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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel)Ethnic school composition and peer victimization: A focus on the interethnic school climate<sup>☆</sup>Orhan Agirdag<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jannick Demanet<sup>a</sup>, Mieke Van Houtte<sup>a</sup>, Piet Van Avermaet<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Ghent University, Department of Sociology, Research Group CuDOS, Korte Meer 5, 9000 Gent, Belgium<sup>b</sup> The Centre for Diversity and Learning, Ghent University, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 49, 9000 Gent, Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

Does *de facto* school segregation have an impact on ethnic minority and majority pupils' chances of being victimized by their peers? Moreover, does the interethnic climate at school mediate the relationship between the ethnic school context and peer victimization? To answer these questions, this article examines the association between the ethnic composition of a school—as measured by the ethnic school concentration and the school's ethnic heterogeneity or diversity—and self-reported peer victimization. Multilevel analyses on data based on a survey of 2845 pupils (aged 10–12) in 68 Flemish primary schools revealed differential effects for natives and non-natives. In line with the imbalance of power thesis, and disconfirming the group threat theory, we find that non-native pupils report less peer victimization in schools with a higher minority concentration—that is, in schools with higher proportions of non-native pupils. Our findings indicate that this relationship is mediated by the interethnic school climate. In contrast, for native pupils, the concentration of ethnic minority students is not associated with peer victimization. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the literature on interethnic relations and educational policy.

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## 1. Introduction

In many western countries, there is a growing concern about ethnic school segregation, as many recent studies have shown that a high concentration of ethnic minority students is unfavorable for educational achievement (*for Belgium: Jacobs, Rea, & Teney, 2009; for France: Felouzis, 2005; for Germany: Kristen, 2005; for the Netherlands: Westerbeeck, 1999; Driessen, 2002; for Sweden: Szulkin & Jonsson, 2006; for the United States: Bankston & Caldas, 1996; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005*). Therefore, policy makers generally work towards the dispersal of immigrant and ethnic minority students (in this article we call these groups *non-native pupils*), believing that the mixing of students of different ethnic groups will enhance students' academic achievement and later occupational success (*Burgess, Wilson, & Lupton, 2005; Mahieu, 2002*).

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However, other studies have pointed to the flip side of this picture, arguing that school contexts with ethnically mixed student bodies might have unintended negative consequences for non-cognitive outcomes such as self-esteem and peer victimization (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). These non-cognitive outcomes are not only very important because pupils have the right to feel good at school, but also because they might have an impact on cognitive outcomes (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). In other words, while attending ethnically mixed schools might have a positive impact on the educational performance of minority students, there will be no or fewer academic advantages when these students do not feel at home—if, for instance, they are frequently bullied in such school contexts. Research has shown that pupils who are victimized by their peers are more likely to face school adjustment and achievement difficulties (Buhs, Ladd, & Gary, 2006). When educational policies do not take the potential adverse consequences of desegregation into account, they run the risk of failure. Therefore, educational research should identify and explain the potential negative effects of ethnic school composition on pupils' non-cognitive outcomes, in order to counteract them and make school desegregation efforts work.

In this study, we investigate the impact of *de facto* school segregation, as measured by the ethnic make-up of the school, on self-reported peer victimization. This paper is a unique contribution in three distinct ways. First, we consider three interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, to achieve a better understanding of the association between the ethnic composition of a school and peer victimization. Specifically, we draw upon the imbalance of power thesis (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006), group threat theory (Blalock, 1967), and constrict theory (Putnam, 2007). Secondly, we employ a further elaborated conceptualization of ethnic school composition, as we make a clear distinction between ethnic minority concentration (the proportion of non-natives at school) and ethnic diversity or heterogeneity. Previous studies tended to confuse these two distinct concepts. Third, in Flanders—the Dutch-speaking region comprising the northern part of Belgium, where the present study was conducted—research into the effects of ethnic school composition on peer victimization is simply non-existent. Through this paper, we aim to fill these research lacunae.

## 2. Ethnic composition and peer victimization

Providing a thorough review of the research on bullying behavior and peer victimization, Espelage and Swearer (2003) insist that victimization should be understood through a social-ecological lens: it is imperative that we investigate both the individual characteristics of students and the context-level variables that may be responsible for increased chances of peer victimization. While the bulk of the research examined bullying behavior at the individual level (e.g., Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2005; Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), less studies have focused on the ecological school factors. These studies found that the impact of a school's ethnic composition is an important context variable in reference to peer victimization (Graham, 2006; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001; Juvonen et al., 2006; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002; Vervoort, Scholte, & Overbeek, 2010). However, school ethnic composition has been operationalized in different ways. Some studies assess this by examining the ethnic heterogeneity of schools. For instance, a study by Rowe, Almeida, and Jacobson (1999) finds that displays of aggression by adolescents (aged 12–18), which often accompany bullying behavior, are more likely to emerge in schools with more heterogeneity. But a number of different studies come to another conclusion. Graham (2006) and Juvonen et al. (2006), for example, demonstrated that pupils (aged 10–12) at more heterogeneous schools are less likely to be victimized, and that this holds for both for ethnic minority and majority students.

Other studies operationalize ethnic school composition as the proportion of non-natives in a school. Again, the empirical evidence here points in different directions. A Dutch study by Vervoort et al. (2010) found that school classes with higher proportions of non-natives saw more victimization for both natives and non-native pupils (aged 12–14) than school classes with fewer non-natives. Verkuyten and Thijs (2002), in contrast, showed that native and non-native pupils (aged 10–14) felt more victimized when they attended schools classes with respectively fewer native and non-native peers. Research in the United States concurs with this latter study: pupils (aged 10–12) who are in a numerically minority position at school are at a heightened risk of being victimized (Juvonen et al., 2001). Hanish and Guerra (2000), in a study in the United States with elementary school pupils (aged 6–10), complete the confusion, as they show that schools where ethnic group sizes are roughly equal foster more victimization for White children and less for African-American children, and have no effect on the victimization rates of Hispanic children.

These findings show that the relation between ethnic school composition and peer victimization is a rather complex one, and that researchers have not come to an understanding of the direction of the relationship. Matters are complicated further because studies have not assessed this in a coherent manner. As discussed above, some studies operationalize ethnic composition as the proportion of students from a certain ethnic group—we call this the ethnic minority concentration in schools (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2001; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002; Vervoort et al., 2010); however, others use a calculated index of heterogeneity—that is, the number of distinct ethnic groups within a body of students (e.g., Graham, 2006; Juvonen et al., 2006). This renders their results difficult to compare. Moreover, although this issue is clearly situated on two different levels—ethnic composition at the school level, and peer victimization at the student level—there are studies that use single-level techniques (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2000), though it is imperative to use multilevel analysis to resolve this (see Graham, 2006; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). It is important to address these matters in a coherent way, as it is possible that these differing choices are to some degree responsible for the divergent results.

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