allport’s Contact Theory on separate days. There were three separate qualitative research techniques used to measure the four different contact conditions: equal group status within a situation, common goals, inter-group cooperation, and support from authorities. The three qualitative methods were all adapted from Another Set of Eyes, Techniques for Classroom Observation (1987).
Measures of Contact Conditions

Support from authorities and common goals were measured using a global scan qualitative technique of observation. This involves anecdotal records of events that happen in the classroom as well as any information that is given to the researcher through informal conversations with authorities. Pamphlets, leaflets, or brochures that contain any relevant information about the school environment were included in this research technique.

To measure the presence of equal status and individualized contact I video recorded the classroom for 1_ hours on two separate days, providing a total of 3 hours of recorded observation. I wanted to capture the essence of classroom interaction between students and their peers as well as between the students and the teacher. When measuring equal status I used a verbal interaction technique of observation. I recorded how often the teacher verbally interacted with the students while noting the race of each student. I broke the three hour recorded observation time into ten-minute time frames for measurability purposes. For individualized contact I used classroom traffic technique of observation using the same three hours of recorded observation. I recorded how often a student would interact with another student of the same race and how often a student interacted with another student of a different race. I also noted how often a student was on their own with no interaction with other students. Again, I broke the three hour recorded observation time into ten-minute time frames for measurability purposes.

Results and Interpretation

Using the information collected from the global scan technique I evaluated how well the contact condition of support from authorities was met. In this particular school
environment authority figures included the Principal, the administration, the teachers, and the assistant staff. These authority figures may show support for the institution in different ways but the members of the in-group, the students, must to be able to recognize that the support is present. As head of the school administration the Principal is responsible for the organization and supervision of the school as well as the safety and welfare of the students in the school environment. This means that in addition to being an advocate for desegregation the Principal must effectively promote positive interracial attitudes and behaviors. The Principal was often observed welcoming students to school in the morning as they exited the school bus. By virtue of his presence as the students entered the school, the principal ensured that students were aware of the school’s encouragement and support.

Included in the global scan was information about meetings that were advertised on a leaflet titled the *Principal’s Page*. The leaflet included announcements about the school’s goal to help the students become more responsible and respectful with one another, therefore creating a more peaceful school environment. This goal is referred to as the school theme, “Developing a Peaceful School Environment”. Also included in the leaflet was training in “Positive Discipline” and “Developing Capable People” for the staff of the school, including all teachers and administrators. Workshops were also made available to help parents teach their children about being responsible, respectful, and develop them into “capable people”. One such workshop included a presentation on “The 3 R’s: Respect, Responsibility & Reverence”. The presentation emphasized the importance for parents to stress the 3 R’s in their children’s lives.
Support in the classroom was also evident when special education teachers came to the students in the classroom. It is common in traditional schools that special education students are taken out of the classroom to receive additional help. When a student is taken from the classroom there is a stigma attached to the child that he or she is different. Differences among children such as academic ability, race, or ethnicity are made more perceptible when the student is taken from the in-group. This causes other students to make a rudimentary evaluation of the difference and possibly associate it with a negative stereotype, therefore causing a negative attitude and behavior. In this particular school, support from authorities was evident when special education teachers would remain in the classroom with the student. Staying in the classroom with the other students meant that the special educated student was not being singled out from his or her peers and no stereotypical association could be made. Overall, support from authorities is present in this magnet school, which in part is important for the fostering of positive interracial attitudes and behaviors.

Common goals were also measured using additional information collected from a global scan. From the information gathered I was able to evaluate if this particular contact condition was met. There must be an active goal oriented effort that initiates cooperation between group members in order for the condition of common goals to be present. If the entire school environment is observed, as in this case, then the magnet school would show common goals in effect because there is an active, goal oriented effort made by students to academically succeed. A magnet school promotes an environment where children are given the opportunity to actively learn while accommodating each student’s special interests and intensive desire to excel in certain
academic areas. Even in an elementary magnet school students are given the opportunity to surpass the standard level of academic ability. In this particular magnet school this is a common goal that students are encouraged to attain for themselves, while working with other students in doing so. This cooperation and common goal is mutually beneficial for the students and can lead to positive relations between groups, therefore increasing positive interracial attitudes and behaviors. In addition to attending the elementary magnet school, for some students in the upper elementary classroom it is a common goal that after grade 6 they continue to attend a Magnet Middle school. This means that these particular students will apply for the Middle Magnet School in order to retain the opportunity of sustaining their personal academic achievements. Based upon the information gathered and the goals that are present in the school there is evidence to suggest that the condition of common goals is present in the magnet school.

The results for equal status are interpreted differently from the previous two conditions. Due to the different observational technique the equal status condition was measured on a scale of how often the teacher interacted with students of different races. Equal status in a desegregated school environment means that all students have equal representation and equal attention from the teacher regardless of what social group they represent. Based upon this premise I recorded how often the teacher had verbal interaction with a student and noted the race of each student to determine if equal status was present in this classroom. Figure 1 represents the percentage of interaction occurrences that took place over the three-hour block of time. From the figure it can be seen that on more than one occasion the teacher interacted with only black students. This usually took place during a reading group where the majority of the students were Black
and a low percentage of Whites and Latinos were represented. Where there is no interaction with Latinos the student was either on his own or was part of a reading group where no interaction took place. For each ten-minute block of time when the teacher is not leading a reading group, five minutes is typically spent not interacting with any student. The lack of interaction during these times will be further discussed later in the paper. Overall, the interaction between the teacher and the students appears to be equal when compared to the racial composition of the classroom. While 58% of Blacks students are represented in the classroom they received 64% of the interaction occurrences. Whites represent 33% the classroom and received 28% of the interaction occurrences. Based on their representation in the classroom, which was 9%, Latino’s received the predicted amount of interactions, 9%. There is no significant difference in numbers between the racial representation in the classroom and the occurrences of interaction from the teacher with each race. This implies that each student, regardless of race, has equal status in the classroom when measured by the number of occurrences of interaction from the teacher. The presence of equal status is therefore present in this magnet school classroom, consequently facilitating positive interracial attitudes and behaviors.

From the results for the measurement of individualized contact I was able to conclude that the fourth contact condition essential for fostering positive interracial attitudes and behaviors is present in the magnet school. To measure individualized contact an interaction was recorded when a student would approach another student and verbally interact with him or her. If the other student did not reciprocate with a verbal reply, a return interaction was not recorded. Based on the total number of interactions
and the number of black, white, and Latino students in the class I was able to estimate how often each child should interact with their own race and students of a different race within the three hour block of time (see Table 1). For example, if there are three students in a class, the chance that one student interacts with one of the other two is 50% for each. I used the same calculation to estimate how often a student should interact with another student based on the total amount of interactions recorded. I then compared these estimates to the amount of individualized contact observed between the students (see Table 2). Using these two tables I was able to calculate the variance between the expected amount of interaction between students and what was actually observed (Table 3). For example the total amount of interactions recorded between Blacks and students of the same race and of a different race was 75. From the sample 58% were black students, 33% were White students, and 9% were Latino students. Therefore 41 of those 75 interactions should have been with other black students, 27 should have been with white students, and 7 should have been with Latino students. It was recorded that 44 interactions with blacks, 31 with whites, and 0 with Latino took place therefore calculating a variance of 3, 4, and -7 respectfully.

The variance between the two tables shows little significance. The largest discrepancy was found with white students interacting with students of the same race. It was estimated that of the total number of interactions between the students, 21 should have occurred between white students and students of the same race. However, 32 interactions were recorded during the observation, therefore calculating a variance of 11. Also recorded were 7 fewer interactions than estimated between black students and Latino students. The variance for white students’ interactions with Latino students’
follows close behind with -6. Overall, these numbers are too low to show any significant lack of individualized contact between students in the classroom. This may be due to the sample being too small to show any great significance. If the same study were conducted using a larger sample of students, especially where Latinos are more represented, the variance might have been more significant. Also, the quality of the interaction was not recorded. If it had been noted how each student interacted with another student, whether it is hostile or friendly, a more significant variance may have been calculated. However, based on my findings and the quantity of the interactions between students it can be concluded that individualized contact is present in a magnet school. This concludes that all four of Allport’s (1954) Contact Conditions are present in a magnet school and therefore a magnet school is effective in fostering inter-racial attitudes and behaviors.

Discussion

The study of Allport’s Contact Conditions on fostering interracial attitudes and behaviors is significant to education and desegregation in schools. It is evidently not enough to simply desegregate schools in America and give every child their right to an equal educational opportunity if the optimal contact conditions are not present and interracial attitudes and behaviors are not improved. The purpose of the Magnet School is to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation by providing voluntary integrated school opportunities to inner-city students. With this elimination of racial isolation and the presence of Allport’s four contact conditions children are able to share their values and develop more positive inter-racial attitudes and relations with peers.

Even though it was concluded that the contact conditions are present in this magnet school and therefore positive interracial attitudes and behaviors are fostered, it is
still questionable whether a Montessori Magnet school serves its students with optimal contact conditions. As was discussed earlier, each contact condition has its most advantageous and favorable criterion. It can be concluded that for the conditions of support from authorities and common goals the most advantageous and favorable criterion were present.

However, for individualized contact and equal status the criterion mentioned earlier in the research were not present in this particular classroom. For example, it was discussed that in order for individualized contact to be present the individual characteristics of an in-group member have to be perceived on a more intimate level in order for a stereotype to be eliminated. It is therefore the quality of the interaction and not the mere interaction itself that is important to improving interracial attitudes and behaviors.

Cooperative learning methods are a way that students are able to find similarities and common interests. Slavin (1985) states that putting students into teams that work on assignments allows for more than a face-to-face interaction. The individual characteristics of an in-group member have to be perceived on a more intimate level in order for stereotypes to be eliminated. Cooperative learning methods allow this intimate level to take place. The Montessori method of learning focuses more on the self-formation of the child, which entails that the students have significant opportunities for free choice. If the student wishes to work quietly on their own they are free to do so. This free choice also means that the student has uninterrupted work cycles with no forced interaction with peers or with the teacher. Apart from group reading and group mathematics the teacher leaves the students to independently work and learn on
assignments that were given at the beginning of the week. This form of learning, even though pertinent to the Montessori method, can be perceived as an obstruction to optimal contact conditions.

Slavin also addresses cooperative learning strategies like Jigsaw and Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) that give students the opportunity to play leadership roles in a situation that will promote equal status. The contact condition, equal status within a situation, must be present for positive inter-racial attitudes and behavior to be fostered. Equal status within a situation means that everyone within that group must be treated equally. If the individuals within that group feel that they have equal status, more positive inter-racial attitudes and behaviors are promoted. For example, when the students in the classroom, in this case a reading group, are asked a question by the teacher, the teacher will choose a student to answer regardless of whether or not that student has raised their hand. When a student is chosen to fulfill a role in the class and is given equal opportunity to do so Allport’s equal status contact condition is evident. Even though the setting observed in the Montessori classroom was a mixed racial group, the teaching practice did not give students the most favorable opportunity to play leadership roles that would foster positive interracial attitudes and behaviors.

The importance of contact conditions being present in an elementary school is evident in research showing that children start to become aware of differences as young as four (Goodman, 1952). Goodman distinguishes between three different phases of the development of race awareness and attitudes. The phases include the following,

Phase 1: Awareness, the dawning and sharpening of consciousness of self and others in terms of racial identity.
Phase 2: Orientation (incipient attitude), the learning and synthesizing of race-related words, concepts, and values.

Phase 3: True attitude, the establishing of full fledged race attitudes. (p. 252)

If contact conditions are optimal in a desegregated elementary school such as a Magnet school, when children reach phase three of establishing a true attitude the interracial attitude could be positive and sequentially produce positive interracial behaviors.

Overall, my research findings do show that contact conditions are present in a magnet school and as a result magnet schools are effective in fostering interracial attitudes and behaviors. It is also important that these contact conditions are in effect in the early years of an elementary magnet school so that when children reach the phase of possessing true attitudes they are positive attitudes. Only when children of different races and economic and social groups are given the opportunity to know each other on an equal, cooperative, and intimate level that is supported by authorities can they be expected to gain the understanding and mutual respect necessary for the cohesion of society.
References


Figure 1.
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