



**early developments** Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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# Children's Social Identities in Culturally Diverse Schools



**P**UBLIC SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE must strive to accommodate the varied academic and social needs of culturally diverse student bodies, foster tolerance among students, and ensure students' safety. To meet these challenges, school administrators and teachers require an understanding of the ways in which social differences such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and ability impact how children view themselves, their peers, and the world around them. FPG scientist Debra Skinner's ethnographic study, *Children's Constructions and Negotiations of Social Identities in Culturally Diverse Schools* (funded by the W. T. Grant Foundation), seeks to improve our understanding of how elementary school students, specifically fourth and fifth grade students, understand and negotiate human differences and similarities in and beyond their classrooms. The research team, which also includes FPG senior scientist Virginia Buysse and project ethnographers Rebecca Schaffer and Tammy Morgan, is conducting several hundred hours of classroom observations and interviews with approximately 150 students and 8 teachers at 2 diverse public schools in North Carolina over a 2-year period. The goal of this research is to produce a detailed account of the ways in which pre-adolescent students perceive themselves and others, how these students interact

with their peers, and how schools' policies and practices influence the students beliefs and practices about diversity.

Skinner's study is designed to capture the language that students use to classify various "social types" within their schools. These terms are often based on physical appearance, social class differences, race/ethnicity, academic ability, and other characteristics deemed important by students in particular contexts. For example, preliminary analyses suggest that terms such as "nerd" and "retard" are commonly used by fourth and fifth graders to classify students based on perceived academic ability, to indicate or explain a student's lack of popularity, or

to tease, taunt, or put down another student. "Another common term that the children use to describe, and often to tease and taunt each other, is 'gay.' They sometimes use it to describe students who behave in a manner that is stereotypically identified with the opposite gender, such as when a girl plays a 'boy's game' during recess or when a boy hugs someone. They also use it as a more general taunt to express their dislike for another student," Morgan says. Students who chronically violate classroom norms for appearance or behavior are often singled out by their peers and labeled as "crazy" or "different."

Linguistic terms or labels for certain social types encapsulate bodies of cultural knowledge that students draw upon not only to describe other students but also to demonstrate their own relationship to a particular cultural group. For example, students who express an interest in hip-hop culture

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One significant preliminary finding is that teachers who employ critical multicultural lessons that explore histories of inequality and oppression, incorporate students' knowledge of their own cultural backgrounds, encourage students to connect what they are learning to their own lives, and provide safe spaces in which students can openly explore their ideas and feelings about sensitive topics are best able to promote true tolerance and understanding.

and/or rap music may use the term “shortie” to refer to all female students or the term “bling” or “bling bling” to refer to jewelry. In doing so, these students attempt to prove that they are conversant in this vocabulary and, therefore, affiliated with this culture. Schaffer notes that students' use of such terms often provides insight into cultural boundaries that they deem important. For example, when a white student with few or no African American friends uses a term such as “bling bling,” that student may be accused of “acting black” by African American peers. However, a white student who has a number of African American friends may use the same term without causing any concern among African American peers, although that student may be accused of “acting black” by other white students. Arguments about whether or not a student is “acting black” provide important windows into the ways in which students understand and help construct boundaries between social groups in the classroom and beyond. They are also strong examples of symbolic encounters, which arouse the emotions of those involved and require participants to reconsider their own identities and their relationships to others. These encounters often reveal some

of the sources of information about group differences on which children draw when making social distinctions. These sources may include school curricula, the mass media, parents, religious institutions, and other domains that provide information about social categories.

The study also examines peer relationships and friendships within culturally diverse classrooms to identify the extent to which social differences and school practices affect student relationships. Researchers will examine factors that influence friendship patterns such as ability tracking, social class, religious affiliations, and nationality. The study is also concerned with the ways in which features of the school and classroom environment influence children's understandings and experiences of cultural diversity. Multicultural curricula and ability tracking (pull-out programs for academically gifted and/or special needs students) are two of the features that appear to be significant factors in students' understandings of difference and interactions with their peers. One significant preliminary finding is that teachers who employ critical multicultural lessons that explore histories of inequality and oppression, incorporate students' knowledge of their own cultural backgrounds, encourage students to connect what they are learning to their own lives, and provide safe spaces in which students can openly explore their ideas and feelings about sensitive topics are best able to promote true tolerance and understanding. When children are encouraged to ask questions and explore their own complicated relationships to cultural identities and social issues, they are better able to understand their own social positions and empathize with other students. Another significant preliminary finding is that assigning bilingual students who are fluent in English to assist students who are not yet proficient in English can produce a range of social outcomes for both students. For example, while some bilingual students expressed pride in being able to help their peers and saw these requests as opportunities to make new friends, others were concerned that being paired with a student who lacked English proficiency would reduce the amount of time they would be able to spend with other friends.

In addition to presenting these and other findings to researchers and practitioners, Skinner and her colleagues are working closely with school teachers and the Global Fund for Children to develop recommendations for improving multicultural curricula to help children value diversity and become productive, caring members of a global society. |ed|

# Trying on Different Hats

Matt, a 10-year-old Caucasian fourth grader with a wiry build, a very light complexion, a pale blonde brush cut, and bright blue eyes, provides an excellent example of the ways in which children draw on a wide variety of cultural symbols and public discussions in creating their own identities and understandings of the world.

One morning, Matt entered the classroom, chanting lines from a popular rap song and bobbing his head up and down. Later that day, during a social studies lesson on slavery, Matt told the class that he "hates slavery because most of my friends are African American." He later repeated this information to a visiting researcher and then explained that slavery "isn't right because no one should treat people that way." Matt was outspoken about his feelings on this topic. At the same time, Matt was wearing a confederate soldier cap, which he bought on a field trip to a local history museum. He was also wearing a baseball hat (backwards and underneath the confederate soldier cap), a bandage on his right cheekbone (similar to the bandage worn by the rapper, Nelly, who wears it in honor of his incarcerated brother), and an oversized basketball jersey. He said he "was for the South" in the Civil War, because he loves the South *and* because he hates slavery. His "best buddy," who is African American, nods his head as Matt explains his position and then informs Matt that they had better hurry to get a good seat in the cafeteria. They run off, laughing about some lyrics that Matt has been working on.