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## Ethnicity and Victimization Among Brazilian Adolescents: What Can Schools Do? Blog post

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## Ethnicity and Victimization Among Brazilian Adolescents: What Can Schools Do?

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### Ethnicity and Victimization Among Brazilian Adolescents: What Can Schools Do?

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As a parent to two adolescents, I am sure I worry about them about as much as the average parent does. As a psychologist who studies adolescent development however, I often think about the risks associated with adolescence while on the other hand, the various developmental milestones that this period of the lifespan affords. In this blog piece, it is my intent to highlight some of the research my colleague (Josafa) and I have performed which explores the consequences of peer victimization, commonly known as bullying, and

particularly ethnic victimization by studying what positive school environments can do to minimize these effects.

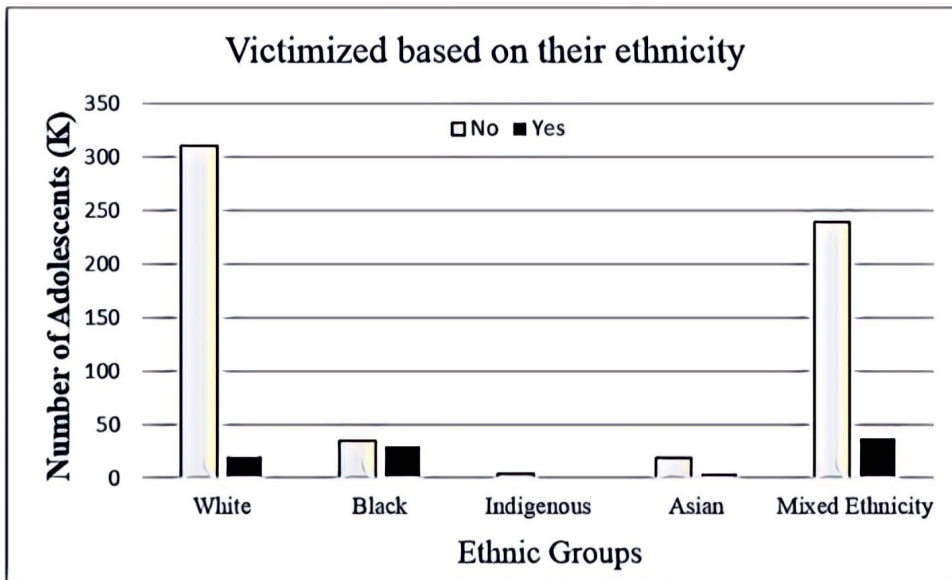
Maybe a bit of background would be helpful. I am sure that no one would be surprised if I were to write that adolescents being on the receiving end of maltreatment by their classmates is a cause for concern. Research in the area of adolescent peer victimization has outlined the various negative consequences ranging from feelings of depression and anxiety, to poor self-esteem. However, peer victimization can also have an impact on academic performance, the effects of which have been shown through lower earnings almost 20 years later(!).

Part of the reason for these effects is that adolescents who are victimized in school, enjoy going to school less, are therefore less engaged academically and eventually are limited (compared to their peers who were not victimized) in terms of job opportunities in adulthood. The additional effects of racism or ethnic victimization exacerbates these effects, especially over time. It is also relevant to note that the power imbalance is a common feature of victimization, which can be manifested through imbalances associated to features of individuals or groups. Unfortunately, more research needs to be done to address the “why’s” of peer victimization. In the case at hand, we highlight issues relevant to ethnic minorities, which are particularly onerous for black and Latinx adolescents specifically.

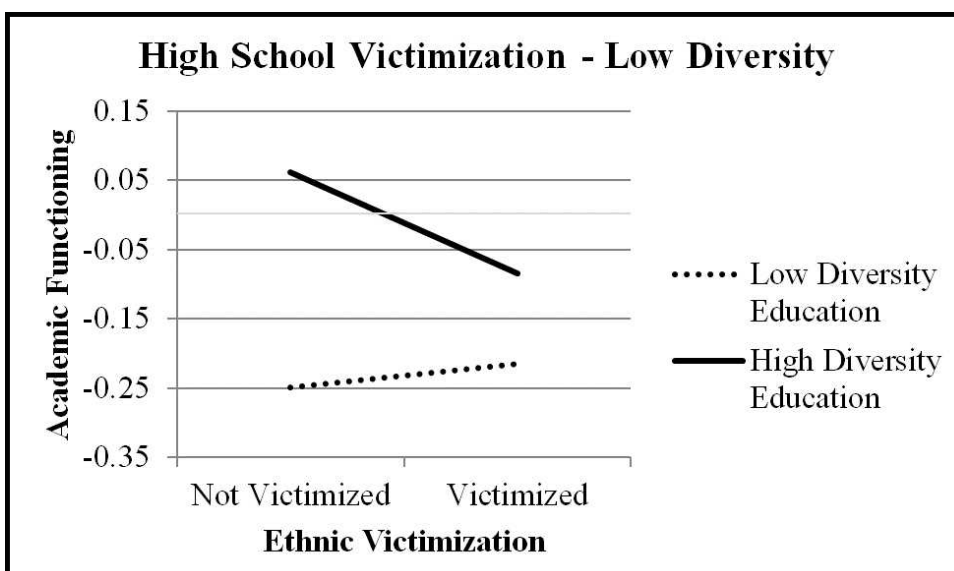
Which brings us to Brazil. The Portuguese speaking South American country is the sixth largest country in the world. Due to the influx of immigrants from Europeans, and enslaved people from sub-Saharan Africa, and many other regions of the world, Brazil has become among the most ethnically diverse and unfortunately, one the most socially stratified countries in South America. Consequently, this makes Brazil an ideal country to understand the effects of ethnic victimization on academic functioning of adolescents.

With that in mind, we wanted to see whether two aspects of the school context may act together as a protective factor in the face of ethnic victimization (at least inasmuch as it is associated with decreased academic functioning). Specifically, we were interested in ethnic diversity in schools and the degree to which schools fostered “diversity education”, in that students felt free to express ideas, felt respected by the adults at school and that adults appreciated the ethnic identity of the students.

To answer this question, we used the 2009 Brazil ENEM data (<https://enem.inep.gov.br/>). This dataset is made of school exams on the Natural Sciences, Humanities, Languages, Math and Writing scores of every person finishing high school across the entire country. The purpose of the ENEM is multifaceted, one of which is to improve the quality of school environment. For our purposes, we wanted to examine just adolescents attending regular schools, giving us over a million people’s academic functioning data of whom, 130,000 experienced ethnic victimization. This data allowed us to ask and answer questions about how ethnic victimization impacted academic functioning. Our analyses would be conducted using data that reflected “real” adolescents in schools. Moreover, we could also disentangle differences in the effect of ethnic victimization, specifically why some teens were more strongly impacted by ethnic victimization. More importantly, we could simultaneously explore different characteristics of the over 25,000 schools might serve to protect adolescents for the effects of ethnic victimization. Below you can see a figure of the proportion of students reporting ethnic victimization across each ethnic group in the study. Black and adolescent of mixed ethnicity were at higher risk of ethnic victimization.



As we would have expected, existent data showed ethnic victimization was associated with lower academic functioning in practically every ethnic group. However, there were powerful differences at the levels of the schools. First off, diversity education was linked with higher academic scores overall. In other words, adolescents do better in general when attending schools where more people report being treated with respect by the adults. On the other hand, ethnic victimization was associated with lower academic scores overall. To be clear, even when these teens are not being victimized for their ethnicity themselves, they are more likely to do worse academically if they are in a school where more people are. Here is the kicker though, among schools that were ethnically diverse AND promoted diversity education, there was no association between ethnic victimization and academic functioning. Stated another way, kids in schools with adolescents who felt respected by the faculty at their school while at the same time from schools with students from a range of ethnic backgrounds were immune to the effects of ethnic victimization!



This finding offers constructive lessons that can be applied to schools here in the US. First, we should work to make schools more diverse. There is evidence that US schools have become more

segregated despite the landmark 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. Meanwhile, it would behoove us to simultaneously foster school environments where students feel that the school administration appreciates the ethnic identity of the students. It bears mentioning that we are inclined to believe that most schools aim to do exactly this already. However, there is a case to be made that schools would benefit from reinforcing this much more vociferously to counteract the current political zeitgeist.

The findings from this study also contains implications directly relevant to the Latinx adolescents in the Omaha community. Based on these results, Latinx adolescents are at higher risk of the negative consequences of ethnic victimization, especially if they should be in schools with less ethnic diversity. The Omaha community and the state of Nebraska as a whole have a responsibility to create school environment where all students feel free to express ideas, feel respected by the adults at school with adults who appreciate the ethnic identity of the students. In the end though, before we'd be able to make definitive statements about the application of these results to the Latinx adolescents in the Omaha community, we'd need to replicated this study here.

At the end of the day, in this Brazilian sample of adolescents, everyone was more likely to do better academically when there was more diversity education paired with more ethnic diversity too. Based on past research, peer interactions during adolescence have lasting impact even into adulthood. When it's all said and done, all adolescents deserve to be educated in an environment where they can feel safe to be themselves and learn in the best way they can.

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