The ViSC Program: Fostering Intercultural Friendships in Schools

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In schools in Austria 18% of students speak another first language than German.

In Vienna 52% speak another first language than German.

Two main (non-german speaking) immigrant groups

- Former Yugoslavia (31%)
- Turkey (13%)

→ High variability of cultural diversity between schools

(Statistic Austria, 2016)
Despite increasing diversity in schools friendships between adolescents with same cultural backgrounds are still more common compared to cross cultural friendships. (e.g., Joyner & Kao, 2000)

Friendships are formed based on similarites, (i.e. homophily) with respect to gender, age, cultural background, personality, interests. (Berscheid, 1985; Kupersmith, et al. 1995)

However, same cultural friendships are not only a result of personal choices but are also determined by the availability of same cultural peers in class. (e.g., Strohmeier, 2012)
Intercultural friendships are regarded as beneficial for non-immigrant and immigrant youth, as they lead to enhanced social and intercultural competencies (e.g., Lease & Blake, 2005) and are especially for first generation immigrant youth helpful to get integrated into the new society (Berry, 1997; Titzmann & Silbereisen, 2009).

Friendships between adolescents with different cultural backgrounds reduce prejudice and negative attitudes against members from other cultural groups. (Pettigrew, 1998)
Intergroup Contact Theory

Contact between members of different cultural groups reduce prejudice and foster friendships under following conditions:

- Equal Status
- Common goals
- Cooperation
- Support from authorities

(Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998)

The ViSC class project draws on the principles of contact theory, such as cooperative group work and authority support. (Slavin & Cooper, 1999)
The ViSC program is a primary preventive program designed for secondary schools (i.e. grade 5 to 8) with following main goals:

- Reduction of aggressive behavior and bullying
- Fostering social and intercultural competencies

The program is a school development project during one school year with trainings for teachers and students.

The program is part of the Austrian national strategy to prevent violence in kindergarten and school (Atria & Spiel, 2007; Strohmeier, Hoffmann, Schiller, Stefanek, & Spiel, 2012; Strohmeier, Atria & Spiel, 2008)
Theoretical foundation

- Social cognitive theory
  (Bandura, 1978)

- Concepts of instrumental and reactive aggression
  (e.g. Card & Little, 2006)

- Bullying as a group phenomenon
  (e.g., Salmivalli, 1999)

- Social information-processing theory
  (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994)

- **Principles of intergroup contact theory**
  (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998)
The ViSC class program consists of 13 units (each unit lasts 90 minutes), which should be implemented during regular class hours:

- **Unit 1-8 (Impulses):** Working with ViSC material: 
  Teacher actively leads the class

- **Unit 9 (Reflection):** Reflection what the students learned so far and which action they want to carry out together
  Teacher passes over the responsibility to the students

- **Unit 10-13 (Action):** Students plan and carry out a common action (transfer of learned competencies into real life situations)
  Teacher moderates and leads the activity to a common success
Class Level: Content of class units

- Information about the program
- Development of commonly shared class rules
- Recognizing critical social situations (aggression, bullying)
- Behavioral options for spectators
- Recognizing emotions and empathy training
- Managing emotions (anger, sadness, ...)
- Recognizing different viewpoints of the same situation
- Behavioral options for victims
- **Dealing with cultural diversity**
Class Level: ViSC Units

Individual Work
Class Level: ViSC Units

Small group work
Class Level: ViSC Units

General discussion
Interactive Games

Class Level: ViSC Units
Class Level: Action Phase

Making a movie
Class Level: Action Phase

Preparing and having a picnic
The main goal of the present study was to evaluate the ViSC program whether it was effective in fostering intercultural friendships.

(1) Are in ViSC classes compared with classes without intervention less same cultural friendship preferences after the program?

(2) Is the ViSC program equally effective in fostering intercultural friendship preferences in groups of non-immigrant students, students from former Yugoslavia, and Turkey?
Randomized intervention-control group, pre-post-follow up

In December 2008, all secondary schools located in the capital city of Austria were invited to participate in the program.

34 schools applied for participation, 26 schools fulfilled the necessary requirements (e.g. participating in the evaluation).

13 were selected to run the program. Out of 13 schools, 5 agreed to be controls.

Cluster randomization
Sample: Intercultural Friendships

Pre-Post Sample

- 11 ViSC schools
- 5 Control schools
- T1 – June 2009: 1020 students
- T2 – June 2010: 1007 students
- 48.4% girls
- Age: M=11.7 (10-15 years)
- Grade: 5 & 6
- 43.3% natives, 15.6% former Yugoslavia, 15% Turks, 26.1% others
Friendship Nominations

Peer nominations: “Who are your best friends in class?” (3 nominations)

- **Reciprocal Friendships**: Two peers choose each other mutually as friends
- **Unilateral Friendships**: one peer nominates another peer as friend but is not nominated as friend by the same peer

**Same cultural friendship preferences**

Friendship preference was calculated with an opportunity index (Strohmeier, 2012)

\[
oi = \frac{\text{number of same cultural friends}}{\text{number of all friends}} - \frac{(\text{number of same cultural peers in class} - 1)}{(\text{number of all peers in class} - 1)}
\]

Range: -1 (preference for cross cultural friends) to +1 (preference for same cultural friends)
Analyses

- **Dependent variables**
  - Same cultural preferences: unilateral
  - Same cultural preferences: reciprocal

- **Independent variable**
  - Intervention vs. Controll

- **SPSS 23**

- **2x2x3 ANOVAs: Time x Intervention x Groups of students**
Results

Same cultural preference: Unilateral – whole sample

Time 1

Time 2

Controll

Visc
Results

Same cultural preference: Reciprocal – whole sample

Time 1
Time 2

Controll
Visc
Results

Same cultural preference: Reciprocal – Turkish students

Time 1

Time 2

Controll

Visc
Summary & Conclusion

There are no differences between ViSC classes and with classes without intervention in unilateral and reciprocal same cultural friendship preferences after the program. The ViSC Program is only effective in fostering reciprocal intercultural friendships in one group of immigrant students.

Thus, it might be necessary to implement more units which directly addresses the topic of cultural diversity.
Furthermore, as the program was mainly conducted in 6\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} grades, when friendships are already established it might be useful to implement the program already in 5\textsuperscript{th} grade.

In general, the program might work differently in different classes. Thus, further class level variables need to be looked at, e.g. grade, ethnic diversity, and class climate.
On behalf of our team:

Thank you for your attention!

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