As elementary and middle school students progress in school, they are less likely to have friends of a different race, even from the beginning to the end of a single school year, finds a study led by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The study, published online in the *Journal of Early Adolescence*, also suggests that teachers may make a difference in how students select and maintain friends.

"Our study seeks to advance the understanding of factors that enable children to select and maintain interracial friendships during a time of developmental and school transition," said Elise Cappella, associate professor of applied psychology at NYU Steinhardt and the study's lead author. "Although research shows that children with greater access to diverse peers are more likely to form interracial friendships, our findings suggest that access to diversity alone is not sufficient for fostering these friendships, and teachers may play a role."

Studies show that most childhood friendships are formed in classrooms, but children tend to form friendships with others of their own race or ethnicity, with interracial friendships decreasing across ages and grades. Yet, for nearly half a century, educators and scholars have argued that friendships across race have social, emotional, and academic benefits.

"Friendships provide opportunities to build empathy and practice social skills," said Cappella. "Being friends with racially or ethnically diverse peers can create opportunities for academic and social learning different from the opportunities afforded by same-race friendships."

The current study looked at student and classroom factors that affect the likelihood of children forming friendships across race. Cappella and her colleagues used data from the Early Adolescent Development Study, a longitudinal study of elementary and middle school children in a racially diverse middle-class suburban school district. Surveys were collected in the fall and spring of the 1996-7 school year in 53 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms, with a total of 553 African American and white students participating in the study.

On an individual or student level, the researchers looked at age, race, and psychosocial factors, including sociability, internalizing behavior (such as worrying or feeling sad) and externalizing behavior (such as acting out or getting in trouble). They also examined factors related to classroom context, including teacher support, whether teachers treat students with varying levels of academic achievement differently, and competition among students.

Results suggest that same-race friendships increase over the school year, with greater increases among white and older children. Externalizing behavior predicted a greater increase in same-race friendships, particularly among white students.

Teachers and classroom context influenced student friendships in two different ways. Classroom support - measured by student perceptions of teachers' warmth, respect, and trust - predicted less of an increase in same-race friendships from fall to spring. In addition, African American students who perceived that their teachers treated students differently were more likely to have friendships with white peers over time.

"Teachers' differential treatment sends messages regarding the value of different groups. We don't know if the teachers in this study favored white students over African American students, as other
studies have shown. But if this is the case, it's not surprising that African American students formed more friendships with white peers as they began to internalize the higher value their teachers placed on white students," said Cappella.

The researchers said their study points to the need not just for diverse schools, but also for teachers to foster classrooms where students and teachers support one another, and social and academic hierarchies are not dominant, which could increase the likelihood of students developing and maintaining interracial friendships.

Provided by New York University

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.