

**Cross racial cross cultural friendships in middle school students:
Implications for social curriculum in schools**

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Olivia A. Williams, Ph.D.
920 Eberhard Center
301 W. Fulton Street
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49504-6495
Office Phone: 616 331-6610 Home Phone: 248 459-9744
Fax Number: 616 331-6515
E-mail: williaol@gvsu.edu

Grand Valley State University

Olivia A. Williams is an Assistant Professor of Foundations in Education at Grand Valley State University. Her primary research and writing interests are in Blacks in U.S. schools.

Kathy D. Evans is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Tennessee-Martin. Her research interests focus on the development of social competence in young children and factors that influence the development of friendships.

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Abstract:

The authors discuss social relationships, ethnic identity, and schools in the context of cross racial and cross cultural friendships among middle school students. They build a case for the need to for school reformers, administrators, teachers and others involved in the lives of children to focus on the social curriculum in schools.

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Introduction

The current tone of race relations should reflect the best of U. S. cross racial relationships more now than at any time in history. The last century documents revolts against enslavement, oppression, and racial discrimination. Many legal victories were won (for example, Brown vs. Board of Education) in a much divided land. Yet, now, in the 21st century, although our country perceives itself as a mixing pot, cross cultural relationships remain in an embryonic state (Hughes, et al., 2006). By the year 2050 children of color will out-number Caucasian children (Passel & Cohn, 2008). This fact alone is critical to future research that focuses on cross cultural relationships.

Today we celebrate the offspring of the first middle class African Americans in our country. “According to the U.S. Department of Education, in the year 2004 blacks earned 131,241 four-year bachelor's degrees from American colleges and universities”; (The Solid Progress 2010). Most impressive is that in 2008 the nation swore in its first African American president. Although, we do not expect a “Moses” experience from our current President, we do believe that the nation, the world, has an opportunity to maximize the on the forum of race in the era that having an African American president invites. Given his bi-partisan, reconciliation, bridge building approach would seem plausible that President Obama’s tenure will yield enlightened steps for youth.

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The Story

The Story: A sixth grader from a mid-size city; raised in a middle class suburban area and attending an ethnically diverse middle school tells his African American neighbors after being invited to attend a football game held at the diverse middle school, that he does not want to be around “those people” (referring to the African American athletes and their supporters). A few thoughts crossed the mind of the neighbor; one, he has been our friend for three years, has he always felt this way? Does he realize that “we” are “those” people? What kind of messages is he receiving from his parents? How is this going to affect our future relationship with him?

Prologue

Just fifty years ago it would have been unheard of for an African American child to attend a sleep-over or birthday party in the home of a Caucasian child. Even if they were in the same classroom, they never went home with each other. Around thirty years ago, society began to change their views on cross cultural childhood friendships (Korgen, 2002). Cross racial and cross-ethnic play was more common; elementary school students were much more likely to have playmates who represent various racial and ethnic groups. Designer schools, like Montessori preschools, portrayed themselves as multi-ethnic/multicultural (Perkins, 2005). Parents believed that enrolling their children in these kinds of programs identified

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their parenting efforts as responsible. Yet, there were still boundaries associated with those friendships. As such then the friendships only existed on the playgrounds and in the classroom (Lewis, 2008).

Today, children and youth have more cross racial social encounters than ever before (Lewis, 2008). Degirmencioglu, S.; Urberg, K.; Tolson, J.; Richard, P. (1998) found in their study on levels of friendships among middle school and high school students that best friends and the circle of best friends tend to remain at the same level throughout high school. Degirmencioglu et al. (1998) reported that, as students develop friendships, those in the close friendship network may replace a best friend, they rarely fall from grace to occupy the level of the “loose” network of friends. Studies with similar findings offer support for the thinking that if students are going to benefit from the value of cross racial friendships, they will greatly improve their chances if they formed those relationships during middle school (McGlothlin, Edmonds, & Killen, 2008).

Middle school offers a prime context for exploring new relationships. Middle school curriculum advances new interests for students that may include Science Fairs/Olympiad, Jazz band, Chess clubs (Martin, 1983). The framework for such experiences is to provide extra-curricular options for students at one of the most critical developmental time in their life. Young adolescents, while opposing too many adult directives, are most eager to explore the unusual experiences (Wickes,

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Ward, 2006). Under the guidance of teachings, schools offer a natural context to explore those new experiences. While the schools' investments in varied academic experiences are met with support, little attention is given to the social curriculum of students' experiences.

Educators invest in the academic and even the extracurricular curriculum for middle school students but little thought is given to the social curriculum of these students (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). In this article, *social curriculum* refers to the tone or the culture of the school or the classroom. Social curriculum defines the communication style, respect, rules, and communication of those within the classroom. It is the intentional and unintentional "lessons taught" by the educational leaders and "lessons caught" by the students. This paper discusses the importance of cross racial and cross cultural friendships in the context of the development of social curriculum in middle schools.

Social Identity Development of early adolescents

Young adolescent's social development centers around the initial answer to the 'who am I?' question. They are beginning to listen to the opinion of others and integrate those opinions with their own. They use the voices of other people such as parents and peers to determine what they like and do not like; what they spend their time doing; and who is popular or worthy of their attention. They are, while not fully aware, working hard on developing a concept of themselves. This process takes on the task of weeding and gathering, weeding out and inviting in.

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The early adolescent will switch between the weeding (or rejecting) and the gathering (or inviting in) quickly without notice, thus, appearing unsettled, unorganized, and flighty. Secure teens are looking for caring people who affirm them and in whom they can trust. Middle-school students are working to discover where they fit among other middle-schooler's. Therefore, close and intimate relationships, such as friendships, play a crucial role in not only the development at-hand but also in the choices made during this developmental period, and later in relationship decisions made during adulthood (Oyserman & Harrison, 2004).

Ethnic Identity Development

It is important to discuss specific features of ethnic and racial identity when looking at cross racial and cross cultural friendships. Identity development for African Americans extends beyond the adolescent's examination of her own personal question of 'who am I?' and 'where do I belong?' to 'where do I belong as an African American (or other ethnic minority affiliation)?' Identity development of people from minority ethnic groups follows similar paths in questioning and exploring both interpersonal questions and ecological questioning of belonging (Anyon, 1980). This section of the paper will make reference to African American while discussing ethnic identity, yet, with the understanding that other ethnic minority groups are included in the framework.

Studies of ethnic Identity dates back to the classic Clark and Clark (1950) "doll" study that examined the racial preferences Negro children. Findings from this

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study played a major role in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. They also encouraged additional studies on race. More recent studies have looked at variations of racial and ethnic identity. Phinney (1989) describes stages of ethnic identity; while the Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, and Cota (1990) study with reported of young children. This article will include the discussion of the importance of considering ethnic identity while developing cross racial and cross cultural friendships.

Critical Race Theory (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009) offers educators a way of understanding students' social dynamics particularly those daily encounters of racial micro aggressions. By understanding the sociological concept of (racial) micro aggressions educators have an opportunity to interrupt encounters that impede the development of cross racial cross cultural friendships. Micro aggressions can be intentional or unintentional and are in the form of verbal, behavior and environmental encounters. Each form digresses from the most observable (verbal/behavioral) to the least observable (environmental) encounters in a teachers classroom for instance, the lack of culturally reflective artifacts; photos, music, art, expressions, historical artifacts that decorate the room can reinforce the "invisibility" and thus, the devalue of the student of color would be an example of environmental encounters. One of the most disturbing fall-outs of micro-aggression is the fact the many [teachers] are unaware of these

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aggressions when they occur or while they are committing them, thus, making the study and discussion of cross cultural cross racial friendship critical to the experiences of students. When teachers understand the framework of micro aggressions, they are empowered to pay attention to their own behaviors and those of their students thus, creating the social curriculum that promotes cross cultural and cross racial friendships.

Social Curriculum

With the onset of high stakes testing as a NCLB mandate and the focus on academic curriculum, social curriculum has become a second thought to preparing students for citizenship and work. Quite the opposite of that preparation results when educators ignore the impact that social curriculum has on the purpose(s) of schooling. Charney (1997) purports that the social curriculum includes an overall integration of social experiences and expectations. She further describes it as dynamic in how we behave and encompasses the entire ecology of school experiences - aesthetics, tone, rules, schedules, and assessment for example. Social curriculum improves the academic goals for students and should not be viewed as a static lesson leaving it to the students to apply how it might be relevant. It is most effective when it is integrated in the entire ecology of the schooling experience rather than taught as a lesson.

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Social curriculum is evident in rules or policies that affect behavior of students, like bullying, seating charts, and group assignments. It is observed in what a teacher chooses to design her walls in the class room, or menu in the cafeteria. We see social curriculum in the pace and language used in schools, even in how schools relate to the community around its location. To understand the impact of social curriculum, it is important to explore how it is currently used.

Skiba and Peterson (2003) describe three ways that teachers make their social visions/expectations known to students - verbal clarity, written rules, and trial and error responses to behavior. Further, they discuss when these expectations are most and least useful and for whom they best work. For instance, students who read social cues well may need less direct instruction to understand the social expectations of a classroom. Students who may have difficulty reading and decoding social appropriateness in the classroom may need something different in order to benefit from the social curriculum. Social learning is both a cognitive and a social skill activity.

Social Learning theory

Albert Bandura (2001) is known as a social scientist who studied social cognition in adolescents. Social learning theory consists of three key factors in social learning, each represented at a point on a tri-angle; the person, the observed behavior and the context (what else in the environment). It is used to discuss the way in which adolescents learn social behavior from others, such as, their

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teachers, other students, other adults; the aesthetics, the images in the school and class room, the language spoken, the location of the school, etc. According to Bandura, the person who has the capacity for learning from the environment and the behavior exhibited by others in the environment will learn from and influence both while they in turn influence each other. Therefore, the environment or the classroom/school affects the teacher and the student (person) and so on. This theory is important to the implications section of the paper.

The literature

This section is informed by the literature on cross racial/cultural relationships, cross racial/cultural friendships, adolescent development, ethnic identity, and social curriculum. Much of the scholarly literature on these subjects dates back a few decades. Studies that addressed cross racial and cross cultural friendships, albeit, popular during the 70s and 80s, appeared to have lost momentum toward the later part of the 20th century. Slowly, it has begun to show more interest; therefore, the usefulness of the literature for this piece is primarily around areas containing the consistency, of theory. Additionally, many of the pieces that support or compete with this framework are included as to provide a balanced perspective. We began with reviewing the underpinnings of social development of adolescents, specifically considering ethnic identity coupled with the consideration of Critical Race theory. Moreover, special attention was paid to the usefulness of studies of cross cultural/cross racial friendships among early

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adolescents as a context for relationships. Finally, this examination is rooted in the ideas that individuals, employers and the broader society will benefit from a generation of people who have more positive and long-lasting cross cultural experiences during their formative years.

Social Curriculum

Students use the social curriculum in school to assist them to become good citizens, make friends, and develop other socially appropriate skills such as kindness and sharing. Social curriculum can also be a catalyst to assist students through the process of developing cross racial relationships. Romo and Falbo (1996) found that simply being in the same building with multiracial schoolmates did not provide enough social prompting to reach out and develop relationships with one another. Students may re-segregate by ethnicity or race even in multicultural schools. Just as during the Brown vs. Board of Education era of desegregation, moving one group from one location to another location was not enough to close the cross racial or achievement gap. It was later revealed that more aggressive integration efforts were necessary to assist in the transition (Orfield, 1996). Further, actual school policy may contribute to the re-segregation of students by ethnicity and race (Kozol, 2005). By default, total grouping and segregating students by achievement such as honors, vocational, or remedial classrooms add to the self-selection of friends by race and, thus, advance existing

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stereotyping and discrimination (Schofield, 1995). Moreover the development of Cross cultural social skills are critical assets in obtaining jobs, successful relationships, and social acceptance.

Adolescents and Friendships (the person)

Friendship Networks

In their study on adolescent friendship networks, Degirmencioglu, Urberg, Tolson, and Richard (1998) examined the friendship networks of adolescence using a quantitative classification to report network roles over a school year. They were also concerned with the continuity of those relationships. Teens were asked to assign their friends to specific groups - clique, loose groups, dyads, isolates, and remainders. They purport that it is not uncommon to believe that the classification of friendships might remain the same over time. This is very important to the social curriculum of middle school because if student friendship in high school has little change, it may be crucial that cross racial and cross cultural friendship establish earlier in the students development. It is also central to understand the development of relationships during adolescence. The study concluded that the friends preferred friends similar to themselves. The study also indicated that friendship networks may stay the same or have very little movement over time when students are in environments (schools) that have students with choices of friendship that are the same as them. If students are looking for sameness in their friendship choices and there is little pool for

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selection of those who are not similar to them, they may keep those friends that they came to middle school with rather than make new friends.

Further studies could provide more data on what happens to those friendships when students select friends similar to themselves even in the presence of an ethnically diverse school environment. Or, when students are in a segregated school, those adolescents may not have cross racial cross ethnic friendships. The authors also suggested that additional studies on the environment associated with Bandura's social cognition theory regarding environmental influences of social learning be pursued.

Friendship by Race: The Role of Cross racial/Ethnic Friendships in Social Adjustment

Kawabata and Crick (2008) examined the role that cross racial cross- ethnic friendship plays in social adjustment of fourth graders of various racial groups. They found that African American students had a lower frequency of cross racial and cross ethnic friendships than European American children. Importantly, they further reported that overall cross racial and cross ethnic friendship were associated with positive development. They found that those children who had cross racial and cross ethnic friendships were viewed as having leadership quality while students with the same race/ethnicity friends did not measure on their social adjustment scale. In other words, neither positive nor negative measures were

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documented. In their study Kawabata and Crick found that cross racial and cross cultural friendships yielded students with higher social currency than those of same-race same-ethnicity friendships. Therefore, it is important to further explore strategies to promote social curriculum that fosters cross racial and cross cultural friendships.

Close friendship between Blacks and White Americans

In her book on close friendship in America, Korgen (2002) studied the close friendships between Blacks and Whites in the America. She interviewed forty Black-White dyads friends. She defined “close” as “3:00 a.m. friends”, i.e., those one can phone in case of an emergency at 3:00 AM. Her interview consisted of topics on the pairs of friends’ background of their friendship; perceptions of their friends race prior to becoming close friends; views on race in general in the United States; and other topics on race relations. Although she discusses many elements of her study, it is important to note her interpretation on current race relations. Most notably is her claim that the existence of cross racial friendships makes it easier for others to explore new cross racial friendships. She claims that stereotypes about opposite races are affected when more close cross racial friendships are established. Thus, America’s race relations could improve with increased cross racial friendships.

Environment and Friendship (the environment)

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Social Curriculum and Friendships

Social distance as defined by Holmes (1997) is the non verbal communication in social interaction. Holmes studies the social distance affect on race and gender among young children. Those environmental effects of social distancing were use to develop one hypothesis that says; “children will place the smallest distance between themselves and same-race/same sex peer and the largest distance between themselves and a racial/gender out-of group peer.” She concluded that while gender was not a factor in the children’s notions of distancing, race was a pronounced factor. This notion is relevant to this article because if young children are organically physically monitoring their social distance with children who do not share the same race as them, they may continue this behavior as they age making it crucial that we address the social curriculum in middle schools.

School Segregation and Friendships

James Moody (2001) of the Ohio State University conducted an eloquent study on Race, School Integration, and Friendship Segregation in America. A key factor in this study was that when minority students were forced in re-segregated schools, cross racial and cross cultural segregation was heightened. He discusses that a major goal of Brown was to promote cross racial relationships. As mentioned above in Degirmencioglu et.al (1998) study on friendship networks,

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students will often select friends who share similar interests and traits as themselves. When schools comprised of racially and ethnically similar students little opportunity for cross racial friendship selection is available. Moody found similar outcomes for student in largely minority schools as well as largely majority schools. In both cases students cross racial friendship selection was stifled. He continues that school officials have opportunities to affect student behavior through the structure of social spaces and social curriculum. Of importance to this article is the conclusion that simply desegregation schools without a social curriculum will not necessarily result in the promotion of cross racial and cross cultural friendships; “the problem of racial friendship segregation is inherently multilevel: individuals choose friends but do so within the opportunities and constraints provided by the school context” (Moody, J. 2001 pp. 708).

Summary and Conclusion

As adolescents practice their social skills during middle school by exploring relationships and making friends, it is not unusual for middle school students to select friends who are similar to themselves. Once established, they tend to hold on to those friendship networks showing little movement between the friendship classifications. Students in segregated schools may have few diverse students with whom to explore relationships. However, students who have the opportunities to establish cross cultural and cross racial relationships are viewed as having

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leadership qualities and are better prepared for work and citizenship. These qualities may prove valuable to both their academic and societal contributions. Schools are a natural setting for students to practice these cross cultural relationships, however, sometimes the social curriculum of the educational setting must be intentional in order to offer cross cultural experiences. If middle school students are going to explore cross racial and cross ethnic relationships, the social curriculum of the school will need to be the conduit. Therefore, the interventions of schools, especially teachers and principals may need to provide intention social curriculum for diverse experiences for students.

Although, there are a few studies that report on pilot programs, further studies are needed test the most affective social curriculum for various student demographics in middle school.

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