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Cross-Ethnic Friendships in Urban Middle Schools Make Youths Feel Less Vulnerable, Safer

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Psychosocial Benefits of Cross-Ethnic Friendships in Urban Middle Schools

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Friendships matter throughout life, and in early adolescence they provide validation and emotional support. Now a new study has found that friendships across ethnic groups in urban middle schools help protect youths from feeling vulnerable, making them feel less lonely and at the same time safer. As the population of children in the United States grows increasingly diverse, this study has implications for how educators oversee student interactions.

The study, by researchers at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers looked at 536 Latino and 396 African American sixth graders from 66 classrooms in 10 urban American middle schools that varied in ethnic diversity and were in predominantly low-income neighborhoods. The students reported on the number of same- and cross-ethnic friends they had, how vulnerable they felt, the quality of their friendships, and their ethnic identity.

Cross-ethnicity friendships increased as the ethnic diversity of classrooms rose, the study found. Youths who reported these friendships felt less vulnerable—less lonely, less victimized by peers, and safer at school—according to the findings. Earlier work by the same researchers found that greater classroom diversity predicted less vulnerability, and the researchers suggest that this may be because diverse classrooms have both more ethnic groups and groups of about the same size, which means that no one ethnic group is numerically more powerful than any other group. The current findings suggest that cross-ethnic friendships might partly explain the link between diversity and vulnerability.

“Students benefit when they take advantage of opportunities for cross-ethnic contact in forming friendships,” explains Sandra Graham, professor of human development and psychology in the Department of Education at UCLA, who led the study. “The composition of classrooms can play a facilitative role.”

Graham and her colleagues suggest that, even in ethnically diverse schools, administrators and teachers need to be especially sensitive to how organizational and instructional practices, such as academic tracking, promote or inhibit opportunities for students from different ethnic groups to interact.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Psychosocial Benefits of Cross-Ethnic Friendships in Urban Middle Schools by Graham, S (University of California Los Angeles), Munniksma, A (University of Groningen), and Juvonen, J (UCLA). Copyright 2013 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.