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# I pledge allegiance to the Southern Cross? The importance of multicultural education in today's schools

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I Pledge Allegiance to the Southern Cross?  
The Importance of Multicultural Education in Today's Schools  
Jennifer Kurbel

A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

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Department of Graduate Psychology

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Confederate Flag Incident at Smith Jackson High School”.....	2
III. History & Evolvement of the Confederate Flag.....	7
IV. How Students Learn Racism & Prejudice.....	16
V. Diversity & Multicultural Education in Schools.....	20
VI. Implications for Teachers, Administrators, & Counselors.....	24
VII. “Smith Jackson’s” Response to the Confederate Flag & Multicultural Education.....	29
VIII. Recommendations & Suggestions.....	34
IX. Conclusion.....	37
X. References.....	38
XI. Appendix A: Resources .....	41

## Abstract

As schools nation-wide continue to become increasingly diverse, the need for multicultural education curricula is becoming an absolute necessity. Within the school setting, counselors, teachers, administrators and other personnel are in an ideal position to serve as positive role models and to help shape the students into citizens who respect and value the diversity of their society. This project provides a firsthand look into a controversial event at a high school that could have possibly been prevented with a more proactive approach to diversity and multicultural education. The report also provides potentially useful and helpful suggestions, considerations and resources for educators when approaching the needs of their diverse student population.

## Introduction

I was excited and energized as I prepared to enter my third and final year of graduate school. I had made it through two years of intense core classes and had passed the dreaded comprehensive examination to prove I was ready to embark on my internship experience. With the start of the new school year, I would begin my first placement as a School Counseling Intern at “Smith Jackson High School.” (The name of the school, along with the name of the school’s principal, have been changed in this paper in order to maintain confidentiality.) I was anxious and thrilled to finally be working in the field and excited to have more opportunities to practice what I had learned from my classes and professors. On the first day, I walked into “Smith Jackson High School” with my head held high, confident, bright-eyed and ready to take on any new challenges. If only I had known then, however, that within a few weeks, I would find myself in a situation for which none of my classes or professors could ever have prepared me. As a brand new internship student, I found myself caught in the crossfire of a heated racial war. I felt completely stuck and as if I had absolutely no control over anything that was happening. It was like I was trapped on a crazy roller coaster ride that didn’t seem to have a clear ending in sight. I felt overwhelmed and helpless in the situation, which is a feeling that I’m sure many of the “Smith Jackson” students shared as well.

## Confederate Flag Incident at “Smith Jackson High School”

“Smith Jackson High School” is located in rural Virginia. The high school does not have a very diverse student population. In the school, there are a total of 4 Asian students (1 male, 3 females), 14 African American students (7 male, 7 female), 72 Hispanic students (28 male, 44 female), and 1011 White, not of Hispanic origin students (519 male, 492 female). “Smith Jackson”, like most other schools, is comprised of numerous other subgroups. One of these groups identifies themselves as the “Rednecks.” This is a large group in the school and there is a large “Redneck” presence in the surrounding community as well. The “Rednecks” identify themselves as avid defenders and supporters of Southern heritage and history. They also view themselves as hard manual workers and as individuals who are able to fend for themselves and live off the land and materials around them. Many of the students in this group can often be found wearing Dixie Outfitter apparel that usually displays the Confederate flag and camouflage or other hunting-related clothing. It was the actions of some of the more extreme members of this group that started an ugly racial war in the school.

It was evident on the morning of September 17, 2009, that a storm was about to hit “Smith Jackson High School”. As administrators, teachers, and students arrived at the school, they were greeted by a Confederate flag parade. Several trucks and other vehicles, covered with large, waving Confederate flags and Rebel banners, were driven into the parking lot by students in the “Redneck” group. The students in the vehicles were covered in clothing displaying the Confederate flag as well. They had Dixie Outfitter shirts on, and belt buckles, hats, jewelry, patches, backpacks and other items that were fully adorned with the Confederate flag. Tension started to mount when “Dr. James”, the

principal, and the school resource officer asked the students to take down the overly large Confederate flags on their vehicles because this was a vision obstruction issue in the parking lot. Several students complied with the request without any problems, but two students refused to take down their flags. The students stated that it was their right to show their flags and if they had to take their flags down, then all the other flags in the school had to come down. They were asked again to take down their flags, and again they refused. The two students were eventually suspended for being unruly, disorderly and disobedient, which set a ripple effect in motion. The next morning, the racial hurricane engulfed “Smith Jackson High School” in full force.

On Friday, September 18, 2009, the racial drama overwhelmed the school. The local news media were at the school to cover the story as even more students arrived with large Confederate flags and banners on their cars and trucks. Parents and members of the community, who were in support of the suspended students, drove their own cars back and forth in front of the school with large Confederate and Rebel pride flags showing. Friends of the suspended students and other members of the “Redneck” group showed up at the school completely decked out in Confederate flag apparel. These students also came prepared and ready with extra Dixie Outfitter and Confederate flag T-shirts, which they passed out to other students and encouraged them all to wear them around school. Numerous students who didn’t support what was going on decided to wear the shirts. Some of them said that it was easier to go along with all of the peer pressure instead of being teased or tormented for going against the grain. Some students, who did not understand the racist meanings associated with the Confederate flag, decided to wear the

shirt. Many of these naïve and unaware students then found themselves being harassed by other students who were against the “Rednecks” and the Confederate flag.

Several students came into the counseling office extremely upset and confused by the hurtful comments they had been receiving as they walked around the hallways. A bi-racial student (African American and Caucasian) came into the office crying when she had been teased and taunted for putting on one of the shirts. She said she didn’t even know what the flag meant and that she had only put it on because she was told to do so. A student from the “Emo” group (grunge, alternative) and a student, who openly identified himself as being gay, also came in to the counseling office after they had been harassed for wearing the shirts. They, like the bi-racial student, said that they didn’t know about the racial implications surrounding the Confederate flag and said they were told people were simply wearing them to go against the principal and administration.

As the day went on, the tension seemed to rise. Racial slurs and threats were directed at many minority students in the hallways. Several Hispanic students came into the counseling office and said people shouted at them, “Go back to your country, illegals!” and, “Get out of here, you dirty Mexicans!” A female student from the “Redneck” group screamed racial slurs at two female Hispanic students and threatened to fight them. This student was suspended for her intimidating and violent behavior. The parents of the two Hispanic students, along with several other parents, pulled their children from the school, as they feared for their safety and well being. An African American student, after being called a “nigger”, also went home in order to keep himself out of trouble and from getting into a fight with another student. There was not only apprehension about the physical altercations between students in the school, but there



was a concern for possible gang retaliation. Several students reported that some of the Hispanic students, who had been harassed and/or threatened, had connections to the MS-13's. The MS-13 gang, aka Mara Salvatrucha 13, is one of the most violent and dangerous gangs in the United States, and they are known to have a strong presence in the local area (Know Gangs, 2009).

No one seemed to know what specifically triggered this incident. Some teachers and staff thought it might have been all the racial conflict building up in the world of politics. With Obama elected as President, there has been a great deal of coverage and spotlight on all the racial remarks and insinuations made by individuals in the media. Others thought it might have been the drama that happened at the Video Music Awards the Sunday night before the Confederate flag parade. That Sunday, during the music awards ceremony, Kanye West, an infamous African American rapper, got up on stage, interrupted and insulted Taylor Swift, a young, popular, white female country singer. Whether it was politics, random events in the media world, or something else, the racial tension at "Smith Jackson High School" left many people wondering, "How on earth did we get to this point?"

Due to the events that took place at "Smith Jackson High School", I decided to research the development and history of the Confederate flag. Many students I talked to at "Smith Jackson" were unfamiliar with any of the different meanings associated with this flag, other than that of Southern pride and heritage. I will also look at the evolution of the meaning of the Confederate flag. It's important to know and understand how the flag went from being a symbol of soldierly valor, to one that symbolizes racial division and discrimination. I will also look into how students learn and develop their first

feelings and thoughts of racism and prejudice. Where do students learn the notion that one race is “better” or “worse” than another and what can change that? I will also discuss the importance of a comprehensive multicultural curriculum in all schools and the implications for administrators, teachers, counselors and other school personnel. And finally, I will offer some recommendations and suggestions as to how to avoid and/or handle heated racial incidents in your own school. It is my hope that what I discuss in this project will help prevent the incidents that took place at “Smith Jackson High School” from being a problem at other schools across the country.

## The History & Evolvement of the Confederate Flag

In our society, the Confederate flag is seen as quite a controversial symbol. Opponents of the flag view it as an overt symbol of racism. They believe it represents both the history of racial slavery in the United States, and the establishment of Jim Crow laws by the Southern states, which enforced racial segregation within state lines for nearly a century until the Civil Rights Movement. Supporters of the Confederate flag, however, view the flag as a symbol of heritage. To them, the flag represents the cultural tradition of the South's freedom from the oppression of the Northern government. How did the Confederate flag become such a notorious emblem within our culture? In this section, I will look into the history behind the Confederate flag, the purpose of its original formation, along with its evolvement into the symbol that we know today.

Senator William Porcher Miles, of South Carolina, was a key figure in the development of what we now know as the Confederate flag. In the first few weeks of the Confederacy's life, before secession led to war, Miles advocated for a new flag design that had been used at his state's secession convention in December 1860 (Bonner, 2002). This particular secession flag featured a blue St. George's (upright) cross on a red field. Emblazoned on the cross were fifteen white stars, representing the slaveholding states; on the red field were two symbols of South Carolina, the palmetto tree and the crescent. In adapting this design as the flag of the Confederacy, Miles removed the palmetto and crescent and substituted the St. Andrew's cross for the St. George's cross (Coski, 2005). Despite the fact that he was on the Flag and Seal committee, Miles was unable to impose his design. Other members did not like the St. Andrew's cross and said it looked "like a pair of suspenders" (World Flags 101). Instead, the design recommended by the

committee and approved by the Provisional Congress became known as the Stars and Bars. The flag consisted of three horizontal stripes, alternating red and white, with a union of blue emblazoned with an array of stars, usually in a circle, corresponding to the number of states in the Confederacy (Katcher, 1992).

Problems with the Stars and Bars quickly started to arise when Confederate troops took the flag into battle. The national colors also became the battle flag of the nation's military units, and in the spring of 1861, when Confederate regiments marched off to war, most of them carried the Stars and Bars (Katcher, 1992). The main purpose of battle flags was to mark the positions of each unit and help officers in strategizing and maneuvering of their troops, but the first few battles of the war showed the ineffectiveness of the Stars and Bars for this purpose (Bonner, 2002). The first major engagement of the war occurred on July 21, 1861, at Manassas, Virginia, when the Federal army under Gen. Irvin McDowell confronted Gen. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard's Southern Army of the Potomac. During this battle, at least one Confederate regiment fired on another Confederate regiment, possibly because of a failure to distinguish between opposing battle flags and uniforms. The inexperience of the troops on both sides, along with the complex maneuvering of the armies and inability to identify enemy versus ally, made Manassas a very confusing battle for the soldiers and commanders (Bonner, 2002). After the battle, Beauregard "resolved to have our flag changed if possible, or to adopt for my command a 'battle-flag,' which would be entirely different from any State or Federal flag" (Coski, p. 8).

For assistance in developing a new and improved flag, Beauregard turned to a man who had previously advocated for a new flag design, and his name was William

Porcher Miles. In discussions between Miles and Beauregard, Miles described to the general, in detail, his beloved pattern, which he had failed to gain approval from the flag committee – the St. Andrew’s cross (Coski, 2005). Upon his return to Richmond, Miles told the committee of the generals’ complaints and recommended that the flag be changed. The committee rejected the proposal by a four-to-one vote. General Beauregard proposed to his commander, General Johnston, that the army attempt a different strategy:

I wrote to [Miles] that we should have two flags – a peace or parade flag, and a war flag to be used only on the field of battle – but congress having adjourned no action will be taken on the matter – How would it do for us to address the War Dept. on the subject for a supply of Regimental or badge flags made of red with two blue bars crossing each other diagonally on which shall be introduced the stars, the edge of the flag to be trimmed all around the white, yellow or gold fringe? We would then on the field of battle know our friends from our Enemies (Coski, p. 4).

The high command of the Virginia army met at Fairfax Court House in September to adopt a new battle flag design, and everyone present agreed on the basic St. Andrew’s cross pattern.

Due mainly to the work of Generals Beauregard and Johnston, the flag pattern of the Army of Northern Virginia was soon introduced into other Confederate armies. When Beauregard and Johnston were transferred to other regiments away from Richmond, they took their St. Andrew’s cross pattern with them and sought to impose on their new commands the same uniformity of flags as they had done in Virginia (Katcher, 1992). While many of the units in the western armies (west of the Appalachians) continued to use either national flags or other battle flags adopted earlier in the war, by 1864 the St. Andrew’s cross was common throughout the Confederacy. In late 1863, when Johnston assumed command of the Army of Tennessee, he introduced a rectangular variant of the

St. Andrew's pattern as that army's official flag—the version most widely seen in the late twentieth century (Katcher, 1992).

Battle flags of all shapes, sizes, and patterns served important practical, and especially emotional, functions during times of war. Flags were tangible cloth embodiments of military units' morale and spirit of community (Katcher, 1992). Carrying the regimental colors was a high honor and grave responsibility. The opposing armies recognized the real and symbolic importance of battle flags by rewarding men who captured enemy flags. Northern soldiers who captured Confederate flags typically received the Congressional Medal of Honor (Katcher, 1992). The loss of "the colors" occurred on most battlefields when units suffered tremendous casualties. The clichéd stories of consecutive color bearers rushing forward to catch the flag from injured comrades are well grounded in historical fact (Katcher, 1992). On the first day of Gettysburg, as many as fourteen men fell carrying the colors of the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry. Two days later, the remnants of the regiment lost the flag in the Pickett-Pettigrew charge against Cemetery Ridge; 80% of the unit's men were killed, wounded, or captured in the battle (Katcher, 1992).

The indisputable bond between the soldier of the Confederacy and the St. Andrew's cross flag is the foundation of the modern heritage organizations' insistence that the flag deserves respect as a symbol of soldierly valor. As in any war, the men who fought for the Confederacy were not responsible for precipitating the conflict. By war's end, not only the soldiers but also the wider Confederate public had developed a strong emotional attachment to the St. Andrew's cross – or, as contemporaries called it, the "Southern cross." The pattern had been incorporated as the most prominent visual

element of the Confederate national flag and embodied the evolving sense of Confederate nationhood and independence (Coski, 2005). In 1863 Congress again considered a new design for the national flag and in early May, after a week of deliberating, a new flag replaced the Stars and Bars. The new flag featured the battle flag design in the left corner on a field of white. It was popularly known as the “stainless banner.” On March 4, 1865, the national flag was changed again, for the last time. The new design added a red vertical bar at the end of the “stainless banner” due to the fact that the white field of the flag could be mistaken for a flag of surrender (Bonner, 2002).

When the Confederate armies surrendered in May of 1865, the government collapsed, and Confederate flags of all descriptions were torn down, packed away, and furled (Katcher, 1992). Whether the victorious Federal armies explicitly prohibited the display of Confederate flags is unclear, but it was certainly understood that flags of the “rebellion” were not to be tolerated. While the national flags of the Confederacy were not forgotten or forsaken, memorial organizations re-elevated the status and visibility of the St. Andrew’s cross pattern (Bonner, 2002). As veterans became the focal point of the Confederate cause, the flag that was most meaningful to them became most popular for memorial rituals. In books and articles throughout the era, veterans testified that the battle flag was the only flag that meant anything to them. A soldier wrote, “It would be impossible to forget this flag’s fierce, incarnate glow, as it flashed deep into enemy lines and memories will never fade after having followed it throughout, maybe with naked feet, but with love and devotion in heart” (Bonner, p. 159).

Around the late 1920’s, organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy fought and worked to convince a flag manufacturer to produce the square

St. Andrew's flags (Bonner, 2002). The company and other manufacturers told them that the problem was not supply but demand. They reported that people wanted the rectangular/oblong flags, even though they were technically incorrect. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century and even now, in today's society, the St. Andrew's flag was mislabeled the "Stars and Bars" and used essentially as *the* Confederate flag. Since people perceived the Confederate flag as a counterpart to the Stars and Stripes, they wanted a flag shaped like the Stars and Stripes, and so that's what the manufacturers produced (Bonner, 2002).

### *The Evolvement of the Confederate Flag*

Since first being developed, the battle flag has certainly undergone some significant changes. The most important change is its social proliferation (Katcher, 1992). From a battle flag of the armies of the Confederacy, the flag became a totem of Confederate memorial organizations, and has in the decades since World War II, become a widely used banner with diverse symbolic meanings (Katcher, 1992). The Confederate flag is a victim of its own success because it is a very distinctive symbol that is capable of stirring loyalty along with powerfully negative emotions. The flag became a natural logo for the South, and was elevated by Confederates and their descendants to a status as primary symbol of the Confederacy. It became a symbol for truckers, bikers, stock-car race fans, Southern rock bands, and "rebels" of all stripes (Coski, 2005). It also appeared on flags of several Southern states. Once the Battle flag achieved such a trendy status with pop culture America, it was inevitable that the Confederate heritage groups would lose control of the flag. Confederate symbols, especially the battle flag, have been dragged into the center of racial controversies as right-wing extremist groups, such as the



Ku Klux Klan, display these symbols in their public rituals and stir up emotions that the flag's original patrons never could have imagined (Coski, 2005).

It seems that a change in its relationship with society has had more to do with the Confederate flag's association with racial controversy than a change in its inherent symbolic meaning. Before World War II, the flag was a calm, solid symbol of a secure established social order that enjoyed the unspoken support of the federal government (Coski, 2005). However, once the fight over civil rights began, the flag became, at times, a hostile symbol of an order under attack from the federal government. The flag's long prior absence from racial controversy relied on a unanimous agreement that the flag represented the soldierly valor of Confederates, which people could respect. This was a false agreement which relied heavily on the survival of an explicitly white supremacist group in the South and its toleration by the rest of the nation. Once this group began to crumble and the toleration ended, so too, did the flag's exemption from racial controversy (Coski, 2005).

African Americans in the South, as their political strength grew, started to protest the officially sanctioned use of the Confederate flag and other symbols in Southern states around the mid 1970's (Coski, 2005). Around the late 1980's, the Southeast region of the NAACP launched an intensive campaign to eliminate the battle flag from the state flags of Georgia and Mississippi and from the capitol domes of Alabama and South Carolina. The campaign received support from liberal reform and conservative business groups and gained wider support in the state legislatures. The controversies surrounding the flag that acquired headlines in the late 1980's and early 1990's owed their time in the spotlight primarily to this campaign (Coski, 2005). The African American activists' movement

against the flag was an expression of an attitude, though to some flag defenders it may have seemed like an uncalled for assault on a widely accepted symbol. This attitude, however, became more evident soon after African Americans in the South achieved a measure of political power (Coski, 2005).

There was a time when the Confederate battle flag, along with other symbols of Confederate heritage, demanded respect and enjoyed official state sponsorship. This was during a long period when the “losers” of the Civil War were the rulers of the New South (Coski, 2005). They admired the flag as a symbol not merely of the Confederate soldier, but of the Confederate cause. This Confederate flag, however, was originally associated with armies whose victories had the effect of preserving a nation that supported slavery. Consequently, the battle flag was supported by generations of white Southerners who supported and defended Jim Crow segregation (Coski, 2005). These historical facts make the flag a logical symbol to be dragged into racial controversies.

Of course, racism is not the Confederate flag’s only meaning. There is some historical analysis and an argument that the flag’s white supremacist implications are ongoing and inherent, but it is a mistake and unacceptable to attribute racist motives to those who do not accept the argument (Coski, 2005). The nonracist meanings that people attach to the flag are real and deserve respect. In contrast, however, it is naïve and logically indefensible for anyone to conclude that because he or she does not regard the flag as a racist symbol, others don’t have the right to view it that way. The media’s obsession with the flag’s racist connotations, along with the thoughts and beliefs of many critics tend to obscure and/or fail to acknowledge and understand the strong, enduring significance that the flag holds for many white Southerners as a symbol of their ancestors

(Coski, 2005). Along the same lines, however, Southern partisans and the people who revere the flag similarly obscure or fail to appreciate the strong historical experience and continuing associations that make it a threatening symbol of racism and white political and cultural dominance (Coski, 2005).

The Confederate flag invokes neither heritage nor hate for many people in America or for people around the world. It is simply a logo and symbol of the South, a symbol of collective or individual rebellion, or a symbol of the “Dukes of Hazzard.” Such a disharmony of meanings is inevitable if the flag continues to be a part of America’s pop culture. Perhaps it would be possible today for those who revere the Confederate flag to control its meaning if the “Conquered Banner” had been furled permanently in 1865. However, since it was not rolled up and put away forever, it has instead, continued to wave prominently in contexts related more to the events and issues of later periods than to the events of 1861-65 (Coski, 2005). It is for this reason, for better or for worse, that the Confederate battle flag is part of America’s twentieth-first century history.

## How Students Learn Racism & Prejudice

Now that we know about the history of the Confederate flag and have a better understanding of how it came to be such a controversial symbol, what do we do about it? In schools, such as “Smith Jackson”, the Confederate flag can create tension and conflict and can racially divide the school. While we will discuss how schools must address and implement a more culturally diverse curriculum, first, it is important to look at how students form and develop their initial feelings of prejudice and racism. Since many students, like the ones at “Smith Jackson High School”, view the Confederate flag solely as a racial symbol against African Americans and other minorities, it’s crucial to understand how they came to form those beliefs.

People often recollect their first experience with racism during childhood. When children attend schools with children of diverse cultures and backgrounds, social interaction with other children grows more common. During grades K-6, young people learn and develop a sense of their own competence. At the same time, negative experiences and upsetting memories with teachers, parents, and peers can be particularly harmful (Walls, Sperling, & Weber, 2001). In fact, from the ages of five to eight years old, children acquire information about their own identity and understanding others’ differences. The first school years pose a critical time in the formation of a child’s own racial identity and understanding of prejudice and fairness (Derman-Sparks, Higa, & Sparks, 1980).

Even though diversity has increased within schools, there is limited research measuring interracial contact within schools. Hallinan and Williams (1989) found that same-race friendships are far more common than cross-race friendships. Thus, while

diversity in our schools has increased, interracial contact and cross-racial friendships remain limited. Like adults, research has shown that children use skin color and racial cues in making judgments about individuals, evaluating cross-race peers less positively than peers within their own racial group (Graham & Cohen, 1997; Kowalski, 2003). Therefore, while cross-race friendships are a way to reduce racial prejudice, such friendships are rare (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003). One reason for this is that race is perceived as an in-group/out-group characteristic where a child either belongs or does not belong. It is not until later that similar interests, goals, etc, become additional characteristics in which peers may judge each other (Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, & Griffiths, 2005). In fact, children as young as three years of age exhibit racial prejudice; although researchers contend that young children are actually demonstrating a positive bias toward their in-group rather than out-group derogation (Cameron et al., 2001). However, institutional, structural, and social conditions can lead to the development of prejudice within young children (Cameron et al., 2001). For students in grades seven through twelve, peers are particularly important because they are likely to recall events involving boy/girl memories or best-friend memories during this stage of their lives (Walls, Sperling, & Weber, 2001). Moore (2002) explored how children learn and use the concepts of race within their peer cultures and interactions. Kids often replicated the racial categorizations seen from adults, so greater diversity encouraged greater awareness and power distribution, but the development of cliques was more often race based. This is especially the case today when schools and communities are becoming more diverse.

The ideas of tolerance and racism, along with learning to cope with racism and prejudice, are often learned from family. There is little research, however, understanding

how racism and prejudice are transmitted to children (Hughes & Chen, 1997). The literature on intergenerational transmission of racism and prejudice is scant and is even more limited regarding how individuals cope with racism and prejudice within their family, particularly when they receive messages from society that prejudice and racism are unacceptable. O'Bryan, Fishbein, & Ritchey (2004) stated that it is generally assumed children's prejudiced attitudes simply reflect their parents' attitudes. However, additional research shows that children's prejudice is only moderately influenced by their parents. In fact, the transmission of prejudice and racism is somewhat more complicated as O'Bryan et al., discovered. Mothers may have a greater effect on their daughters' attitudes, while fathers may have a greater effect on their sons. Weis and Hall (2001) showed that women often attempt to "rewrite negative race scripts perpetrated by the men in their lives, as they attempt to interrupt such ideology through direct intervention with their children" (p. 52). In their ethnographic study, Wies and Hall (2001) reported the stories of many poor white women who often fought and challenged fathers and brothers on issues of race. Tatum (1994) described how many white students often go through a period of guilt upon learning about society's pervasive racism. Subsequently, when they think about and consider times that they have exhibited racist behavior they may become resistant to further learning about racism and prejudice. However, in spite of this, many students find the courage to go against their primary socialization and become more accepting and tolerant of individuals from different racial backgrounds.

Childhood is a critical time for intergroup contact, since having a close cross-race friend in childhood is associated with positive racial attitudes and integration in adolescence and adulthood (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003). According to a survey

reported by O'Neil (1993), young people today are more comfortable than their parents in dealing with individuals of another race. Problems occur, however, when there is a lack of awareness of the norms and practices of other races or cultural groups leading to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, or worse (O'Neil, 1993). Overall, children go through developmental stages when peers and peer acceptance become more important as they get older. Pagano & Hirsch (2006) reported that peer relationships play an essential role in the lives of adolescents, facilitating their explorations of social identities, individuation from the family, and tolerance of stress. They found that adolescents often experience both intimacy and conflict equally in close peer relationships. Conflict can lead to closer ties and new understandings, or it can lead to fear of betrayal and interpersonal sensitivity, which especially may be the case with interracial friendships (Pagano & Hirsch, 2006).

According to several scholars, cross-race friendships are not only fewer in number than same race friendships, but the duration is often shorter and the quality may be lower. As a consequence, interracial friendships tend to decline with age, with older children reporting fewer cross-racial friendships than younger children (Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Aboud et al., 2003). School racial composition affects the development of cross-racial friendships. Joyner and Kao (2000) found that as a school's racial heterogeneity increases so does the likelihood of its students having an interracial friendship. Subsequently, children who have interracial friendships are more likely to possess such friendships as adults (Joyner & Kao, 2000).

## Diversity & Multicultural Education in the Schools

While the number of culturally diverse students has grown tremendously across the United States, their level of achievement has lagged considerably behind that of their language majority peers. One congressionally mandated study reported that culturally diverse students received lower grades, are judged by their teachers to have lower academic abilities, and score below their classmates on standardized tests of reading and mathematics (Moss & Puma, 1995). Furthermore, these students have high dropout rates and are often placed in lower-ability groups. These findings reflect growing evidence that most schools are not meeting the challenge of educating culturally diverse students. The United States is sharply divided along racial, gender, and social class lines. These divisions are caused by political, social, and economic factors that prevent many culturally diverse segments of society from fully participating in our nation's development. The goal of inclusion has been an elusive one.

The implementation of multicultural education programs can play an important role in helping the nation's schools to promote national unity and educational equality. Multicultural curricula must reflect the experiences, struggles, and visions of all groups, thus fostering the common good (Au, 2006). Multicultural education can help all students to acquire the academic skills needed to function in a culturally diverse society. Multicultural education is an education for life in our democratic society. It has the potential to help students transcend their cultural boundaries and acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to engage in public discourse with people who differ from themselves. Race, gender, and class can interact to influence student behavior (Au, 2006).



Many different racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups make up the United States. In many school curricula, textbooks, and other instructional materials, however, these groups are given little, if any, attention (Banks, 2006). The focus is on white Anglo-Saxon Protestant groups. The dominant cultural group in the U.S. society is often called “mainstream” America. A curriculum that only focuses on mainstream Americans and largely ignores the experiences, cultures, and histories of other ethnic, racial, and cultural groups has negative consequences for both sides. A mainstream curriculum is one major way in which racism is reinforced and perpetuated in the schools and society at large (Banks, 2006).

There are many negative consequences with having a mainstream curriculum for mainstream students. It reinforces their false sense of superiority, gives them misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of reference that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures (Banks, 2009). A mainstream curriculum also denies white students the opportunity to view their own culture from the perspective of others. When students view their own culture from the point of view of another culture, they are able to understand their own culture more fully, see how it is unique and distinct from other cultures, and understand better how it relates to and interacts with other cultures (Banks, 2009).

Also, culturally diverse students can be negatively influenced in a mainstream curriculum because it marginalizes their experiences and cultures and does not reflect their hopes, dreams, and perspectives (Lee, 2006). When the school curriculum reflects their own cultures, experiences, and perspectives, it motivates students to do better and

learn more. Many culturally diverse students experience cultural conflict and discontinuities that result from differences between their school and community, and in turn feel alienated in their own schools (Lee, 2006). By implementing programs and a curriculum that reflect all backgrounds, schools can help culturally diverse students mediate between their home and school cultures. When teaching writing, language arts, science, and mathematics, schools can make effective use of community values (Lee, 2006). Many events, themes, concepts, and issues are still viewed from a white European perspective (Banks, 2008). Take, for example, events such as the European explorations in the Americas. When viewed from a Eurocentric perspective, the Americas are perceived as having been “discovered” by explorers like Columbus and Cortez. American “Indians” were discovered by the Europeans and their lands rightly owned by the Europeans who claimed and settled them (Banks, 2008).

Multicultural education is also affected by the content and structure of classroom textbooks. Teachers may not have the in-depth knowledge about ethnic cultures and experiences needed to integrate ethnic content, experiences, and points of view into the curriculum, so they put their trust in their textbooks to fill in the gaps (Banks, 2009). Even though several significant changes have been made in textbooks in recent years, the content about ethnic groups is usually presented from mainstream perspectives and criteria, and rarely incorporates information about ethnic groups throughout the text in a consistent integrated way (Banks, 2009). Information about ethnic groups is usually discussed in special units, topics, and chapter sections in the textbooks. Teachers therefore approach the teaching of ethnic content in a fragmented fashion and students

cannot receive the best education if school personnel lack preparation for a culturally diverse curriculum (Banks, 2009).

## Implications for Teachers, Administrators, & School Counselors

In the schools, the majority of teachers, administrators, counselors and staff recognize the importance of acceptance, empathy, and openness in the general education classroom (Lahelma, 2004). They facilitate the student's process of coming into a school as a pupil and later becoming a citizen of the school's community. Throughout this process, students often navigate a complicated web of interactions including friendships, student/teacher relationships, student/administration relationships, student/counselor relationships, peer relationships, and academics. Therefore, teachers, counselors, administrators and other personnel have a key role in socializing citizens of the school and citizens of the world. Unfortunately, they are often not equipped with the tools and resources to deal with the growing diversity within their schools (Lahelma, 2004).

For teachers, multicultural understandings are fundamental to the education of all children, not only children from culturally diverse backgrounds (Banks, 2008). Multicultural education is an integral part of the curriculum, not a separate course, a special unit of study in February, or a series of discrete activities added to a prescribed curriculum. A climate must be created in which students can dare to question, to take risks, and to learn from each other. This approach prepares students for a world in which learning is neither limited to information presented within the covers of a textbook nor confined within the school walls. Teachers are an extremely important variable in teaching cultural content. When they encounter racist content in materials or observe racism in the behavior of their students, they must be able to utilize the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to teach lessons about the experiences of culturally diverse groups in the United States (Banks, 2008). It's important for teachers to be

especially sensitive to their own racial attitudes, behavior and statements that they make in the classroom, and they need to make sure that their classroom conveys positive images of all different groups (Banks, 2008). It's also essential for teachers to choose their teaching materials carefully to make sure they avoid anything that contains blatant stereotypes and negative portrayals of ethnic groups. They should use trade books, films, videotapes, and recordings to supplement the textbook treatment of groups and to present the ethnic perspective. This will help show experiences of what it is like to be a person of color in the United States (Banks, 2008). Teachers should also be sensitive to the developmental levels of their students when selecting concepts, content, and activities related to cultural groups. Learning activities for children in kindergarten and the primary grades should be specific and concrete (concepts of similarities and differences, prejudice, and discrimination), and as students progress through the grades, more complex activities and discussions can be introduced (Banks, 2009).

Teachers need to develop a curriculum that helps students develop the ability to make reflective personal and public decisions. It should be conceptual, interdisciplinary, and based on higher levels of knowledge (Banks, 2006). The focus should be on helping student's master key concepts that highlight major themes in the experiences of ethnic and cultural groups in the United States. All students need to master certain concepts – race, racism, prejudice, and discrimination – if they are to gain a full understanding of American society and history (Banks, 2009). We must keep in mind that racism remains a major problem in society today. There are several key concepts to keep in mind that are related to ethnic groups. One concept is that conflict exists among different generations and subgroups within ethnic groups. These conflicts are evident in values, goals, and

methods of protest. Another concept is that cultural diversity is exhibited in a wide range among and within various ethnic groups. Group identification is influenced by such factors as skin color, social class, and personal experiences. Also, an important concept is that social protest occurs in movements that have emerged to develop pride, shape new identities, gain political power, and shatter stereotypes. The intensity, scope, and type of movements have varied widely from group to group and have been influenced by the unique histories, values, cultures, and lifestyles of ethnic groups (Banks, 2009).

A balanced approach is very important when identifying concepts for a multicultural curriculum (Au, 2006). People of color should not be depicted only victims. They should be depicted as people who helped shape their own destiny, who built ethnic institutions, and who played major roles in attaining their civil rights. It is necessary to teach such concepts as prejudice, discrimination, and racism, but it is also essential to teach concepts such as protest, empowerment, and interracial cooperation in order to portray a full and accurate view of the experiences of culturally diverse groups in the United States (Au, 2006). Overall, a sound multicultural curriculum should help all students, from both majority and minority groups, break out of their cultural and ethnic enclaves and learn that there are many ways to live and survive.

Schools seldom offer multicultural counseling, which is necessary to help children develop an understanding of themselves and their role in society. Racial identity becomes a central focus for students and educators (Lahelma, 2004). Previously used counseling techniques, strategies, and interventions were inadequate for culturally diverse learners. The trend today cautions counselors against imposing their culturally laden goals, values, and practices on clients from diverse backgrounds (Banks, 2006).

Culturally competent school counselors and educators should seek greater self-awareness and understanding regarding their biases, assumptions, and stereotypes. This self-awareness comes from understanding one's own cultural values and norms and in understanding that individuals are a product of their culture. School counselors, teachers and administration should also seek to understand the worldviews (values and norms) of culturally diverse students without negative judgments (Banks, 2009). Counselors and educators do not need to adopt these views but should respect them as different and legitimate rather than as inferior or otherwise substandard. They must move from the stage of tolerance for cultural differences to a point where educators truly embrace culturally diverse differences (Lahelma, 2004).

Through self-understanding, school counselors, teachers, and other educators become more informed of how attitudes and prejudices affect teaching and learning (Banks, 2009). Just as with children, our sense of self-worth influences our work. Our self-awareness influences the way we relate to children. Our personal histories reflect biases about how other people live, work, and play. Culturally competent counselors and teachers attempt to increase multicultural awareness and understanding among all students (Banks, 2009). Socially responsive counselors, teachers, administrators, and school personnel are activists who seek positive changes on behalf of culturally diverse students. As advocates, we seek equity in all areas of the educational process. Also, culturally competent counselors and educators attempt to make education relevant, appropriate, and sensitive to students' diverse needs (Banks, 2009). They create a learning environment aimed at achieving pride, equity, power, wealth, and cultural continuity. These individuals go beyond the subject matter and encourage students to

value achievement and understand the personal value, the collective power, and the political importance of academic success (Lee, 2006). They engage all students in reflections about life's realities and integrate the realities of the student's lives, experiences, and cultures into the classroom while validating and affirming the students' identities (Banks, 2009).

Becoming a competent school counselor/educator is a lifelong process. Individuals must continue to seek experiences that help refine their skills and abilities to work with culturally diverse students. Increased diversity among school personnel, modifications in curriculum and instruction, and philosophical changes can be implemented more effectively when school personnel are trained to be more culturally aware and competent. Professional development on everyone's part becomes a critical factor for this type of personal growth to continue within a school (Banks, 2009).



## “Smith Jackson’s” Response to the Confederate Flag and Multicultural Education

After all the incidents and problems surrounding the Confederate flag, everyone anxiously waited to see how the school administration would respond. No drastic changes or immediate action took place within the school. It seemed like the school was trying to pretend that events of September 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> never happened. The only action taken by the administration to immediately address the racial tension was to have different diversity awareness quotes read during the morning announcements. The “Redneck” students, however, continued to arrive at school with Confederate flags on their vehicles and they continued to wear Confederate flag clothing. Students were only disciplined for their clothing if it was explicit and/or had inappropriate language/graphics. Students were also warned and disciplined for the use of racial slurs and/or threats toward other students.

In response to what happened at the school, several parents of Hispanic students called and asked that the Dixie Outfitter shirts and any other type of clothing with the Confederate flag be banned from the school. The parents argued that the school handbook clearly states that any clothing that inflames or defames is not allowed. They also stated that clothing and other items that are gang affiliated are not permitted on school grounds, and they felt that individuals were now intentionally wearing the Confederate flag shirts to intimidate and instill a sense of fear in minority students. “Dr. James” stated that even though the parents had a good point, banning the Confederate flag from the school would never pass because they are in rural Virginia, where the flag is deeply rooted in the area’s history.

While the school administration seemed to sit idle in response to the heated racial situation within the school, others took it upon themselves to take action in order to try and make peace and unify the school and student body. One of “Smith Jackson’s” school counselors, along with student club members of the ACES (students who help with the transitioning of new students) and Peer Mediators were deeply saddened and frustrated by what happened at their school. In response, they developed “We Are Smith Jackson” shirts and sweatshirts to sell to faculty and students. The shirts had people of different shades holding hands around a picture of the world that had a peace sign in the middle of it. All of the faculty and staff, along with a large percentage of the student population, purchased a “We Are Smith Jackson” shirt or sweatshirt and wore them on specific days as a peaceful way to try and bring the school together.

The school’s diversity coalition also took action and hosted different events during school. I volunteered to organize and coordinate a school-wide diversity awareness mini-fair that took place during the students’ lunch periods. Weeks before the mini-fair, I sent out an email to all the administrators, teachers, counselors and other staff asking them to answer the question, “What defines you?” I asked them to include, along with their definitions, their ethnicity/racial heritage. I thought it would be nice to have these responses up during the mini-fair, so students could read how their own teachers and faculty defined themselves and so they could see how diverse the “Smith Jackson” population actually is. For my mini-fair table, I designed a large tri-fold poster board titled “What Defines You?” In the center section of the poster was a world map, where students, teachers and faculty could place pins on their families’ place of origin. Above the map was a quote made by an anonymous individual stating, “Diversity is the one true

thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day.” Below the map was a diversity quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stating, “We must learn to live together as brothers, or we are going to perish together as fools.” On the two outer flaps of the poster, I had pictures and stories from the book *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* by Fulbeck, Lennon, & Spickard. The pictures in the book are simple portraits of individuals of mixed racial heritage along with their candid responses to the question, “What are you?” Participants young and old, male and female, gave deep, thoughtful answers that defined them as unique individuals and not simply as someone of a “mixed” race. One example that I used on the poster was of a seventeen-year-old female. At a quick glance, students thought she was just an average Caucasian teenager, but when they read her information, they found out that she was Dutch, German, Japanese, French, and Belgian. Her response to the question, “What are you?” was:

What am I? How should I know, I’m only 17. I am not just one thing, I am many all rolled into one. I am a girl that loves to shop. I am a senior eager for the future. Most people think I am just a blonde, but I am really a brunette at heart. I defy the rules of being a blonde (Fulbeck, pg. 106)

Along with the stories of the individuals from the book, students were also able to read the personal responses from their own principals, counselors, teachers and staff that I had printed out and placed on a separate poster sheet. Also, at my table, I had numerous diversity quotes printed out for students to take and I had an optional activity in which they could participate. For the activity, I had different color squares that said, “I am...” in the middle. I asked the students, if they wanted, to write out how they defined themselves as an individual. I then taped the completed squares to a large sheet of paper, creating a multicolored quilt. Over 70 students chose to participate in the activity. One

square that stood out was written by a Hispanic student. She wrote, “I am a Hispanic female. I am a loving person and open-minded. I love all people and do not judge others based solely on what they look like. It would be nice if everyone was like that.”

Over a month after the initial incidents surrounding the Confederate flag took place, administration brought in outside professionals to serve as a Facilitation Team to help address the racial divide and tension. The Team held trainings and educational workshops for teachers, faculty and staff regarding conflict, the Confederate flag and diversity. They explored ways to engage the flag conflict with students, parents and members of the community in a way that seizes the opportunity for growth, education, and relationship building. The Facilitation Team also met and talked with minority students, students from the “Redneck” group, and any other students who had been affected by the events that took place in September. The Team also held meetings with parents and members of the community to help promote calm, peaceful discussions about the Confederate flag issue. While many students, parents, and teachers agreed that the Facilitation Team was a positive experience, they felt that it shouldn’t have taken the administration so long to take action. They expressed that the school lost valuable moments for teaching and for growth opportunity while they sat back and waited for things to improve.

Even after all the multicultural workshops, discussions, and mini-fairs, many students from the “Redneck” group continued to wear Confederate flag clothing. There were not, however, any further problems or incidents like the ones that happened on September 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. It appeared that through the combined efforts of students,

counselors and administration to promote diversity and multicultural awareness, education and acceptance, that a sense of calm and peace was restored at the school.

## Recommendations & Suggestions

Looking back at the intense events that took place at “Smith Jackson High School”, one of my most important recommendations for other schools would be to evaluate their overall curriculum and attitude regarding multicultural education. I believe that if “Smith Jackson” had done a better job in promoting a more open and diverse environment and provided more opportunities for students to learn about and experience other cultures, there would not have been as much racial tension and division among different student groups. I also suggest that school administrators develop some type of crisis plan to address possible racial conflicts. “Smith Jackson” seemed to be caught completely off guard by what happened at their school, and because they had no set response plan, they lost valuable time that could have been used to address and help the situation.

Another recommendation I have is for schools to make better use of their school diversity coalitions, and if they don't have one, it is important that they develop one. “Smith Jackson” has a diversity coalition team, but until the events on September 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> took place, they did not seem to take an active role within the school. After September 18<sup>th</sup>, the team quickly tried to put together mini-fairs and presentations to try and address the diversity issue and help unify the school. I believe a diversity coalition team would be more effective if it took a proactive stance to multicultural education and awareness. The diversity team should have activities and presentations planned throughout the year to keep students talking and thinking, and not only when a problem arises in the school. The diversity coalition should also be familiar with multicultural resources to help serve the needs of their minority students.

I also recommend that there be more in-depth classroom education and discussion regarding the Confederate flag. When I talked to several “Smith Jackson High School” students, they reported that they do not really learn about or talk extensively about the Confederate flag in any of their history classes. They said if anything, they learn that it was a flag associated with the South during the Civil War. Since the Confederate flag is such a controversial symbol, with many different meanings for many different people, I feel it would be extremely helpful and beneficial for students to receive a more thorough education concerning the flag’s actual history and evolution. Before I wrote this paper, I too, had very minimal knowledge about the Confederate flag, but because of the research I performed, I now have a better understanding of what it stands for and represents. I think it’s important for students to receive this factual information so they don’t solely develop their opinion about the Confederate flag based on the media or from what other people say. Also, by talking more about the history and formation of the Confederate flag in class, teachers may have the chance to facilitate some powerful discussions with students regarding their personal thoughts and feelings toward the flag. The discussions could possibly help address some of the confusion and misunderstandings that students have and it could also help alleviate some of the underlying tension and hostility that revolves around it.

Lastly, I recommend and encourage schools to facilitate small groups and round table discussions with students of different ethnic/racial backgrounds. These groups can provide students with the opportunity to talk and ask peers questions about their different cultures, customs and lifestyles. Along with asking questions, it also provides the students the opportunity to teach their peers what they want them to know and what they

feel is important about their own culture. By doing this, students can dispel different myths that some of their peers might believe and they can establish a better understanding and sense of respect for each other.



## Conclusion

The events that took place at “Smith Jackson High School” show the importance of implementing a multicultural curriculum and the importance of promoting an environment of multicultural acceptance within schools. It should not take racial hostility to make school programs take a more proactive approach to multicultural education. As the nation continues to become more multiracial and ethnically diverse, schools must strive to develop proactive interventions that promote multicultural education, along with different multicultural skills and competencies for their students. Multicultural education can help close the achievement gap through the use of teaching approaches and materials that are sensitive and relevant to the students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences. It can provide an environment that values cultural diversity and portrays it positively. It can help students to think critically and gain a better understanding of the causes of oppression and inequality, including racism. Multicultural education can also help students deal with social and historical realities of American society, such as the issue of the Confederate flag. Multicultural education is an absolutely crucial component to the increasingly diverse school populations, and it is time to provide students of all races and ethnic groups the education that they rightly deserve.

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<http://www.worldflags101.com/other-flags/confederate-flag.aspx>

## Appendix A: Resources

## **Books**

Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools by Jonathan Kozol

Un-standardizing Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-based Classroom (05 Edition) by Christine E. Sleeter

Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom ((Rev) 06 Edition) by Lisa Delpit

Affirming Diversity: Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education

We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools (2<sup>nd</sup> 06 Edition) by Gary r. Howard

The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities (Multicultural Education Series) by Sonia Nieto

## **Websites**

Multicultural Pavilion: Resources and Dialogues for Equity in Education  
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/>

Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center  
[www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org)

Multicultural Supersite  
[http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/multi\\_new/](http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/multi_new/)

Race – The Power of Illusion  
[http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000\\_00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm)

Race – Are We So Different?  
<http://www.understandingrace.org/>

## **Videos**

A Place at the Table: Struggles for Equality in America  
(A Complete Text & Video Teaching Package) from Teaching Tolerance

The Shadow of Hate: A History of Intolerance in America  
(A Complete Text & Video Teaching Package) from Teaching Tolerance

The Color of Fear directed by Lee Mun Wah

Last Chance for Eden directed by Lee Mun Wah