

SUPPORTING INTERETHNIC AND INTERRACIAL FRIENDSHIPS AMONG YOUTH TO REDUCE PREJUDICE AND RACISM IN SCHOOLS: THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

Supporting interethnic and interracial friendships in schools among children and adolescents is an important part of a progressive educational agenda informed in equity, social justice frameworks, and critical multicultural education that leads to a reduction in racial prejudice. Positive intergroup contact is a necessary condition in prejudice reduction and the development of positive racial attitudes among ethnically and racially diverse groups of children and adolescents. School counseling initiatives focused on promoting interethnic and interracial friendships can have significant individual and systemic consequences such as: improving social, emotional, and cultural competence among youth; prejudice reduction; and the creation of equitable educational spaces informed in multicultural and social justice worldviews.

“You need to meet new cultures. You want to meet new people in a school that’s very mixed... If you are hanging out with other people, you might just learn things about them.”¹

(Atabei, Haitian-American student, Grade 4)

Children’s friendships are fundamental to the experience and expression of intimacy, affection, and companionship. Friendships provide contexts in which children learn how others feel, what they think, and what they believe (Dunn, 2004). In an increasingly global and multicultural society, interethnic and interracial friendships offer important opportunities for children to learn about how children of differing ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds make meaning of the world (Pica-Smith, 2009).

These relationships provide spaces in which children can explore and appreciate both the similarities and differences of their identities and experiences. School counselors, by virtue of their training, experience, and position in schools, can support interethnic and interracial friendships to improve cultural competence and understanding among young people. The purpose of this article is to review research and theory on interethnic and interracial friendships and provide examples of ways they may be promoted by counselors in schools.

¹ Quote collected in 2007 during a research project in a public school in a large Northeastern city of the United States. The child’s name has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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Interethnic and interracial friendships (also referred to as intergroup friendships in psychological research because they are formed between children of different racial and ethnic identities) positively impact both individual children involved in these friendships (Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009) and the overall school climate and culture (Zirkel, 2008). On an individual level, these friendships are crucial to child development, decreasing prejudice and developing positive racial attitudes (e.g., Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Feddes et al., 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), increasing cultural competence (Lease & Blake, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 2004) and social-emotional competence (Kawabata & Crick, 2008; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007), reducing perceived vulnerability (Graham, Munnikma, & Juvonen, 2014), and increasing academic performance (Newgent, Lee, & Daniel, 2007). On a systemic level, intergroup friendships link to positive school cultures characterized by intergroup collaboration (Zirkel, 2008). Hence, educators interested in children's development and the development of a collaborative school climate in racially and ethnically diverse schools should be involved in efforts to support these important relationships among children.

School counselors are invested in supporting children's social and emotional development and are uniquely placed to promote prejudice reduction and positive racial attitudes in contexts such as schools. The Search Institute (2007) identified cultural competence as a young person's knowledge and comfort with individuals of different ethnic, racial, and cultural background, and named it as one of the 40 developmental assets that support positive youth development. Intergroup friendships can provide a context in which children and adolescents acquire such competency. Therefore, school counselors can support this important area of development by fostering positive intergroup relationships, prejudice reduction,

and, ultimately, cultural competence (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2009, 2010).

Yet, these friendships are much less likely to exist in racially inequitable school contexts. For example, Moody (2001) found that when positional hierarchies were correlated with race (children of color were disproportionately grouped in the lower-achieving groups while white children were placed in higher-achieving groups), students were unlikely to form interracial friendships. Ponterotto, Utsey, and Pedersen (2006) noted that culturally competent school counselors should work to acknowledge prejudice and oppression and seek to change inequitable policies that exist in most schools in the United States because these create and reinforce the above-mentioned positional hierarchies. The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) asserts that advocacy and systemic change are two core themes for guiding professional conduct, and that school counselors who advocate for socially just outcomes seek to expand and develop their cultural competence and proficiency and address inequities that may impede student achievement or development.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS . . . CAN SUPPORT INTERETHNIC AND INTERRACIAL FRIENDSHIPS TO IMPROVE CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE.

By adhering to the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) and ethical guidelines (ASCA, 2010), school counselors are in a unique position to support the optimal group contact that facilitates intergroup friendships. In turn, focusing their efforts on positive intergroup contact and friendship formation will support a reduction in racial prejudice and racist bullying. By doing this important work, school counselors can simultaneously promote cultural competence and prejudice reduction, positively affecting a cooperative and equitable school climate and youth development.

CHILDREN AND INTERGROUP FRIENDSHIPS

Research that spans three decades demonstrates that schoolchildren have significantly fewer interracial friendships than intra-racial friendships (Aboud et al., 2003; Bagci, Kumashiro, Smith, Blumberg, & Rutland, 2014; Bellmore, Nishina, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2007; Currarini, Jackson, & Pin, 2010; Graham & Cohen, 1997; Graham, Cohen, Zbikowski, & Secrist, 1998; Hallinan & Smith, 1985; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Joyner & Kao, 2000). From this literature, several themes emerge. Same-race friendship preferences begin in preschool (Fishbein, 1996; Fishbein & Imai, 1993; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett, & Ferrell, 2005). Overall, interracial friendships decrease while intra-racial friendships increase as children grow older (Aboud et al., 2003; Kawabata & Crick, 2008). Even when cross-race friendships are present within a school context, these friendships are rated as lower in quality (Aboud et

al., 2003) and rarely considered best friendships (Reynolds, 2007). While research on real-life friendships of young children is scarce and somewhat outdated, studies on children's perceptions of interracial friendships confirm that children hold more positive perceptions of intra-racial than interracial friendships (Pica-Smith, 2011).

White children in particular hold less positive perceptions of interracial friendships (Margie, Killen, Sinno, & McGlothlin, 2005; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; Pica-Smith, 2011) and their in-group favoritism is linked to racial prejudice (Cameron, Alvarez,

INTERETHNIC AND INTERRACIAL FRIENDSHIPS POSITIVELY IMPACT BOTH INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN AND THE OVERALL SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE.

Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001). In Canada (Schneider, Dixon, & Udvari, 2007), the United States, (Bellmore et al., 2007; Fischer, 2008; Kao & Joyner, 2004) and Europe (Verkuyten, 2001), white children have fewer intergroup friendships than children of color. Although researchers have noted these differences in perception and friendship behaviors, they lack consensus on the mechanisms that explain these findings, even when controlling for racial diversity in school settings.

When intergroup friendships are present, however, they have a positive impact on child development. These relationships connect to prejudice reduction in both children and adults (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Feddes et al., 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), and with social skill and sociability development (Hunter & Elias, 1999; Lease & Blake, 2005). The positive impact on racial attitudes associated with intergroup friendships may be due to the fact that these relationships allow children and adolescents to form their own ideas of out-group members and afford the positive affective experiences associated with close friendship. Researchers posit that, for white children, these relationships may help to identify and resist the culturally prevalent stereotypes about people of color present in the societal context in which children develop (Killen, Clark Kelly, Richardson, Crystal, & Ruck, 2010). Other benefits of intergroup friendships include higher levels of social competence and self-esteem (Fletcher, Rollins, & Nickerson, 2004); sociability, leadership characteristics and social skills (Hunter & Elias, 1999); and academic achievement (Newgent, Lee, & Daniel, 2007). The Newgent et al. (2007) study is particularly noteworthy as it used a national database with 13,000 participants to reveal that 10th-grade students who had a best friend of a different race

evidenced higher levels of academic achievement than those who did not. The research evidence reviewed above indicates that young people who have intergroup friendships experience many positive benefits. Much of this research grew out of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) more than a half century ago.

INTERGROUP CONTACT THEORY

Gordon Allport (1954) began the important examination of how individuals' contact, or lack thereof, with people across racial/ethnic boundaries influenced racial attitudes, prejudice, and behavior. He theorized that our lack of significant and positive intergroup contact is one of the factors that greatly contributed to racial prejudice. Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) posits that optimal intergroup contact, defined as contact between different groups under a series of specific optimal conditions, contributes to the reduction of prejudice. The four conditions outlined by Allport are that members of the two groups involved in the intergroup contact must experience: (a) equal status within the situation, (b) common goals, (c) intergroup cooperation, and (d) support of authorities, the law, and customs. Each of these conditions is described in detail below.

The *equal status* condition refers to the extent to which children of different racial groups participate in the school context on equal terms. Zirkel (2008) explained that multicultural educators attempted to address this condition by deconstructing status differences such as those that may be created by formal or informal "tracking" systems in schools. Moody (2001) found that intergroup friendships

were more likely to occur in racially heterogeneous schools only if these positional hierarchies were not present. To promote equal status, efforts should be made to identify and correct educational practices, policies, and procedures that may create perceived status differences among students of differing racial and ethnic identities.

The *common goals* and *intergroup cooperation* conditions refer to the extent to which children experiencing the first condition of equal status are given opportunities to work collaboratively with one another in efforts to accomplish mutually agreed upon goals (Allport, 1954). For example, children on an athletic team work together to accomplish goals related to learning to play their sport and winning athletic competitions. They participate in these efforts cooperatively under the conditions of equal status as all members of the team are important in accomplishing the goals. Similarly, participating in a musical group with the goal of learning to play instruments together and putting on musical performances creates opportunities for young people to work together on the common goals of performing a musical piece under conditions where each orchestra member is valued and important in order to bring the musical composition to life.

The *support of authorities* condition refers to the extent to which schools explicitly support and practice norms that foster acceptance between groups (Allport, 1954). Hence, a school context in which educators are mindful of creating equal status conditions as well as opportunities for children of differing group affiliations to work cooperatively on common goals would exemplify support of authorities. Zirkel (2008) underscored the necessity to "address the ways that racism is encoded in school policies and practices, from disciplinary procedures and special education assessments to students' relationships with teachers in the classroom" (p. 1160), and asserted that addressing this institutionalized racism affects both student outcomes and positive intergroup relationships. Allport (1954) asserted the first three conditions of op-

timal intergroup contact in schools are interconnected, and none are possible without the support of educators and educational administrators.

Allport (1954) hypothesized that optimal intergroup contact would afford children and adults the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and prejudiced thinking by allowing people to acquire new learning about each other and each other's group. Hence, shifts in perceptions and cognition would contribute to changes in the way individuals of different groups interact with one another. More contemporary research on Allport's theory demonstrates a robust relationship between optimal intergroup contact, prejudice reduction, and intergroup friendships (Pettigrew, 1997, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Furthermore, advances in intergroup contact research add to Allport's original theory and elucidate the affective processes that help to reduce prejudice through the formation of intergroup friendships. Specifically, a recent meta-analysis of 515 studies demonstrated that intergroup friendships contribute to increased empathy and reduced anxiety toward the outgroup (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). In this analysis, the following dependent variables were affected positively by intergroup friendships: "reduced anxiety, outgroup knowledge, intergroup trust, forgiveness, and perceptions of outgroup variability" (Pettigrew et al., 2011, p. 275). Therefore, individuals who participate in intergroup friendships are both less prejudiced and more positive about members of different racial/ethnic groups.

INTERGROUP CONTACT IN SCHOOLS

Nationwide, the U.S. student population is becoming increasingly multi-racial and multiethnic. Demographic shifts occurred from the 1970s, when students of color comprised 22% of the student population, to 2003, when they accounted for 39%, with this number

increasing to 64% in urban schools (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006). According to the latest available data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), nearly 50% of students in the 5- to 17-year-old age range are students of color (NCES, 2013). Therefore, racially and ethnically diverse schools in the U.S. do exist, and represent important spaces in which children of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds may interact, work together, and form meaningful, reciprocal, intimate friendships, which could significantly impact prejudice reduction and racist bullying in schools (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

THESE FRIENDSHIPS ARE MUCH LESS LIKELY TO EXIST IN RACIALLY INEQUITABLE SCHOOL CONTEXTS.

Yet, intergroup contact in and of itself is not a sufficient condition for positive intergroup contact and friendships (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Demographic diversity among students does not guarantee that children will forge intergroup friendships. As per the tenets of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011), optimal conditions in schools must be supported by equitable institutional policies and supported by educators to create the foundation upon which children can interact on equal footing and create reciprocal relationships (Zirkel, 2008).

Supporting Optimal Intergroup Contact

Equity pedagogy, critical multicultural and social justice frameworks that influence classroom and school climate, can make a significant impact on creating positive intergroup contact conditions. For example, Zirkel (2008) linked collaborative learning and teaching strategies in the classroom to increases in interracial and interethnic friendship and prejudice reduction. When children of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds work together, collaboratively, on common goals, the optimal conditions of intergroup con-

tact occur (Allport, 1954). Disciplinary practices and data on disciplinary actions can be tracked, analyzed, and used to inform more socially just discipline and referral practices, likely leading to more equal status conditions. School counselors who participate in efforts to disrupt inequitable practice for systemic change create benefits for all students (ASCA, 2012).

Supporting optimal intergroup contact, prejudice reduction, and meaningful interracial friendships are important goals in and of themselves. They also may contribute to the creation of a positive and collaborative school climate. Although much bully-

ing and violence is linked to prejudice and discrimination across differing social identity groups such as race, class, religion, ability status, and sexual orientation (see Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010), anti-bullying initiatives are often focused on responding to the bullying behavior rather than addressing the conditions of prejudice that reinforce the bullying behavior (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). Fostering positive intergroup contact and intergroup friendships across race (among other identities) can simultaneously support positive intergroup interactions and a reduction in antagonistic interactions.

Talking About Race and Increasing Intergroup Friendships

School counselors are uniquely qualified and positioned in schools to integrate practices that afford opportunities for students to develop intergroup friendships and benefit from them. We emphasize the term *integrate*, as we believe that school counselors are already engaged with students in many ways that support intergroup friendships. Given the many positive benefits intergroup friendships afford students, we would like to see school counselors more explicitly attend to creating the conditions that give rise to them.

STUDENTS, THEMSELVES, VOICE THEIR DESIRE FOR ADULT EDUCATORS TO ADDRESS PREJUDICE AND INTERRACIAL FRIENDSHIPS.

First, school counselors must be willing to openly discuss issues of race and racism, prejudice, and discrimination with students and adults in the school community to support the optimal intergroup contact needed to facilitate intergroup friendships. In the ASCA National Model (2012), the Delivery System describes the places such conversations can take place as Direct Student Services (work with students, such as individual and group counseling and curriculum delivery), and Indirect Student Services (work on behalf of students such as advocacy, leadership, and collaboration). Students, themselves, voice their desire for adult educators to address prejudice and interracial friendships (Pica-Smith, 2009) and address these links to prejudice reduction (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Paluck & Green, 2009). These discussions should happen spontaneously based on race and friendship talk in less formal settings such as the cafeteria, playground, and hallway. More formal discussion can be facilitated through guided questions and dialogue as part of individual student planning, responsive services, and instructional or group activities in the school counseling core curriculum. In schools using existing interventions such as Open Circle (www.open-circle.org) and Second Step (Committee for Children, 2011) with younger students or advisories with older students, only minor modification to existing curricula may be needed to ensure opportunities exist for discussions of race and racism, prejudice, and discrimination.

A noteworthy approach to increase the presence of conditions for optimal intergroup contact and opportunities for forming intergroup friendships that can be integrated into existing group or instructional activities of the school counseling core curriculum is Intergroup Dialogue (Adams, Bell, &

Griffin, 2007). Intergroup dialogue is an analytic and reflective process in which individuals of different social identities come together to have conversations in an effort to learn about one another's experiences and to explore and challenge the assumptions and biases they hold about both their own group and others' groups. This method is informed by critical multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, and intergroup contact theory and aims to foster knowledge of systems of oppression and privilege as well as prejudice reduction and participants' understanding of their own experiences and participation in these systems (Adams et al., 2007). Many benefits are associated with participation in these groups such as greater personal awareness and awareness of intergroup relations (Dessel & Rogge, 2008); increased critical thinking on issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia; and greater understanding of social justice issues (Nagda, Kim, & Truelove, 2004). The process has been used most often in higher education, but it is increasingly used in middle and high schools, and studies demonstrate positive outcomes at this level as well (Griffin, Brown, & Warren, 2012). For example, in a study of adolescents, Aldana, Rowley, Checkoway, and Richards-Schuster (2012) found that participation in intergroup dialogues on race promoted increased ethnic-racial consciousness and racism awareness in participants of differing ethnic-racial identities. In a recent meta-analysis of child and adolescent intervention programs to prevent prejudice, programs that promoted direct intergroup contact that emphasized empathy and perspective taking showed the greatest effect size (Beilmann & Heinemann, 2014).

School counselors can work with teachers, administrators, and other school staff to identify areas of

strength and challenge with respect to facilitating optimal intergroup contact, and strive to advocate for and promote systemic change if needed. For example, extracurricular activities such as team sports provide naturally occurring opportunities for students to connect under optimal conditions because they allow students to interact collaboratively, within equal status conditions, toward a common goal with the support of authorities—all four conditions of intergroup contact theory. School policies and procedures should be reviewed to ensure that systemic barriers to facilitating optimal intergroup contact do not exist. For example, all children should be able to participate in afterschool activities. This requires that school administrators think about providing transportation, childcare, and offsetting the cost of participating in afterschool activities (e.g., equipment, uniforms, etc.). In addition, data on discipline infractions, course placements, extracurricular activity participation, and special education referrals should be analyzed and disaggregated by race to identify areas where racism may be perceived.

Existing curricular content that addresses ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2014) can be examined to assess the degree to which intergroup friendships are already being supported, and if modification may be needed. Specifically, Mindset Standard #3, sense of belonging in the school environment, and several Behavior Standards in the area of Social Skills are related to improving the conditions that promote intergroup friendships. The specific Social Skill Behavior Standards are #2 (create positive and supportive relationships with other students), #4 (demonstrate empathy), #6 (use effective collaboration and cooperation skills), and #7 (use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams). Curricular content that addresses the Mindset and Behaviors noted above may be more effective if implemented with the four conditions of optimal contact in mind.

School counselors also can partner

with families and the larger school community to support the conditions of optimal intergroup contact. Partnerships to connect the school to families and the larger school community can provide visible and tangible evidence that the school community values and benefits from diverse cultures and related customs, and models intergroup cooperation to achieve the common goal of student success. Through this leveraging of the larger school community to achieve student success, the potentially negative effects of the positional hierarchies common in the structure of schools are greatly reduced or eliminated (Moody, 2001). These partnerships can take many forms, but should leverage and link the entire school community, from businesses and community organizations to churches, higher education institutions, and even professional sports teams. While not previously linked explicitly to supporting positive intergroup contact, school-community-family partnerships led by school counselors also promote a strengths-based approach to empower students (Bryan & Henry, 2008) and learning and healthy development (Walsh, Kenny, Wieneke, & Harrington, 2008); resilience and academic achievement (Bryan, 2005); immigrant student academic engagement (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010); and college readiness (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010).

When school counselors deliver a comprehensive school counseling program, opportunities to support the conditions of optimal contact present themselves and are ready to be utilized. Central to seizing these opportunities is school counselors, themselves, being willing to openly discuss issues pertaining to race and racism, prejudice, and discrimination. When such a willingness exists, conversations with other adults in school have the potential to lead to the identification of inequities that may exist, and remedies in the form of interventions provided to students directly (e.g., supplementing classroom-based interventions) and indirectly (e.g., changing policies or

engaging the larger community). As school counselors promote equal status among students, the remaining three conditions of optimal contact—common goals, intergroup cooperation and support of authorities—are simultaneously opportunities to model them.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS MUST BE WILLING TO OPENLY DISCUSS ISSUES OF RACE AND RACISM, PREJUDICE, AND DISCRIMINATION.

Given the potential of intergroup friendships to support the attainment of school counseling-related standards, future research should focus on describing the quantity, quality, and nature of intergroup friendships across a variety of school contexts. For example, research could elucidate differences in the prevalence and quality of intergroup friendships in schools that vary by location (urban, suburban, and rural) and grade level (elementary, middle, and high). The effects of existing interventions on the conditions that support optimal intergroup contact could potentially support our assertion that school counselors are already doing much to support intergroup friendships, and possibly help establish a link between the effects of such interventions and reduced prejudice and racism, even when these are not the intended outcomes of the interventions.

CONCLUSION

Participation in intergroup friendships offers a unique experience for young people to dismantle socially constructed barriers of race, ethnicity, and culture and create meaningful relationships that support growth and the development of multicultural competence. Intergroup friendships are linked to overall prejudice reduction and more positive attitudes and affect towards individuals across a number of different social identities. In addition, as much of the violence and bullying in schools is related to outgroup

prejudice and intolerance, supporting intergroup friendships addresses anti-bullying goals as well. The work of assisting young people in developing these bonds is an important focus for school counselors because supporting these friendships also supports the

reduction of prejudice, violence, and bullying, and creating more positive school contexts.

As elucidated in this article, optimal intergroup contact is necessary for young people to engage in intergroup friendships in racially and ethnically diverse contexts. School counselors are uniquely positioned to support the four conditions of equal status of young people within the school context, working cooperatively on common goals, and providing the support of authorities to youth. By more intentionally focusing on creating these conditions, school counselors will positively impact both individual students and the overall school culture. ■

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