



Can student body diversity foster inter-ethnic trust, tolerance, and national identification prioritisation? The role of friendship in Kenya

A closer look at what the evidence shows about diversity, friendship, trust, tolerance, and national identity in Kenya's national schools.

Key Finding at Glance

1. National schools built more diverse friendship networks. Students in Kenya's diversity quota national schools had friend groups with 9% more members from other ethnic groups than students in comparison schools ($p < 0.01$).

2. National school attendance directly raised national identity prioritisation. Students in national schools were significantly more likely to rank Kenyan nationality above ethnic or county identity, a direct effect of school type itself, not something that required friendship.

3. Trust and tolerance moved only through friendship, not through diversity alone. There was no consistent direct effect of national school attendance on trust or tolerance. Inter-ethnic friendship mediated these outcomes: students with more diverse friends reported significantly higher trust and tolerance.

4. The two outcomes follow different pathways. Identity shifted directly with school type. Trust and tolerance shifted only where diversity converted into friendship, a distinction the authors treat as their central contribution to contact theory.

Context

"Building national cohesion is particularly important in post-conflict societies and/or places where subnational identities outweigh civic nationalism." -Authors

Following the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya, which significantly followed ethnic lines, the government expanded its network of national schools, a category of selective secondary schools governed by regional diversity quotas, from 18 to 103 in 2011. The study reviewed here, by Jaimie Bleck, Robert Dowd, Danice Guzman, John Mugo, and Jackline Oluoch Aridi, and published in the British Journal of Political Science, tests whether this policy actually built social cohesion, and if so, through what pathway.

18 ► 103

National Schools after the
2011 quota expansion

984

Form 4 students across
10 national and 10
comparison schools

9%

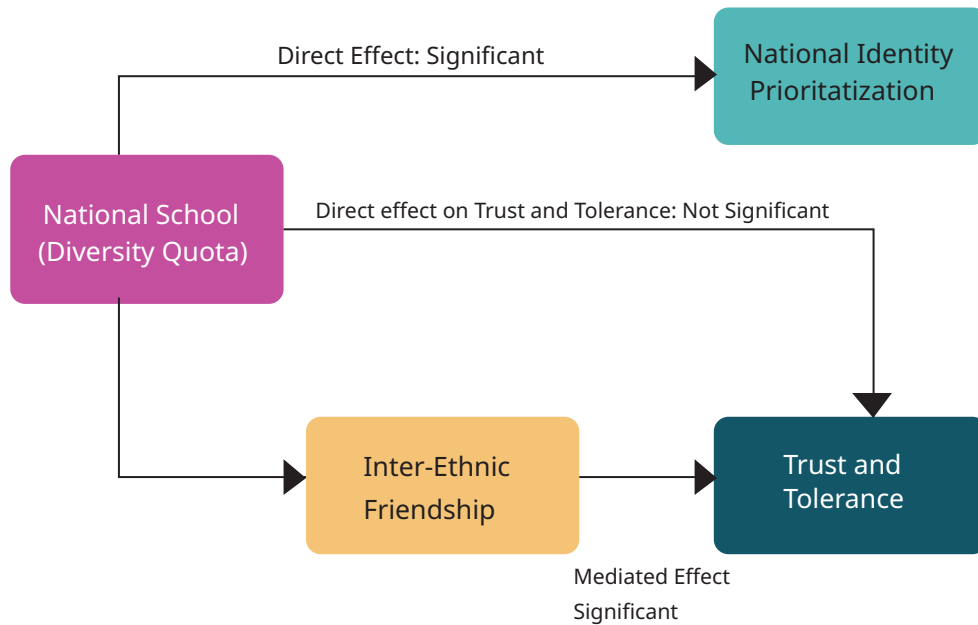
More outgroup friends
among national school
students ($p < 0.01$)



- The study uses a quasi-experimental design built around Kenya's National School Upgrading Programme, which converted selected county and extra-county schools into national schools subject to a diversity quota, combined with an expert matching exercise to identify comparable non-national schools.
- The sample comprises 984 Form 4 secondary students from 10 new national schools and 10 matched comparison schools, one boys' and one girls' school of each type in each of five counties: **Homa Bay, Kericho, Tana River, Marsabit, and Trans Nzoia**. While the counties vary in their degree of ethnic diversity, they have all been flashpoints for ethnically driven political violence.
- Comparison schools were selected using criteria set with Kenyan education experts: single sex boarding schools founded twenty or more years ago, matched as closely as possible on fees and entrance exam scores.
- Balance tests confirmed no significant differences between national and comparison school students in age, socio-economic status, entrance exam scores, or prior exposure to diversity at home, supporting the claim that student body diversity is the key difference between the two groups.
- Trust was measured with Afrobarometer-style questions on trust of own versus other ethnic groups and behavioural measures such as lending money or possessions. Tolerance was measured as self-reported comfort marrying someone from a different ethnic group. National identity was measured by asking students to rank national, ethnic, African, religious, and county identity in order of importance.
- Friendship was measured by asking students to list up to four close friends and report each friend's ethnicity, religion, and favourite subject, producing an outgroup friend index for each student.
- The authors used multivariate regression with county fixed effects and school-clustered standard errors, followed by causal mediation analysis (the Imai et al. average causal mediation effect method) to test whether friendship mediates the relationship between school type and each outcome.

The Pathway

The diagram below is the single most important visual summary of the author's argument, and it is more precise than a simple diversity-leads-to-cohesion story. National school attendance had two distinct effects. It directly raised the prioritisation of national identity over ethnic or local identity, with no need for friendship to explain that shift. But for trust and tolerance, there was no meaningful direct effect of school type. Those two outcomes moved only through inter-ethnic friendship, which national schools made significantly more common.



National schools attendance directly raises national identity prioritization. Trust and tolerance raise only where friendship forms





Key Finding 1: National Schools increased cross-group friendship

Students attending national schools had significantly more diverse friend groups than students in comparison schools. Controlling for gender, ethnicity, religion, and county, national school students' friend groups were made up of 9 per cent more outgroup members than those of comparison school students, a highly significant difference.

Students in national schools have a greater probability of having a friend from a different ethnic group. Their friend groups are made up of 9 per cent more outgroup members than friend groups in non-national schools.

Belonging to the school's dominant ethnic group was associated with a less diverse friend group, while having neighbours at home who spoke a different language was associated with a more diverse friend group, both consistent with expectations



Key Finding 2: National schools directly raised national identity prioritisation

Unlike trust and tolerance, national identity showed a clear direct effect of school type. Students in national schools were significantly more likely to rank Kenyan nationality above more local identities such as ethnicity or county of origin, and this relationship held even after accounting for friendship.

There is a statistically significant relationship between being enrolled in a national school and the probability of ranking nationality above more local identities such as county or ethnicity.

The mediation analysis found no meaningful indirect effect of friendship on this measure of identity, meaning that simply attending a national school, independent of who a student became friends with, was enough to shift identity prioritisation toward the nation.



Key Finding 3: Trust and tolerance rose only through friendship

This is the paper's central mediation result. There was no consistent direct effect of attending a national school on trust or tolerance. However, inter-ethnic friendship mediated both outcomes: students with more diverse friend groups reported significantly higher comfort marrying someone from a different ethnic group and significantly higher trust toward other ethnic groups, regardless of school type.

Friendship with other ethnic groups, which is more common in national schools, serves as a mediating factor that leads to significantly higher levels of reported trust and tolerance

The authors note that these mediated effects, while statistically significant, are modest in size. A 9% shift in friendship diversity likely reflects something like one additional close cross ethnic friendship for many students, a meaningful but incremental change rather than a wholesale transformation of social networks.



Key Finding 4: The results refine intergroup contact theory

Taken together, these findings sharpen a long-standing debate about whether diversity itself reduces prejudice or whether specific conditions of contact are required. The evidence here shows that the answer depends on the outcome in question. School-level diversity was sufficient on its own to shift identity, likely through socialisation and repeated exposure to a national policy narrative, but trust and tolerance required something more personal: an actual friendship with an outgroup member.

This distinction matters for how similar contact-based policies are designed elsewhere. A school, workplace, or neighbourhood can be demographically diverse while remaining socially fragmented, and this fragmentation is precisely where the trust and tolerance benefits of diversity policy can be lost, even if broader identity effects still take hold.

Limitations acknowledged by the authors

- The sample of 20 schools and fewer than 1,000 students limit statistical power to detect small effects or to conduct detailed subgroup analysis.
- The cross-sectional data, collected at a single point in time without a pre-enrolment baseline, hence unmeasured differences that existed before students entered these schools cannot be fully ruled out.
- The authors' own sensitivity analysis indicates the mediation results could be affected by unobserved confounders, such as school culture, that might independently shape both friendship formation and student attitudes.
- There may be an element of self-selection: students with prior exposure to diversity at home were also more likely to form diverse friendships, suggesting that some students may already have been predisposed toward cross-group friendship before arriving at a national school.
- The findings come from elite, single sex boarding schools competing for Kenya's top students, and the authors caution against generalising to day schools or lower-resourced schools, where the intensity of sustained contact is likely lower.

Source: Bleck, J., Dowd, R., Guzman, D., Mugo, J., and Oluoch Aridi, J. (2025) *Can Student Body Diversity Foster Inter Ethnic Trust, Tolerance, and National Identification Prioritization? The Role of Friendship in Kenya*. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, e142, 1 to 21. Published online by Cambridge University Press, 30 October 2025.

This brief has been prepared from the full published article, including its tables of regression and mediation results, and is intended as a summary rather than a substitute for the original article.



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The role of friendship in Kenya. Mizizi Elimu Afrika.