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### A Cross-Cultural Study of Italian and U.S. Children's Perceptions of Interethnic and Interracial Friendships in Two Urban Schools

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## STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A cross-cultural study of Italian and U.S. children's perceptions of interethnic and interracial friendships in two urban schools

Cinzia Pica-Smith<sup>1\*</sup>, Davide Antognazza<sup>2</sup>, Joshua J. Marland<sup>3</sup> and Alberto Crescentini<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This cross-cultural and cross-sectional study investigated Italian and US children's perceptions of interethnic and interracial friendships, also known as intergroup friendships. A total sample of 226 children attending two urban, elementary schools in a middle-sized Northeastern US city and a middle-sized northern Italian city, were interviewed employing the questionnaire. Results indicate that Italian and US children's perceptions of intra-racial and interracial friendships differed with students of color in the US rating intragroup friendships more positively than intergroup ones. In addition, students of color in Italy and white students in the US rated intergroup and intragroup friendships similarly.

**Subjects:** Education; Multicultural Education; Childhood

**Keywords:** children's intergroup friendships; intercultural education; intergroup friendships; multicultural education; perceptions of intergroup friendships

### 1. Introduction

Global migration patterns are contributing to increasingly multiethnic and multiracial communities and schools across the globe. This trend offers an important possibility for the critical work of

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Cinzia Pica-Smith is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Services and Rehabilitation Studies at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. Her research is focused on children's interracial and interethnic friendships as they relate to prejudice reduction in multiethnic and multiracial school contexts. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed academic journals and presented at both national and international peer-reviewed academic conferences. She is a reviewer for multiple peer-reviewed academic journal and serves on the Editorial Board of Professional School Counseling. She was the recipient of the Rubovits Award for best paper presented at the New England Educational Research Organization's 2013 Conference. She was the recipient of a 2013 Distinguished Paper Award from the American Educational Research Association. In 2016 she won the Kim Fries Award for Distinction at the Early Professional Career Level from the New England Educational Research Organization.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Our contemporary society is one in which transnational migration is on the rise. Schools across the globe are becoming increasingly multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multicultural spaces in which children interact with children across many dimensions of difference. At the same time, our society is also one in which much racism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia exist. In order for children to navigate these contradictions and develop in a healthy manner in our multicultural society, they must have opportunities to create relationships—friendships—across the socially-constructed boundaries of “difference.” In fact, intergroup friendships are associated with reduced prejudice and increased cultural competence. Therefore, all educators should become interested in this topic in child development. This study examines children's perceptions of interracial and interethnic friendships in two multicultural school contexts: one in Italy and one in the United States. Results elucidate similarities and differences in how children perceive these friendships.

multicultural educators. For example, racially and ethnically diverse classrooms are fertile contexts in which to focus on racial and ethnic prejudice reduction (see Pica-Smith & Poynton, 2014; Zirkel, 2008 for review), intercultural understanding (Ambrosini, 2008; Bergamaschi, 2013; Contini & Maturo, 2010), and supporting children's interracial and interethnic friendship formation, which have been demonstrated to reduce racial prejudice in children and adults (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2008; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011).

While the United States has been a multiracial society with racially integrated schools for several decades, until the 1980s, Italy was predominantly ethnically and racially homogeneous (Pastore, 2008). The 1990s saw a significant wave of immigration to Italy and the immigrant population has grown significantly to reach 7% in 2006 (Fondazione ISMU Report, 2008). Furthermore, immigration from northern Africa has steadily increased and intensified after the Arab Spring (Mirkin, 2013). In 2011, the Pew Research Center estimated that over 1.5 million Muslims lived in Italy and that the number would more than double by 2030 (Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, 2011). Despite their demographic differences, both countries are experiencing an increase in multicultural and multilingual immigration from their southern borders. The Migration Policy Institute compared the migration patterns in Mexico and Morocco (to the US and EU respectively) and found that the continuous demand for low-skilled labor fuels remarkably similar large-scale immigration trends (de Hass & Vezzoli, 2010).

Both the United States and Italy have seen exponentially more racially/ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse student bodies in their urban schools. Schools in the United States, for example, have experienced a 118% increase in school children whose first language is not English since the 1970s (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006). In Italy, in the year 2000 2% of students were non-Italian children. By 2005 the number had risen to 4.8%, and in 2007 approximately 10.5–12% of Italian school pupils were immigrant children (Campani, 2007; Fondazione ISMU Report, 2008; ISTAT, 2007). In a 2012 report (Fondazione ISMU, 2013), Italian schools with a 30% or more foreign-born student population amounted to 4.3% of the nation's schools.

In time, Italian classrooms have become exponentially more diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, and culture. This demographic shift has created a shift in educational practices to include increasingly more multicultural/intercultural educational initiatives (see, for example, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2007) and research on the effects of such practice on students' social emotional development (Colombo, 2012; Contini & Maturo, 2010). In addition, researchers have explored the social emotional outcomes of intergroup context such as potential intercultural friendships (Colombo, 2004; Contini, 2014; Contini & Maturo, 2010; Costa, 2013). While these studies have investigated the real-life friendship behaviors in ethnically and culturally diverse Italian middle and secondary school classrooms, we know little about young children's perceptions of these friendships. This is an important area of investigation as the greatest number of immigrant children in schools is in primary school (Caritas e Migrantes, 2014). This study represents the first cross-cultural research study to investigate Italian and US young children's perceptions of interethnic/interracial friendships (hereafter intergroup friendships). We believe that this investigation represents an initial step in our understanding of how Italian and US children perceive their potential friendships similarly and differently in increasingly multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual classroom spaces.

In a multicultural society, intergroup friendships provide opportunities for children to learn about the many ways in which children and adults of different ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds are both similar and different from themselves (Pica-Smith, 2009; see Pica-Smith & Poynton, 2014; Zirkel, 2008 for review). These relationships are spaces to explore and appreciate various cultural identities and experiences.

Intergroup contact theorists have demonstrated a significant relationship between intergroup friendships and prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2008; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Children's intergroup friendships have been studied and linked to many aspects of child development including

prejudice reduction and positive racial attitudes (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), cultural competence (Lease & Blake, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999), social skills development (Kawabata & Crick, 2008; Lease & Blake, 2005), social emotional competence (Fletcher, Rollins, & Nickerson, 2004; Graham, Munniksma, & Juvonen, 2014; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007), and the reduction of perceived vulnerability (Graham et al., 2014). In a seminal paper, Hunter and Elias (1999) elucidated the relationship between high-quality interracial friendships among 5th grade girls and increased levels of social skills, leadership characteristics, sociability, and participation in diverse social networks.

Research studies on children's intergroup friendships have been conducted since the 1980s. Over these decades it has been noted that children have significantly fewer intergroup friendships than intragroup ones (Aboud et al., 2003; Aboud & Sankar, 2007; Bagci, Kumashiro, Smith, Blumberg, & Rutland, 2014). Furthermore, other important aspects about these friendships have been identified. There are developmental differences in the formation and maintenance of these friendships with same-race friendship participation preferences beginning in preschool (Fishbein, 1996; Fishbein & Imai, 1993; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett, & Ferrell, 2005). In addition, interracial friendships decrease as children become older (Aboud et al., 2003; Kawabata & Crick, 2008). Differences also exist in ratings of friendship qualities: children rate interracial friendship quality lower than same-race friendship quality (Aboud et al., 2003), and intergroup friendships are seldom considered "best friendships" (Reynolds, 2007).

Differences also exist by racial group affiliation. In Canada (Schneider, Dixon, & Udvari, 2007), the United States, (Bellmore, Nishina, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2007; Fischer, 2008; Kao & Joyner, 2004) and Europe (Verkuyten, 2001), white children have fewer intergroup friendships than children of color or non-native born children (in the case of the Verkuyten, 2001 study). White children have less positive perceptions of interracial friendships (Margie, Killen, Sinno, & McGlothlin, 2010; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; Pica-Smith, 2011), and research on children's racial prejudice has linked white children's ingroup favoritism to outgroup prejudice (Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001). In contrast same-race friendship participation for children of color appear related to protective strategies to offset experiences of racial prejudice (Feddes et al., 2009; Pica-Smith, 2009).

While the studies cited to this point have significantly contributed to our knowledge about children's real life interracial friendships and their perceptions of these relationships, they were conducted mostly in the US, Canada, and England. Hence, we know less about other cultural contexts. Italian researchers have also investigated the real life friendships of adolescents (Contini, 2014; Contini & Maturo, 2010; Costa, 2013) and adolescent prejudice in pluralistic cultural and religious contexts (Bergamaschi, 2013). However, no studies have examined young Italian's children's perceptions of interracial/interethnic friendships. Hence, our study is the first to examine young Italian children's perceptions of intergroup and intragroup friendships as well as to compare these perceptions to US children's.

This study examined children's perceptions of interethnic/interracial (also intergroup) and intra-ethnic/intraracial (also intragroup) friendships using a cross-cultural and a cross-sectional design. Our inquiry was guided by the following questions:

- Do Italian children's perceptions of interracial friendships differ from US children's perceptions?
- Do young children's (K-1 grade students) perceptions of interethnic/interracial friendships differ from older children's (4-5 grade students) in both Italy and the US?
- Are there differences in these perceptions by gender and ethnic/racial self-identity?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sites

This study was conducted in two demographically similar schools, one Italian and one US school. We recognize this is a small sample size; yet, it initiates an area of inquiry on young children’s perceptions of friendships between two nations’, whose multicultural educational practices are beginning to be studied comparatively (see, Contini & Herold, 2015). The one Italian elementary public school in which we conducted our study is located in a medium-sized city in the north of Italy. The student population is made up of 78 percent Italian children who are white and 22 percent of children of various ethnic backgrounds both from northern and sub-Saharan Africa as well as South Asia, who are both first generation immigrants and children of first generation immigrants to Italy. The US elementary public school is located in a medium-sized city in the Northeastern US. The racial demographic of the US public elementary school is 76 percent white and 24 percent students of African American, Latina/o, Asian-American, and multiethnic/multiracial heritage. These two schools were chosen using a purposeful sampling technique due to their similar ethnic/racial demographics as well as the similarities in the cities in which they are situated, which both feature industries that attract immigrant workers.

### 2.2. Participants

All children in K, 1, 4, and 5 grades in the US and Italian schools were invited to participate in the study. The overall sample of the study consisted of 226 children. There were 106 US children and 120 Italian children. The sample was divided into two groups based on grade in school (as a proxy for age). Group 1 included Kindergarten (the first year of primary school in the US) and first grade children ( $N = 105$ ), while Group 2 was comprised of fourth and fifth grade children ( $N = 121$ ). A total of 106 girls and 120 boys made up the sample. 71 US children identified as white or European American and 34 of the children identified as African American, Latino/a, or Asian American. 86 of Italian children were white and 34 were members of ethnic and racial minorities. One student did not identify with either a racial or ethnic label.

### 2.3. Ethnic and racial identity

Ethnic and racial identifiers are used differently in the US and in Italy. Native Italian children of Italian descent did not identify as “white.” Authors chose to use this term for uniformity and to engage in a discussion related to perceptions of racial identity and intra- and inter-racial friendships. Likewise, the term “children of color” is used to identify Italian children of African or South Asian descent although these children do not use this term themselves. We understand the complications related to naming and labeling children using socially constructed racial labels. We do not want to reify notions of racial categories. Instead we hope to engage in learning about how children of dominant and subordinate groups understand friendships across these socially constructed identities based on phenotypic cues (as tested in our measure, which employs photographs of African and African-American and Italian and European-American children) (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Group membership**

	Grade/Age				Gender				Ethnic/racial identity				Total
	K/1st		4th/5th		Male		Female		White		Students of color		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
US	45	42.5	61	57.5	65	61.3	41	38.7	71	67.6	34	32.4	105
Italy	60	50.0	60	50.0	55	45.8	65	54.2	86	71.7	34	28.3	120
Total	105		121		120		106		157		68		

### 2.4. Measures

The Perceptions of Intergroup Friendship Questionnaire was used to collect data in this study (for a complete description of the measure see, Pica, 2008 and Pica-Smith, 2011). The questionnaire is a picture test technique interview protocol. The measure employs a picture-test technique. Children were asked to answer questions regarding six dimensions of friendship (intimacy, self-validation, companionship, emotional security, help, and reliable alliance), which have been deemed important by both children of color and white children (see Mendelson & Aboud, 1999; Mendelson, Aboud, & Lanthier, 1994). The questionnaire was translated and counter-translated for “linguistic, functional, cultural and metric” equivalence (Peña, 2007).

Each question of the *Perceptions of Intergroup Friendship Questionnaire* asked the children to rate the dimension of friendship experienced by intragroup friendship dyads (depicted by photographs of same-race unfamiliar children) as well as intergroup friendship dyads (depicted by photographs of different-race unfamiliar children) on a four point-scale. In addition, children were asked to rate the degree of friendship, on a four-point scale, when presented with photographs of unfamiliar (the children depicted were not personally known by the children tested) intragroup friends’ dyads as well as intergroup friends’ dyads.

The dimension of friendship questions were ones where students were asked “How much these two students” performed a certain activity with responses that ranged from “Not at all,” to “A little,” “Some,” and to “A lot.” Level of friendship questions asked students if the two children in the pictures were “Just kids who hang out,” “Ok friends,” “Good friends,” or “Best friends.”

### 2.5. Factor analysis and reliability

As noted earlier, the measure was translated and counter-translated (Peña, 2007). Because this was the first time the questionnaire was used in Italian, we began by analyzing the adaptation of the measure for the Italian group.

A factor analysis was conducted to examine dimensionality. This allowed us to confirm that the Italian measure, like the US measure, (Pica-Smith, 2011) measures two main factors (perceptions of intergroup and intragroup friendships). The scale has a level of reliability evaluated with Chronbach alpha of .807.

### 2.6. Subscores

As in the original use of the questionnaire (see Pica, 2008; Pica-Smith, 2011), to create subscores, the responses for all inter-race questions about the dimension of friendship were summed together, and all responses for all intra-race questions were summed. The same was done for the type of friendship questions to create a total of four subscores (Inter-race level and dimension, and Intra-race level and dimension). Detailed descriptive statistics for each of the four subscores are presented in Table 2 of the results section.

**Table 2. Average subscores by group for dimension of friendship**

		N	Inter-race subscore		Intra-race subscore	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Nationality	US	105	19.8	3.0	19.9	2.8
	Italy	120	20.1	2.9	20.4	2.8
Grade	K/1st	105	20.8	2.9	20.7	2.8
	4th/5th	121	19.3	2.8	19.7	2.7
Gender	Male	120	20.1	3.0	20.5	2.7
	Female	106	19.8	2.8	19.8	2.9
Ethnicity	White	157	19.9	3.0	20.1	2.8
	Student of color	68	20.1	2.9	20.4	2.8



### 2.7. Analyses

Data were analyzed for main effects of grade, gender, and ethnicity/race within each country’s sample using a 2 (grades K–1) × 2 (female, male) × 2 (US children of color/children of non-Italian ethnicity, respectively, and white US and Italian ethnicity children, respectively) repeated-measure ANOVA. In addition, Italian and US children’s responses were compared. Using a 2 (Italian and US) × 2 (grades K–1 and 4–5) × 2 (female and male) repeated-measures ANOVA, we analyzed the main effects and interactions between the variables of nationality, grade, and gender. The statistical software SPSS was used to conduct all analyses. The repeated measures generalized linear model command was used.

Data were analyzed for main effects of grade, gender, and ethnicity/race between each country using a repeated-measures ANOVA. Two-way interactions between each of the demographic variables and country were also examined. Additional interactions were not examined in this study due to the small sample size. There were two levels for each of the factors included in the analyses:

- Country: United States, Italy
- Gender: Female, Male
- Grade: K/1, 4/5
- Racial/Ethnic identity: White, Students of color

### 3. Results

Mean subscore responses across groups were relatively similar for both inter-race and intra-race questions related to the dimension of friendship, as well as the level of friendship. While group-level subscores tend to be fairly similar, it is the interaction of group memberships and the differences between inter-race and intra-race perceptions that are of interest in this study and the focus of analysis (see Table 3).

#### 3.1. Repeated measures ANOVA level of friendship

In both repeated measures ANOVAs, differences were not significant between genders; therefore, it was removed from the model. However, the main effect for time with respect to the level of friendship was not statistically significant, meaning that overall, students rated same-race dyad questions similarly to cross-race dyad questions. The *F*-statistic was 1.2 with a *p*-value of .267.

However, the interaction between ethnicity and country was significantly different for perceptions of inter- and intra-race friendships for level of friendship. For level of friendship, the *F*-statistic was 5.133 with a *p*-value of .024 and an effect size (partial eta squared) of .021, which is relatively small.

**Table 3. Average subscores by group for level of friendship**

		N	Inter-race subscore		Intra-race subscore	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Nationality	US	105	17.6	4.0	18.9	3.7
	Italy	120	20.2	3.1	20.9	2.8
Grade	K/1st	105	19.9	4.3	20.7	3.7
	4th/5th	121	18.1	3.0	19.4	3.1
Gender	Male	120	19.0	3.9	20.2	3.5
	Female	106	18.9	3.6	19.6	3.3
Ethnicity	White	157	19.1	3.7	19.9	3.5
	Student of color	68	18.8	3.8	20.1	3.1

This can be interpreted to mean that subscores for inter- and intra-race friendships are significantly different for White and students of color for both the US and Italy.

In addition, the differences in average subscore between inter- and intra-race friendships also run in different directions by country (see Table 4 and Figure 1). Here, we see that the difference between inter- and intra-race subscores for white students is smaller than for students of color in the US, while it is larger for white students in Italy than it is for students of color.

For white students in the US there is about a  $-.1$  difference in Inter- and Intra-race Subscores, where it is about  $.5$  in Italy. This reverses, however, when we look at students of color in both countries, where the difference is about 1 point for White students and about  $-.3$  for students of color.

### 3.2. Dimension of friendship

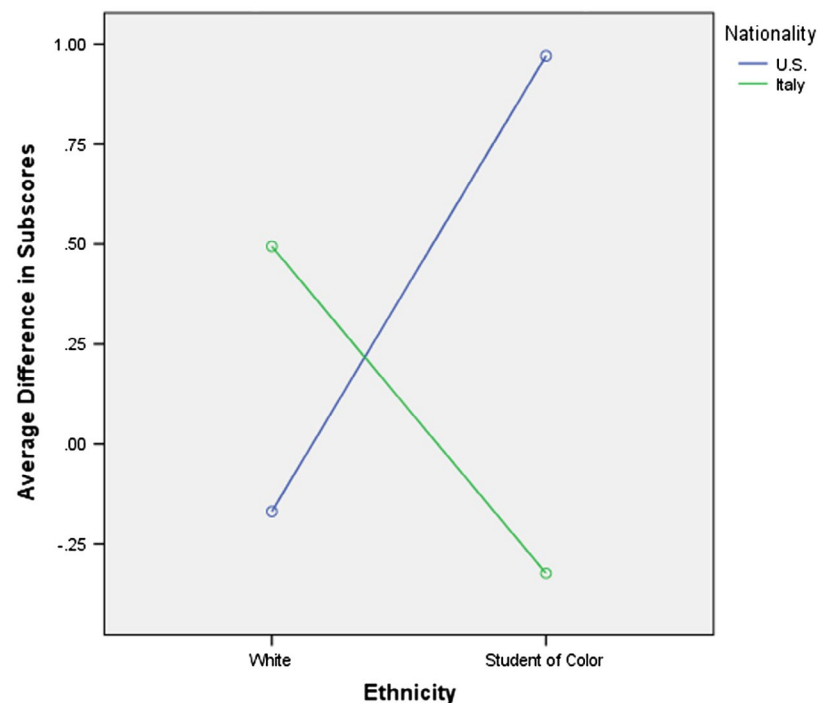
The main effect for time with respect to the dimension of friendship was statistically significant, meaning that overall, students rated same-race dyad questions differently from cross-race dyad questions. The  $F$ -statistic was 16.5 with a  $p$ -value of .000 and partial eta squared of .071, which is moderately small.

Similar to the level of friendship, the interaction between country and ethnicity with differences between inter- and intra-race friendships was statistically significant, where the  $F$ -statistic was

**Table 4. Average dimension level of friendship subscore by nationality and ethnicity**

		Inter-race subscore		Intra-race subscore		Difference
		Mean	Count	Mean	Count	Mean
US	White	19.9	71	19.8	71	$-.1$
	Student of Color	19.3	34	20.3	34	1
Italy	White	19.8	86	20.3	86	$.5$
	Student of color	20.9	34	20.6	34	$-.3$

**Figure 1. Average difference in level of friendship subscores by nationality and ethnicity.**

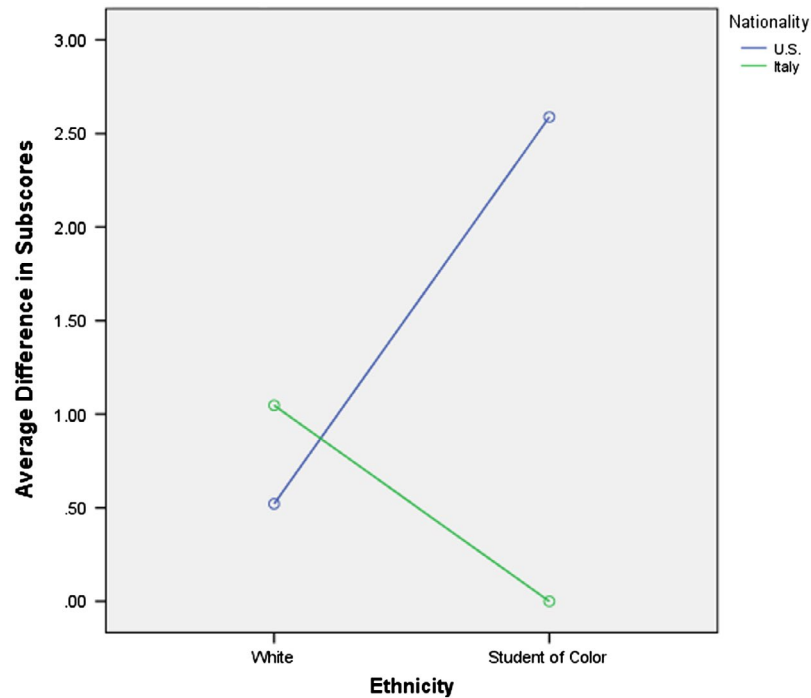




**Table 5. Average dimension of friendship subscore by nationality and ethnicity**

		Inter-race subscore		Intra-race subscore		Difference
		Mean	Count	Mean	Count	Mean
US	White	18.0	71	18.5	71	-.5
	Student of color	17.0	34	19.6	34	-2.6
Italy	White	20.0	86	21.1	86	-1.1
	Student of color	20.6	34	20.6	34	0

**Figure 2. Average difference in dimension of friendship subscores by nationality and ethnicity.**



8.043 with a *p*-value of .005 and effect size of .036. Differences in subscores show a similar pattern to level of friendship, with the differences between inter- and intra-race friendship questions smaller for White students in the US than for students of color. In Italy, similar to the dimension of friendship subscore, differences for White students is larger than for students of color (where there is no difference). The main effect for country was also significant, but is not interpreted here because the interaction that includes country is also significant (see Table 5 and Figure 2).

In addition, for dimension of friendship, inter and intra-friendship subscores were significantly different as well. The *F*-statistic was 16.549 with a *p*-value of .000 and effect size of .071. This can be interpreted to mean that overall, students rated the types of friendships differently depending on whether they were responding to a picture of friends who were the same or different ethnicities.

#### 4. Discussion

As previously stated, the exploratory factor analysis demonstrated that the overall perceptions of the dimension of inter-race relationships were significantly different from intra-race relationships. As was the case in a previous study that employed this questionnaire (Pica-Smith, 2011), the correlations highlighted the relationship between positive perceptions of intragroup friendships and negative perceptions of intergroup friendships.

Differences between gender groups were not significant, even though we hypothesized differences may exist based on the literature. This result may be due to the relatively small cell sizes when we consider nationality and grade at the same time. While gender was removed from the model, grade was kept in, but was also insignificant when country and ethnicity were kept in the analyses. Hence, we can interpret this to mean that differences by country and ethnicity were likely more systematic than those between grades.

In our analyses, we do see that US and Italian children do perceive the dimension of inter- and intra-group friendships differently; but there appears to be an interaction with ethnicity. This means that US white children perceived the differences between the dimensions of inter- and intra-race friendships differently than Italian white children. The same can be said for students of color. We see in the analyses that the differences are quite small, however, and we see small effect sizes.

In the Italian sample, for both level and dimension of friendship, students of color perceived almost no difference between inter and intra-race friendships. Hence, their perceptions of intergroup friendships were generally positive, or at least similar to the way they perceived intra-group friendships. This finding is congruent with the literature on real life intergroup friendships of children of color (Aboud et al., 2003; Bellmore et al., 2007; Fischer, 2008; Schneider et al., 2007) as well as perceptions of friendship by children of color (Margie et al., 2010; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; Pica-Smith, 2011), which demonstrates they are more likely to perceive these relationships positively than white children.

White Italian children perceived intragroup friendships as more positive. This finding is congruent with the literature on both real life intergroup friendships (Aboud et al., 2003; Kao & Joyner, 2004; Kawabata & Crick, 2008) as well as perceptions of intergroup friendships (Margie et al., 2010; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; Pica-Smith, 2011). This is an important finding as the literature has demonstrated the link between intergroup friendships and prejudice reduction (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008) and the intragroup friendship preferences in white children is linked to racial prejudice (Cameron et al., 2001).

The results for the Italian sample are noteworthy as they indicate patterns already established in this area of research: mainly that children of color are more positive and open to intergroup relationships than white children. This is important for educators to know as native Italian children will have to be supported in opportunities to meet and create friendships with immigrant children as they may have more negative perceptions of these children. Hence, intercultural and multicultural educators should create opportunities for sustained intergroup friendships if they wish to support multicultural spaces.

While the results of the Italian sample were congruent with the literature on real life intergroup friendships as well as the literature on the perceptions of these relationships, the US sample demonstrated different trends. White students in the US saw a similar pattern to students of color in Italy. Mainly, they saw less of a difference between inter- and intra-race relationships, indicating a positive perception of intergroup friendships.

This finding is surprising, as it is not congruent with previous research findings on intergroup friendships. In addition, children of color in the US sample perceived intragroup friendships more positively than intergroup ones. Again, this finding is surprising as it, too, is not congruent with previous literature. Reasons for why these results may be surprising are discussed in the limitations section.

## 5. Limitations

There are several limitations in this initial study, the first of which is generalizability of the findings. As noted in the methods section, the school from each country was chosen because of its diverse student body. Given this, students in these schools may have differing views on intra and intergroup

friends than those in more segregated schools. This may also contribute to what we describe as surprising findings, in that these schools do not necessarily represent ones that are often studied in the literature.

Lastly, this study investigated student perceptions on intra and intergroup friendships, but we did not investigate the school context that may have contributed to our findings. For instance, it is possible that one or both schools had specific initiatives related to fostering intra or intergroup friendships, the impact of which was not considered in student perceptions.

## 6. Implications and future research

In an increasingly global society migration will continue to diversify our communities and schools making these important child development contexts multilingual, multiethnic/multiracial, and multicultural. Italy is experiencing a large demographic shift, and Italian children are learning side by side with African and African-descent and Asian and Asian-descent children for the first time in the country's history. In the United States schools were court-ordered to integrate racially in 1954, and while de facto racial segregation is a significant concern, urban schools are becoming increasingly ethnically and linguistically diverse due to immigration patterns.

This increasingly multicultural school context represents an opportunity for educators to address the important goals of multicultural education including a reduction of racial prejudice and racism in our schools and communities. While important, it will take much work to accomplish these goals.

Both in Italy and in the United States children are developing and learning in social contexts informed in racism and prejudice. It is of the utmost importance, therefore, to support children in capacity to create meaningful relationships with children of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds as these relationships are important in and of themselves and are linked to prejudice reduction.

Educators should be looking for ways to support students to create meaningful friendships across socially constructed boundaries of country of origin, language, race, and ethnicity as these friendships have been linked with prejudice reduction and positive measures of social emotional development (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000 for review).

We acknowledge that this study is a first step in learning about young children's potential intergroup friendships in the Italian context. We plan to conduct a next iteration of studies, which will include a focus on qualitative inquiry including observation of children in classroom contexts. These future studies will allow us to understand some of the dynamics in each of the school contexts, which either support or mitigate intergroup contact and friendships. This, in turn, will allow us to think about the relationship between children's perceptions of interracial/interethnic friendship and their real life participation (or lack thereof) in these important relationships.

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