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# Children Speak about Interethnic and Interracial Friendships in the Classroom

## Lessons for Teachers

*Cinzia Pica-Smith*

There is a lot of teasing in my class, and kids are not going to be friends if other kids are calling them "slaves"... The teacher could talk to the kids ... I think teachers could talk to students about being friends with a Black, a Black friend.

—*Della, European American girl, 4<sup>th</sup> Grade*

The ability to interrupt and de-construct prejudice and racism to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with children of diverse groups is necessary to the healthy social-emotional development of all children and to support spaces informed in social justice. Indeed, the goals of prejudice reduction and increased positive intergroup relations have been integral to multicultural education frameworks (Banks, 2004; Zirkel, 2008) and are as salient today as they were in past decades.

Paradoxically, in an increasingly multiracial society and after more than fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education* and attempted integration, our society remains ambivalent in its diversity as evidenced, for example, by racial segregation in housing (Clotfelter, 2001; Crowder, 2000) and the de-facto racial and class segregation of U.S. public schools (Boger & Orfield, 2006; Orfield, 2001).

In this context of social inequities, children's capacity to create meaningful close friendships across ethnic/racial, class, and religious lines must be investigated and supported by researchers and practitioners alike. Unfortunately, though very important, interethnic and interracial friendships have not been amply studied.

Researchers have noted this paucity of research (Quintana et al, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001) and have called for more studies in this important area. Therefore,

in this article, I discuss my research on children's perspectives of interracial and interethnic friendships in a multiethnic school and highlight children's voices on these intergroup friendships.

Schools are important spaces in which social and cultural competencies necessary to the formation of intergroup friendships may be supported (Zirkel, 2008). Schools provide settings in which children learn about themselves and other children, adults, and the society in which they live. Steinitz & Solomon (1989) describe schools as "sites of identity," places where "young people draw conclusions about what sort of people they are, what society has in store for them, and what they can therefore hope for" (p. 135).

In this context, teachers, staff, and administrators may act as important models and facilitators for young children as they develop intra and inter-personally. Therefore, in this article, I also examine how the school supports or mitigates these intergroup friendships.

### Why Should Educators Focus on Intergroup Friendships in Schools?

Interethnic/interracial friendships (also known as intergroup friendships) in childhood have been identified as significant predictors of positive intergroup attitudes and decreased racial prejudice both in children and adults (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Ellison & Powers, 1994; Pettigrew, 1997;1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Interracial friendships have been found to have positive effects on behavioral, social, and affective domains (Lease & Blake, 2005). Hunter & Elias (1999) found that children with at least one reciprocated high quality interracial friendship were more socially skilled, rated higher on a sociability measure, and participated in more diverse social networks than children with no interracial friendships.

Research on multicultural educational practices that foster positive intergroup relationships reveals that intergroup friendships contribute to positive school culture (see Banks, 2004; Zirkel, 2008), which, in turn, positively affects academic development of both children of color and White children in ethnically and racially heterogeneous school settings.

More specifically, for example, research on cooperative learning practices reveals that this equity pedagogy supports positive intergroup relations (Aronson, 2002; Slavin & Cooper, 1999) and has been demonstrated to enhance the learning of all children (see Cohen & Lotan, 1995). Therefore, these relationships should be supported in school settings as these important bonds between children of diverse groups are beneficial to individual children's healthy social-emotional development *and* the development of more equitable classrooms, schools, and societies.

### Theoretical Framework

While developmental psychologists have focused on individual factors that contribute to the development of intergroup friendships, sociologists, social psychologists, and educational researchers have focused their inquiries on contextual factors that promote intergroup friendships. Situational factors such as school and classroom demographics and absence of "tracking" in schools (Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Khmelov & Hallinan, 1999), collaborative learning teams (Slavin & Cooper, 1999), and availability of extracurricular activities (Joyner & Kao, 2000; Moody, 2001) have been examined as significant factors that contribute to intergroup friendships.

These studies have illuminated important school policies and practices that should be considered carefully in order to promote equity and multiculturalism in schools. On the other hand, these studies,

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focused on context, have largely ignored children's voices and understanding of interethnic and interracial friendships.

An assumption that informs this study's methodology is my belief that children, themselves, are the best informants on the topic of interracial/interethnic friendships in school. They can inform us about the supports and barriers that educators create. Children can shed light on the differences between how adults and young people define and experience any given dynamic.

For example, while most teachers in this study expressed that the school was a multicultural space, due to its multiethnic demographic, children did not necessarily *live* and *experience* the space as such. Coker-Colo (2002) states that though many schools focus on ethnic and racial composition to define cultural diversity and promote positive intergroup relationships, a quantifiable measure of diversity, a school's culture of cultural diversity is not measured by demographic trends. Rather, he asserts that a culturally diverse space is one in which different and varied ways of knowing and being are part of a "full reality" that inform the space. Hence, to learn about this "full reality," it is necessary to invite children to share with us their lived experiences of said reality.

Therefore, I use an interpretive, phenomenological framework (van Manen, 1990) that explores how children are living their experiences with intergroup friendships in order to highlight possible processes or mechanisms involved in the formation and maintenance of these relationships. By listening to how children understand these friendships, we may be able to learn how and why some of the individual and contextual factors identified in previous research contribute to intergroup friendship-making.

### Methodology

Methodologically, it was my goal to position this work and study of children's perspectives on interethnic/interracial friendship in such a way that children would become the subjects and informants of this research. As Hogan (2005) suggests, by listening to children's voices, researchers can work in a manner that support children as subjects, rather than objects, of research. For this reason, this phenomenologically-informed (van Manen, 1990) project was designed to allow children themselves to narrate and report on the studied phenomenon.

The data reported in this article are drawn from a larger study on children's perceptions of interethnic/interracial friendships conducted in one multiethnic school in a Northeastern city of the United States. I present the data from twenty semi-structured interviews with ten fourth and fifth-grade children in the school.

I employed semi-structured individual interviews (Greene & Hill, 2005). Questions I asked all children included: (1) how would you describe a friend? (2) I hear a lot of children talking about their best friends, what is the difference between a friend and a best friend? (3) Would you tell me a little about your friends? (4) Are any of your close friends from a different ethnicity/race and cultural background than your own? Tell me about your friendships with them. (5) How could children's friendships with children of different ethnicities/races and cultural backgrounds be encouraged? Follow up questions were based on children's responses.

Interviews ranged in length between 40 and 55 minutes. Each child's first interview was audio-taped and transcribed word-for-word. I also conducted follow-up interviews to triangulate data and conduct member checks. Follow-up interviews were not recorded or transcribed.

### Site

This study took place in one public elementary school in a Northeastern city of the United States. The city counts 95,658 inhabitants. Census data on racial makeup reveal that the city's population is comprised of 63.1% White, 28.1% Black, 5.6% Hispanic, and 3/3% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000). Almost 38% of the inhabitants live in owner-occupied housing while 62.4 % of the population lives in rental property. The median household income in 2000 was \$30,041, and 16% of families live at or below poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000).

The elementary school in which this study took place is situated in a neighborhood with both owner-occupied homes and rentals. The student body is made up of 558 children. The school's demographic records indicate that the racial distribution of children is 48% White, 39% Black, 7% Asian, and 6% Hispanic. Approximately 44% of children receive free or reduced lunch with 33.39% of children receiving free lunch while 10.73% of children receive a reduced lunch. During the academic year 2005-2006 there were 424 non-bussed students (75.9%) and 134 bussed students (24.1%), indicating that a majority of children live in the immediate surroundings while a

minority of the students arrive to school from other neighborhoods or areas of the city.

### Participants

Data presented in this article are derived from interviews with ten fourth and fifth grade children ranging in age between ten and eleven years. Five children interviewed identified as either African American or Black and five identified as European American or White. Two children, one White and one who identified as Black, reported being Jewish and Muslim respectively. Five girls and five boys participated in the interviews. Four of the five African American children reported having at least two friends of a different ethnic/racial background; two of the five European American children reported having at least two friends of a different ethnic/racial background. Table 1 lists the interviewee's self-identifications; names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

### Analysis

Consistently comparing data ensured that I questioned my analysis in order to contribute to the validity of interpretations (Boyatzis, 1998). I coded inductively, employing open and axial coding, while recognizing the influences of my theoretical perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These themes are presented in the next section.

### Findings

Overall, children describe intergroup friendship as less common, challenging, and more difficult to maintain. Children explained that there are more barriers to these friendships. However, when they are formed, these friendships are described as important and rewarding. There are more barriers to these friendships, and they are more vulnerable to termination. The findings below are organized thematically to express the most salient conclusions and to answer the two research questions: (1) how do children make meaning of inter-

**Table 1**  
**Interviewees' Self-Identifications**

|                                | Girls                  | Boys                      |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>African American/Black</i>  | Brianna<br>Linda       | Aubre<br>Devon<br>Letrell |
| <i>European American/White</i> | Anne<br>Della<br>Sofia | Brian<br>Chris            |

ethnic/interracial friendships and (2) what are children's perceptions on how these friendships can be supported in school?

### How Do Children Make Meaning of Intergroup Friendships?

#### "Learning Things"

Children describe having less interethnic than intraethnic friendships, i.e., "About like three [close friends] are not the same cultural background as me, and, like, ten are the same cultural background as I am"(Chris). Although less common, these friendships were described as rewarding in that children describe them as opportunities to learn about different ways of being, thinking, playing, and living than the ways they know from their own upbringings and families. On the other hand, learning new things is interpreted differently depending on the child's experience and whether his/her experiences is validated in a larger cultural context.

When talking about interethnic friendships, Letrell states that one of the positive aspects of these relationships is the inherent possibility of engaging in activities that are "new" or unfamiliar due to the fact that children of different ethnicities may have differing interests: "Spanish people might have a lot of different hobbies than White people and Black people." The idea that friends of different ethnicities can provide learning opportunities around different habits, practices, and hobbies was voiced by many children. Without further probing it may appear that children are interpreting these relationships as vehicles to learning about different traditions:

I think that some of the things that are good [about having interethnic friendships] are that they [friends of different ethnic backgrounds] can teach you a lot of things ... they can teach you things you don't know, or things you don't know how to do. They may have a lot of different hobbies that they like, but you don't. They might teach you how to do them. (Devon)

However, children's interviews reveal that "learning things" is also about learning about different ways of being and learning to understand that these ways of being are acceptable, legitimate and meaningful.

Sometimes my friends will ask me why I don't eat it, why I don't eat that meat. I explain to them why, and they just say "okay", and we leave it at that ... that doesn't bother them ... We do a lot of things different ... and sometimes we learn to do things from each other. (Della)

In this excerpt Della does not refer to "learning things" as simply learning a hobby or practice; rather, she explains that she and her friends learn that differing values, ways of thinking, and behavioral manifestation of those are legitimate and "okay." Their friendships allow them to encounter and "learn" that they do "things different" in a manner that doesn't position one way of being as more relevant than another.

In a similar manner, Devon explains that there are advantages to having interethnic friends, rather than having only intraethnic friends:

I think that they [children who do not make intergroup friends] would probably have a couple of things that they like to do or something, and they will have that for, like, the rest of their life ... A lot of different people, who have different friends, they will learn a lot more things because they will have a lot more different friends, different backgrounds, and they will teach you more things ... and you learn ... that everyone thinks, like thinks, different.

Devon's narrative reveals two very important ways in which he thinks that "learning things" are important. First, Devon associated participating in "different" activities with people of "different background" with *thinking* differently. This is most important. In our interviews, Devon expressed being interested in learning new hobbies, cooking, and music. In the quote above, he also expresses that intergroup friendships create an opportunity to "learn" things that may create the opportunity to expand one's understanding of the diversity of thinking inherent in a truly multicultural context.

Furthermore, Devon expresses that having intergroup friends and learning new things will affect a person's thinking and development throughout life. He explains that if one surrounds oneself exclusively with friends who are similar to oneself, one may not grow and change as "they will have that for, like, the rest of their life."

#### "Do It as Good as They Do"

While "learning new things" or new ways of thinking and being is identified as a benefit of interethnic friendships, it is simultaneously described as difficult. Children explain that it is sometimes challenging to adapt and do things differently than one is used to doing. This idea is expressed by both children of color (Letrell, Devon, and Linda) and by Chris, who is White. Yet, the children's explanations suggest that the difficulties are qualitatively different for Linda, Letrell, and Devon, whose changes and adapting seem

to have to do with conforming to the White dominant value system and conforming to the ways of thinking and being of their White friends.

The children are aware that in order to cross ethnic/racial lines in friendships, they must "do things" in a manner that is acceptable and defined by a White dominant discourse. These children may be learning that their ways of being are not validated in a larger "multicultural" context. Consider Letrell's explanation, which demonstrates both the opportunities and challenges of navigating intergroup friendships:

I noticed that my friends who are the same cultural background like me, like kind of the same stuff as I do ... my friends who aren't the same cultural background as me like different things than we like. So the good things about having different friends is that you can do different things and learn something new. But the bad things is that you have to try to make yourself like the same things that they do, and try to do it right ... try to do it as good as they do. Like if you are not used to it, and you make yourself like it.

When I asked Letrell what "doing it right" meant, he reiterated "doing it like they do." I then asked if he could stay friends with boys who do things differently if he "did things your way," and after a pause Letrell answered "I don't know." Letrell illustrates a way in which children of color learn that White children demonstrate the standard of what is "right." Hence, learning "new things" may be rewarding but also involve learning that the "acceptable" ways of being derive from the dominant discourse, a discourse that is often recognized by children of color but not by White children (Ramsey, 2004). As I will discuss later in a section about teachers and the school context, it appears that children of color garner this understanding in a school context that demonstrates it does not value all children equally.

Devon echoes Letrell's sentiment. He explains that he must learn how to do things differently and "good."

You might have to try a lot harder to get to have a friend who isn't the same as you. You have to listen to music that you are not used to liking and playing different sports that you don't. You have to, you know, like, be like, be like, be like them ... try to be like, be as good and nice as the other person is.

Again, Devon expresses that one must learn to appreciate different activities in order to cross cultural boundaries in friendships. This is a thought expressed



by all children involved in intergroup friendships; all children must engage in at least some unfamiliar play. However, Devon (like Letrell) may be learning that to maintain friendships with children of the dominant group, it is not enough to “learn new things”; rather, he must learn to “be like them.” Being like another implies adopting ways of thinking, knowing, and being different from one’s own; it is not merely learning to appreciate others’ ways of being.

The two European American children who have interethnic friendships that were interviewed did not express having to “change” or adapt to participate in these friendships. Rather, they experienced “learning new things” while being themselves and not leaving their familiar contexts. From their narratives, one feels that they participate in intergroup friendships without having to compromise their identities. Literally and figuratively, they do not tread as unfamiliar ground as their friends who identify as Black or African American.

When I asked Della if she and her two best friends (an African American girl and a Pakistani-American girl) spent time together after school, Della stated that her friends come to her house sometimes. When I asked if she visited them in their homes, she replied that she had not. Chris, a European American boy, also reports that his interethnic friends have been to his home, but that he has not been to theirs.

Informed by my interviews with Letrell and Devon, I asked Della and Chris if it was more difficult to maintain the friendships they shared with children of different cultural backgrounds. Della was quick to respond that there was nothing difficult about these friendships. Chris responded:

I think it’s, I think it’s harder at first but after a time and time it gets easier ... because the guy would be like a stranger, ... you wouldn’t know what they do in their spare time, where they just hang out with their friends, or just, like, stay at home and just relax and watch TV, stuff like that ... but after a while, they will start to be closer and closer like friends and he’ll do things with you; after you get to know them a while, you get a little bit closer and start to become real friends.

Like Devon and Letrell, Chris finds that these intercultural relationships have to be negotiated. However, his narrative is focused on learning about different habits, hobbies, and likes and dislikes of his friends. He emphasizes that after getting to know children of a different background, “they” (children in the “outgroup”) will

begin to do things “with you.” In contrast, when Devon and Letrell speak of negotiating these relationships they emphasize having to learn to do things “good” or “right” and being “like them,” indicating an understanding that they must change themselves to fit the relationships. Hence, these boys make meaning of these relationships, and “learning things” differently.

Lastly, when Letrell and Devon speak of these relationships, they present an ambivalent attitude as if they find these relationships worthwhile and challenging at the same time, which seems appropriate in cases where children feel they must adopt and “acculturate” to different ways of being. After an exchange between Letrell and myself regarding the costs and benefits of these relationships, consider Letrell’s response, indicative of the above-mentioned ambivalence:

Sometimes, some days I feel like there is no use for it [making/maintaining inter-ethnic friendship], and other days I feel like it’s good and there is a use for it—it’s hard, it’s hard to explain.

These friendships are complicated: though they may be rewarding, they may present affronts to racial, ethnic, and cultural identity of children of color.

#### “The Same as Me”

Experiences in ethnically/racially diverse contexts in which children of color feel that their ways of being are not accepted or valued may result in a protective response in which children choose to remain in their “ingroup” to mitigate the psychologically negative experiences of participating in the dominant discourse that devalues them (Pahl & Way, 2006; Tatum, 2003). Indeed, Tatum explains that racial identity development, which includes an in-group focus, may be accelerated by experiencing discrimination (2003).

Linda, an African American girl, who shared that she had been a target of White children’s racial slurs, explains that she can talk to her same-race friends “more.” She explains that intragroup friends “always talk to each other,” “understand each other a lot,” and “feel more good around each other.”

Letrell explains that “my friends that are the same as me understand what I’m going through.” He adds “I can be myself with my same friends.” Statements by children of color about same-race friend preferences can be understood in the context of a psychologically protective process rather than outgroup prejudice towards White children.

#### What Barriers and Possibilities Exist in School?

All children interviewed described a complex school context in which prejudice and discrimination are present. This racial prejudice is understood by the children interviewed as endemic and normative as well as detrimental both to individual students and to positive intergroup relationships. When this prejudice is not confronted by teachers and administrators, children of color and White children with friends of color understand this as teachers “not caring” for them.

When teachers do not “care” for all students, they promote unequal status among children, which violates the positive intergroup contact conditions conducive to intergroup friendships (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). This unexamined dynamic, which privileges White children over children of color, creates barriers to intergroup friendships. However, all children expressed their ideas about how teachers could respond to prejudice in a manner that would support all children and intergroup friendships. In addition, children explained many ways in which teachers could foster positive relationships between children of different backgrounds.

#### “Slaves”: Racial Prejudice in the Classroom

Both children of color and White children who share interethnic friendships reported the presence of ethnic/racial discrimination in the school and believe that this prejudice constitutes a barrier to intergroup friendships. Della, a European American girl, with two “best friends” of color reported incidents in which White children in her class called African American children “slaves.” She spoke at length about this episode of racial prejudice and was hurt and impressed by its unfolding. She reports that this taunting is harmful and “hurts their [children of color] feelings.” Chris, a European American boy, reports that Asian children have been called “flat faces”; he, too, believes this type of name calling “is very hurtful.”

While both Chris and Della find these behaviors reprehensible and often act as allies to their friends who are bullied by intervening during incidents of bullying, they appear resigned to the fact that prejudice and exclusion of peers based on ethnicity/race is part of the fabric of schools. Chris states that “some people [White children] feel like they can only be friends with certain people because they will be the same.” He explains that these

children don't want to be with children who are different because they are "prejudiced." Della describes prejudice as an almost-normal developmental process:

I would say I haven't really seen it [bullying and insulting children with ethnic/racial slurs] in kindergarten or first grade or second grade because they, you know, they're just kindergarteners and first graders and second graders [they] just want to have lots of friends—want to have a good time—and they don't really care what color you are or what you believe. They don't know about prejudice and races and stuff. And so when you are bigger and get to a higher grade you learn about that and then you start realizing that you don't really like this or that, or someone from a different race or ethnicity, and you start calling them names.

Della notices that young children cooperate and play together and that as children mature some learn prejudice and individual racism. She exemplifies an understanding of young children as innocent, naïve, and "color-blind" corrupted by racism as they grow older. This belief represents a lay theory of prejudice commonly found among adults (Esses & Hodson, 2006).

In addition, this ubiquitous racial prejudice in school is understood to be a significant barrier in the formation and maintenance of interethnic friendships. Linda, an African American girl, reflects that "if you have people calling you names, then, you are not ever gonna be friends!" Aubre, an African American boy, reflects in a similar manner when he states "There is nothing I can do . . . I can't be friends with those kids [talking about White children who have used racial slurs in class]." These data exemplify the outgroup prejudice that is present and uninterrupted in schools that mitigates interethnic/interracial friendships and contributes to a protective ingroup friendship selection process by some children of color like Linda and Aubre.

### **Prejudice Disguised: "A Long Time Ago"**

Two distinct manifestations of racial bias and prejudice were noted in children's narratives. The first manifestation, noted above, is a vociferous and observable prejudice that impedes positive intergroup relations. Another form of prejudice is more subtle. White children without interethnic friends made comments stating that discrimination is "bad" and that it happened "a long time ago." The two children quoted below both do not share any interethnic/interracial friendships.

A long time ago, I think, I am not sure,

I don't think White people and Black or Africans talk to each other that much, a long time ago. I think it's bad that they didn't like each other. (*Brian*)

Most White kids like me know about discrimination and stuff. And, well, I don't like it, what did happen, even though that was like a million years ago . . . Now we all can make friends. (*Sofia*)

While acknowledging that discrimination and excluding children due to ethnic and racial identity is "bad," these children did not see their lack of intergroup friendships as connected to exclusion or discrimination; rather, these children saw that their exclusive intragroup friendships were simply circumstantial:

Well, I guess people are use to, I guess kids are used to being with the people that they are always friends with, and I guess it just happens. You just get more friends with the people you are used to and you spend more and more time with them when you get older. (*Sofia*)

Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, and Fuligni (2001) have identified this "intragroup selectivity" as associated with racial prejudice. They explain that children's racial prejudice is manifested more through "ingroup favoritism" than "outgroup derogation." While children explain that much outgroup derogation is present in the classroom, exclusive ingroup friendships by White children represent a quiet, undisturbed form of prejudice.

Sofia and Brian believe that discrimination happened "a million years ago" or "a long time ago." This illustrates that they do not believe discrimination is an issue today, certainly not in their classrooms. Sofia, for example, sees a rise in intragroup friendships as children grow older as a matter of personal choice. This social-conventional reasoning has been observed in previous studies. Children who do not believe that gender and racial discrimination exist are more likely to explain the exclusion of "cross-race" peers as a personal decision (Killen, Crystal, & Ruck, 2004).

Below, Brian expresses another form of racial bias:

I used to [have an African American friend]. I was in every one of his classes until third grade, no, I think it was second grade. So from my pre-K till second grade I was in his classes and that, but then he wasn't in my classes any more. I think [pause] he was held back. I don't think he must have finished all his work.

It is important to note that the child that Brian is referring to was not held back.

Rather, he moved to another school. Arguably, Brian may be drawing upon his own experiences of not completing homework and the consequences he understands to be associated with not performing well in school when making sense of his friend's absence. However, the fact that Brian believes that this boy did not finish his work and was held back may be indicative of racial bias, especially in the larger context of his interview with me.

First, throughout the interview, Brian (like two other White children, Sofia and Anne) often seemed surprised by my questions and was somewhat reticent when asked to discuss *race*. It often appeared to me that he was looking for the socially desirable answer as he lengthily paused to reflect on each question. Indeed, lengthy pauses were frequent in his interview as well as Sofia's and Anne's. I often felt Brian was holding back from honestly answering my questions. This discomfort with talking about issues of race has been noted among White children (Ramsey, 2003).

During our first interview he stated that he did not think that an African American boy and European American boy would likely be friends. When asked why, he stated he could not explain why because it would be "mean." In addition, at another point in the interview when I asked Brian if he had any friends of different ethnic/racial background in his neighborhood, Brian responded that he did not because his mother is "very careful" about whom he plays with. Therefore, it appears that Brian's assumption regarding his African American friend's departure from school because he failed due to not doing his homework may be related to Brian's overall racial biases.

### **The Teacher's Role in Mitigating or Supporting Intergroup Friendships**

Teachers are described as potential models by children in this study. They may act as facilitators or barriers in the friendship formation of children of different ethnicities/races. According to the children I interviewed, teachers facilitate interethnic friendships when they provide opportunities for children to play and work in interethnic groups. They facilitate intergroup friendships by creating a psychologically and emotionally safe classroom where all children are valued and protected from racial taunting.

Finally, they support intergroup friendships when they model and share stories of their own friendships. Children explain that teachers may act as barriers



to intergroup friendships in several ways: when they do not respond to interrupt critical incidents involving racial prejudice, when they do not provide or facilitate opportunities for children to interact in interethnic/interracial group situations, and when they do not demonstrate their interest and investment in interethnic/interracial friendship.

When teachers do not interrupt incidents of racial prejudice they are complicit in the perpetuation of racial bias, thus contributing to an atmosphere that is not conducive to intergroup contact. The children notice the absence of an intervention that would both send a message to the perpetrators of racist behavior as well as comfort to the targets of the racism is noticed by children. Linda believes her teacher should do more to respond to racial taunting by classmates:

I think you [teachers] should talk to the children who were doing it and explain why it's not OK, why it hurts their feelings ... 'cause they just really feel sad, because, you know, it's a really bad thing to say that ... and, if they keep doing it, maybe you should talk to their parents or something.

When I asked Della, a White girl who tried to comfort her friends of color after they had been called "slaves," how her teacher reacted and disciplined the White children who were bullying her friends, Della stated:

Well, she usually gives them, like you know, some homework constraints, because she doesn't want to embarrass them, like, in front of the whole class. Plus, she has probably called their house.

The fact that the teacher did not intervene to end the racial taunting in a public manner constitutes a barrier to intergroup friendships as it creates a classroom climate in which prejudice and individual racism are unexamined and reinforced by an authority figure (Cohen, 1984; Cohen & Lotan, 1995). Furthermore, in the incident described above, Della interprets her teachers' lack of public intervention as an act that protects the bullies from embarrassment. Della does not question why some children (bullies) should be protected from embarrassment while it is apparently acceptable for others to be hurt and embarrassed.

This vignette as described by this student illustrates how teachers may reinforce the unequal status of children, which impede a positive intergroup climate necessary for intergroup friendship formation (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). The absence of interventions that sup-

port intergroup friendships constitutes a barrier to the formation of these relationships (Cohen, 1984; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Molina & Wittig, 2006).

Another critical absence children discussed was the lack of opportunities for quality intergroup contact both in a social and academic context. For example, Brian stated that when he was younger and in earlier grades "my teacher would take us out to play kick ball. So, we would make friends that way, basically like that." Children explained that a focus on friendship-making, sharing, and "playing" as well as intergroup facilitation no longer occurs in later grades.

Thus, an increasing focus on academic versus social emotional development and a combination of ability grouping practices, which have been demonstrated to create racial re-segregation (Oakes, 2005), and children's self-segregation create pronounced intragroup dynamics in the classroom. All ten of the fourth and fifth grade children mentioned that a way to support interethnic friendships is to allow children to "work together" or "be in groups together." Therefore, the absence of these group opportunities constitutes another barrier.

Facilitated opportunities to interact positively with children of diverse cultural backgrounds is especially important in light of the fact that children live in increasingly racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. Aubre, an African American boy, who reports having no interethnic/interracial friends and who expresses a distrust and dislike for White children, explains that children's negative feelings towards children from different racial groups may be mitigated by getting to know these children. However, he explains that these opportunities are not readily available.

You might not like him [a boy from a different ethnicity/race] because you haven't met him that good ... 'cause sometimes there's not enough time to meet someone that good in school, and I take the bus so I don't see him until the next day at school.

Letrell, who is bussed to school from an adjacent neighborhood, echoes Aubre's understanding that schools may provide the only context in which some children may have opportunities to engage in intergroup friendships. Letrell, who shares several interracial friendships, has learned that many contextual barriers exist between him and his White friends.

Friends who live in the same neighborhood, they might just, like, do homework

together and go to the park together, and friends who don't live in the same neighborhood, it's hard for us to get to the friends who are in a different neighborhood to do homework or stuff like that.

Thus, proximity, which is a determinant of friendship in the intergroup friendship literature (Hallinan & Williams, 1989), figured prominently in the children's analysis of their own intergroup friendships as they reflected on how teachers and schools must create these opportunities.

At this point it is important to note that teachers' practices are often driven by the school's organizational culture and system; thus, grouping practices should also be discussed in the context of school organization practices that act as contextual mitigating factors to the formation and maintenance of intergroup friendships. Though the children interviewed attribute grouping practices to individual teachers' pedagogies, these grouping practices are decided at the administrative level of school organization.

#### **"The Teacher Could ..."**

Both children who share and do not share intergroup friendships understand that these friendships are affected by proximity and the opportunity to engage in them. Most of the fourth and fifth grade children interviewed made suggestions that teachers could adopt to facilitate intergroup friendships. Here are some of the strategies children would ask their teachers to implement to encourage interethnic and interracial friendships.

Most of the children would like the teacher to support intergroup contact, which they believe will lead to an increase in friendships. Thus, as Linda explains below, grouping or pairing-up children with children of different backgrounds is an important way children believe teachers can support intergroup friendships.

She [teacher] can always assign them to be partners, so they can hang out, or sit at the table and work together and talk ... that would help because if they start talking about the subject, they would probably start talking more about other things, like, maybe when they are on the playground, they come—they come up to each other—and they start talking about other things and want them to play with them.

Linda believes that spending time together focused on an academic activity may lead children from different cultural backgrounds to talking and familiarizing themselves with one another. She explains that having a relationship, albeit one focused

on academics, would create supports and incentives for children to continue their relationships in social settings like the playground, where these children could engage in social and personal communication.

When asked how interethnic friendships could be supported, Brianna, Sofia, and Brian also note that teachers could provide opportunities for children of different ethnicities to work together in pairs or groups.

Put different people in one group, and maybe, like, help them. Tell a person, maybe, tell them to show the other person around and stuff. Maybe like that they will get friends. (*Brianna*)

The teacher could put a person that is different from you in the same group as you, or something, so you can get to know each other, yeah. (*Sofia*)

I think that when you work with partners, she [teacher] can pick him and have someone who is a different person than them ... most of the time, like, they become friends because they have to solve problems together. (*Brian*)

Thus, children believe that teachers can create opportunities for intergroup contact, which would, in turn, facilitate intergroup friendships.

All of the children in the fourth and fifth grade sample expressed the need for intergroup contact. However, a sub-sample of these children qualified their comment by stating that *positive* teacher facilitation was needed to ensure positive contact within these groups. In other words, some children added further conditions to what makes an intergroup experience one that supports the formation of interethnic/interracial friendships.

A teacher can walk up to them [children in an ethnically mixed group she/he created] and talk to them about having friends that are different, different skin color ... she can talk to them about trying to make different friends. (*Devon*)

Letrell explains that teachers could act as models by talking about their own intergroup friends with children who are attempting to engage in these friendships.

[teachers could help] ... by showing them [children in an ethnically mixed group she/he created] how [she] is friends with other cultural background people, showing them that there are different things that are different to them that they haven't tried yet.

Letrell's idea that teachers could share their experiences is an important one to consider. Adults support, model, and facilitate children's intergroup friendships

(Fletcher, Rollins, & Nickerson, 2004). As intergroup relationships are rare in both children and adults (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), the necessity for adult role models to help navigate the vicissitudes and barriers associated with these friendships is a salient one. Chris explains that teachers could share their knowledge of how they navigated the difficulties of these relationships to help students.

I think teachers could focus on the positive things that you both like ... I think they could help you because they have been through this, and it probably was hard, that probably was hard for them as it is for you.

Although Chris' optimistic belief that teachers may be able to facilitate these relationships because of their own experiences with intergroup friendships may be faulty, what is important to hear is that children want to have opportunities to discuss these relationships with expert adult facilitation. Therefore, teachers could create skillfully facilitated intergroup group-work opportunities and model in a way that would encourage interethnic friendships. This finding is consistent with research on intergroup collaborative learning teams as effective only when skillfully facilitated (Cohen, 1984; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Molina & Wittig, 2006).

### **Interrupting Racial Prejudice and Preventing the Institutionalization of Racism**

An important theme in these data was children's understanding that the teacher has the power and responsibility to interrupt incidences of racial prejudice in the classroom. Teachers who attend to the social and emotional safety of all children help to create a positive classroom/school culture in which intergroup friendships can happen. Children express that they are attentive to demonstrations of care that show the teacher's concern for all students' wellbeing. Letrell explains how he understands the difference between a teacher who cares about and respects interethnic friendships and positive intergroup contact and one who does not.

I think that your teacher cares about your [intergroup] friends, because if they see someone being teased, they try to tell him to stop and make the person who is getting teased feel better. And, I know they [teacher(s)] don't care if they just let it happen in front of them and don't do anything about it.

As mentioned earlier, teachers (and staff

and administrators) who do not interrupt incidents informed in racial prejudice are complicit in the perpetuation of racial prejudice and the institutionalization of racism in the classroom space. Furthermore, they are supporting a school culture in which all children learn that the dominant power structure as represented by educators as authority figures is one that devalues children of color and favors White children (Jay 2003). Not intervening to end the racial taunting in a public manner constitutes a barrier to intergroup friendships as it creates a classroom climate in which prejudice and individual racism are unexamined and reinforced by an authority figure (Cohen, 1984; Cohen & Lotan, 1995).

Linda, an African American girl, expresses that teachers have the power to support those children who are being teased.

Teachers can, they can say—if somebody is being really mean to you, or their friends are being really mean to you, they can say something to them, and, like they can cheer you up. They [teachers] can come and work it out.

In a case of racial taunting teachers can support a target of racism and create a classroom climate where all children feel equally cared for and valued. It is important to note how much emphasis children in this study place on teacher facilitation of interethnic/interracial groups. Most children do not simply believe that intergroup contact will lead to intergroup friendships. Children have experienced intergroup contact in the school that has replicated a larger context of oppression. Hence, when they request that teachers facilitate intergroup contact they are asking for the guidance, modeling, and intervention of teachers.

### **Discussion and Implications**

How children make meaning of interethnic/interracial friendships and how they perceive that schools as sites of identity can support these important relationships were the focus of this inquiry and article. Results reveal that children's perspectives on these questions are complex and grounded in their personal experiences.

Children engaged in intergroup friendships describe them as relationships in which there is potential to learn about multiple ways of understanding the world and "doing things." In this sense, these friendships may provide opportunities to promote a real multicultural agenda founded in a perspective of cultural diversity that goes beyond a partial understanding of diversity as multiethnic representation.



Children who have the opportunity to form intimate bonds with children of different cultural groups and across the socially constructed boundaries of race may learn in a more complex context of cultural diversity, one in which “understanding and valuing of differences” (Coker-Kolo, 2002) inform our ways of thinking that challenge dominant discourses.

Another important learning is that children who do not engage in these relationships or prefer intragroup friends do so for differing reasons. Two of the European American girls in this sample did not share interethnic/interracial friendships. Interviews with these two girls revealed interesting perceptions and attitudes on intragroup friendships. These girls explained that intragroup friendships simply “happen” and described the development of intragroup friendships as a normal occurrence explainable by the fact that similar people spend more and more time together and solidify relationships.

It is important to note that this perspective (intragroup selectivity as “normal”) is associated with racial prejudice, and children’s “lay theories” of intergroup relations (Cameron et. al., 2001). These girls along with another European American boy with no interethnic friendships described racial discrimination as a historical phenomenon and not one present in today’s society. These children did not make connections between participating exclusively in intragroup friendships and the exclusion of “out-group” peers due to their ethnic/racial identity.

In contrast, two European American children with intergroup friendships, noted the presence of much prejudice in their classrooms and attributed low levels of intergroup friendships to prejudice and exclusion of peers based on race. These children used moral reasoning to explain intra- and intergroup friendship dynamics attributing exclusive intragroup friendships to negative racial attitudes. Again, this finding reflects the work of Killen and her colleagues (2004), who have noted that children with “cross-race” friendships are more likely to understand a situation of exclusion based on ethnicity/race employing moral reasoning rather than social-conventional (personal decision) thinking.

Thus, there may be a connection between the reasoning, moral orientation, and racial attitudes of children and their perceptions of—and participation in—interethnic/interracial friendships. In addition, these children, who are involved in intimate close friendships with children of different

ethnicities, interpret what happens in the classroom differently than children without interethnic/interracial relationships.

Four of the five children of color interviewed all shared interethnic/interracial friendships. In particular two boys spoke of these relationships as personally meaningful and important as well as “difficult” to negotiate. One of the boys vacillated between believing that these friendships are worthwhile and worth abandoning.

Two important reasons were noted for these difficulties that should be discussed. First, the boys noted that in interethnic friendships, they felt as if they had to *change* their way of behaving, talking, and interacting. They perceived the need to do things in the “right” or “good” way. It was clear to me that these children were describing a process by which they had to demonstrate the behaviors consistent with the behaviors of White children. These findings should be couched in a socio-political, critical race theory, and critical multiculturalism perspective that elucidate the fact that our schools as a microcosm of our society are transmitting a culture that equates dominant White discourse as “normative” and “acceptable” while relegating the experiences of children of color as “different” and “marginal” (Tate, 1997).

The boys’ ambivalence to continue their participation in intergroup friendships is very important in the context of a discussion of the intersection of children’s ethnic/racial identity development, the experiences of prejudice, and their perceptions of—and participation in—interethnic/interracial friendships.

Before discussing these, it is important to note that another important theme expressed by children of color in the context of this discussion was that they felt that intragroup friends offered more intimacy and understanding of their personal situations than did intergroup friends. Children of color stated they could share their “feelings” more readily with other children of color.

When “Black children are teased” (harassed with racial slurs), children expressed that they did not think that friendships between “White and Black” children will manifest. In addition, an emotionally unsafe climate leads some children of color to the safety of the ingroup. Pahl and Way (2006) noted that experiencing discrimination and racism often accelerated the process of ethnic and racial identity exploration for teens of color. Others (Phinney, 1990; 2005; Tatum, 1992) have noted that during adolescence this “closing the

ranks” and “self-segregating” behavior is normative as young people explore their ethnic/racial/cultural identities and gravitate towards same-race peer groups.

These interview data point to the fact that perceptions of—and participation in—interethnic/interracial friendships for children of color may be related to the experience of the presence or absence of discrimination and racism and an accelerated process of ethnic/racial identity exploration spurred by these negative experiences. In the words of Linda, an African American girl who has witnessed racist incidents “if you have people calling you names, then, you are not *ever* gonna be friends!”

I argue that incidents of prejudice and racism in the classroom and overall school environment do not only prevent relationships between those children who are bullying and the victims of the bullying; rather, these incidents create a negatively-charged environment that will decrease the likelihood and prevent intergroup friendships overall. Therefore, exclusive intragroup friendships can be either a function of prejudice (as expressed in the narratives of European American children without interethnic/interracial friends) or a protective response against it (as expressed in the narratives of African American children).

It is also important to note that children’s narratives elucidated the children’s understanding that they do not grow and develop unto themselves. Rather, fourth and fifth grade children eloquently described the influences that their teachers, schools, and neighborhoods have on their developing perceptions of and real-life intergroup friendships. In effect children described a complex ecology of development. Children described adults’ behaviors, the decisions adults make for children, and the physical and psychological environments that adults help to create for children as extremely important to their ideas of intergroup relationships and racial attitudes. Teachers were noted for what they do to either improve or discourage positive intergroup contact and intergroup friendship formation and maintenance.

Teachers featured prominently in children’s narratives on the influences adults have on their intergroup friendships. First, all children, including those without interethnic/interracial friends, explained that these relationships could be fostered by working together in interethnic/interracial groups at school. Secondly, they noted that teacher intervention during acts of racist behavior would demonstrate that the teacher “cares” about all children, thus,

providing the necessary environment for these relationships to be explored. Thirdly, teachers could create a supportive environment for these friendships by talking about interethnic/interracial friendships, sharing their own experiences with friendships, and by encouraging children of different ethnicities/races to get to know one another through "buddy-systems."

Again, the factors identified by students are consistent with findings in previous studies that identified the factors associated with higher levels of optimal intergroup contact and/or cross-race friendships in schools such as the absence of ability grouping (see Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999), the presence of intergroup collaborative learning teams (see Slavin & Cooper, 1999) skilled teachers/facilitators, who can address incidents of ethnic/racial discrimination and facilitate meaningful discussion on issues of race/ethnicity and racism within intergroup learning teams (Cohen, 1984; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Cohen & Roper, 1972), and the presence of intergroup extracurricular activities (Moody, 2001; Quiroz et al., 1996).

The factors identified by the children also confirm the necessary conditions for optimal intergroup contact purported by contact theorist (see Pettigrew, 1998). In order for interethnic/interracial relationships to flourish children must work cooperatively on common goals in an environment where authority figures, i.e., teachers, staff, and administrators, support them in their efforts, grant the children equal status, and value them unequivocally and unconditionally.

### Implications for Educators

As most educators will agree, more than cognitive and academic development flourish as children participate in the learning-rich environments of schools. All domains of development are facilitated in the school context. Teachers, school administrators, and children's peers are all important influences in the lives of children both inside and outside of the confines of the physical school building. Steinitz & Solomon (1986) describe schools as "sites of identity," places where children learn about themselves, others, and their interpersonal relationship-making.

Schools are spaces in which children develop cognitively and academically, physically, socially, emotionally, and morally; each of these domains is inextricably linked to the others. Ideally, in de-segregated schools, children have the potential

to learn, play, and cooperatively engage with children of diverse backgrounds. In multiethnic schools children have the potential to learn what it is to live cooperatively in a multicultural society.

When supported and facilitated interethnic/interracial relationships can contribute to children's cultural competence, an important asset in an increasingly multicultural society as well as a decrease in negative racial attitudes and prejudice. Hence, it is in the best interest of educators to prepare our schools to support positive interethnic/interracial relationships among children.

As explained in this study, children's narratives were replete with discussions of what teachers and schools could do to support a multicultural climate, interrupt racism in the classroom, and facilitate intergroup friendships. Children provided solutions and a possible map for accomplishing these goals. It seems apparent that children value their potential intergroup friendships and would like help and support in creating and maintaining these relationships.

If educators wish to pay more than lip service to children's overall wellbeing (including their social-emotional development) and to the important goals of multicultural education, much attention must be paid to creating classrooms, playgrounds, and after-school spaces in which children have ample opportunities to work collaboratively in well-facilitated, multiethnic groups. Most importantly, schools as sites of identity must become multiethnic spaces in which children feel valued and validated in their diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world. Classroom teachers must be particularly attuned to interrupting racism both to protect children who may be victims of bullying and to foster the positive climate necessary for all children to feel valued enough to be encouraged to cross the socially constructed boundaries between "ingroups" and "outgroups."

In the end, both the children interviewed in this sample and previous research on decreasing prejudice in children reveal the necessity for thoughtful programming and classroom instruction that may facilitate intergroup dialogue and collaboration for the ultimate goal of supporting meaningful interethnic/interracial friendships.

### Note

When these children spoke to me about these friendships, they often used ethnic and racial labels interchangeably and erroneously; for example, they referred to classmates as

"Spanish" (meaning Latino/a), "Black," or "White" when asked about children of different cultural backgrounds, confusing ethnic and racial labels. They used ethnic labels such as "Pakistani" when asked about race. Though I understand that children often used ethnic and racial labels incorrectly, I have not corrected these in this article as I wanted the children's voices to be authentic and reflect both their struggles and developmental understanding of ethnicity and race.

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