

**Building Better Student-Teacher Relationships**

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## **Introduction**

Black and white students often have very different educational experiences in the United States. This can be seen in disproportionate discipline rates across the country. In Pennsylvania schools, Black children are 5.6 times more likely to be suspended for minor offences: 104,000 a year. Academically, black students often have fewer opportunities to take advanced or gifted classes than white students do. However, teachers can play an important role in making school experiences more equitable for black students. Too many teachers across the United States hold implicit biases against black students, and these biases harm students both socially and academically. However, there are changes that schools and teachers can make to improve relationships between students and teachers. Allowing students to help generate classroom rules, having conversations about topics of students' interests outside of academics, and hiring more black teachers could all help improve student-teacher relationships, and therefore improve black students' academic outcomes.

To support this, this paper will first discuss the biases and negative impacts of poor student teacher relationships. Certain teacher personality traits may not provide students with the support that they need, and implicit biases can harm black students in particular. The paper will then go on to talk about the impacts of poor student teacher relationships. Poor relationships between students and teachers can lead to more suspensions and a drop in academic performance. Finally, it will argue the importance of strong relationships and will provide some ideas for how to fix bad ones.

## **Perceptions, Biases, and Student-Teacher Relationships**

Students can perform better when their relationships with teachers are good. Unfortunately, the relationships between students and teachers are often not prioritized. Teachers' implicit biases or just simple personality differences can lead to student disengagement or suspensions of students for minor offenses. African American students are especially hurt by poor student-teacher relationships. In order to create better student-teacher relationships, it is first important to understand why the relationships are not as strong as other relationships could be.

Teachers really have an extraordinary impact on student achievement. Strong relationships can positively influence students' motivation to do well in school, but if the relationships are bad, it can harm the students. Students' personalities and the way they interact with teachers' personalities can affect how they learn in school. Some students need more help than others and are maybe shy to ask for help when they need it most. Teachers' personalities

also can affect the learning of a student. In a study by Kim et al (2018), the researchers showed that if the teachers were agreeable, organized, detail-oriented and emotionally stable, students believe they will do well in their class. Interestingly, despite these positive traits that help students believe in their ability, teacher personality had no effect on standardized test scores (Kim, Dar-Nimrod, and MacCann, 2018) Even though teacher personalities do not impact test scores they can still impact their daily school life. The four traits can greatly impact students' classroom experience, and students of these teachers were more willing to participate in class, comfortable with asking questions if they need help, and just felt successful overall (Kim et al, 2018). Students who are around teachers with positive traits will feel better about themselves, and they can potentially learn from the teachers about having that kind of mindset.

Teachers' personalities aren't the only thing that hurts a student, Implicit biases are always harmful, and have a huge impact when teachers have them. Having a bias against students can potentially impact their academic performance. In the eye tracking study conducted by Gilliam et al (2016), the researchers gave 132 teachers a task: to observe a preschool classroom and to press a key when they see disruptive behavior. The authors found that the white teachers would look at the boys, especially the black boys, the most; it appeared that they were looking to find a slight off behavior they believed was disruptive among the boys. If a teacher is looking for misbehavior disproportionately, they are more likely to find it. Studies show black students are 3.6 times more likely to get suspended than white students, and some of this may be due to this teacher bias. (Groeger, Waldman, and Eads 2018) With the girls, the teachers did not pay nearly as much attention, and the black girls were shown the least attention (Gilliam et al., 2016). This can also harm a student's education because if a student is not getting attention, they will not get the help they need. Interestingly, the black teachers of the study showed everyone the same attention to all the students.

Implicit biases can also impact teachers' perceptions of how successful a student can be in the classroom. In Gilliam's vignette study, teachers were given a story about a child with challenging behavior and a complicated home life. The only difference in the stories distributed to teachers was the names of the student in the stories: Emily, Latoya, Deshawn, or Jake (Gilliam et al. 2016). After reading the vignette, teachers were asked if they believe they will be able to help the students. Researchers found that white teachers who received reports on Emily and Jake were more likely to state that they could help with their behavior. When white teachers received reports on Latoya and Deshawn, however, they were more likely to state the children were, "helpless" and they thought the students were more likely to cause a problem (Gilliam et al. 2016). This study highlighted that biases can be put on any age of students, as in

the study teachers ranked preschoolers as helpless despite their living conditions. Like with the eye tracking study, black teachers in the study showed less bias and believed they could help the students no matter what (Gilliam et al. 2016). One reason why black teachers may have been willing to help any student is probably because they may have been through what the black students have been through, and they want to help anyone as best they can.

In schools, implicit biases can also lead to Black students being looked at as disruptive or even violent in other people's eyes. In the Staats study, the author described a crime to jurors. The only difference in the description was that Staats used two different names: William and Tyrone. The jurors in this study recalled that Tyrone was more aggressive than William, despite the same description (Staats 2014). These biased ideas of aggression and violence can be implemented in schools also. If a black student in school is rowdy or disruptive, teachers may believe that he or she can hurt other students or themselves, which shows they believe they are violent. This is important, because teachers are more likely to remove students from the classroom if they believe the students are a threat to others. A reason for that is that white teachers sometimes adultify students, no matter their age. Black students, even as young as preschool, are more likely to get suspended because the teacher believes that they look older than what they really are. Because teachers may believe these children are older, they might think that they can hurt the other students in the class, not knowing they are the same age or younger (Johnson, 2020, 3). This adultification harms students' academics majorly because they are more likely to get suspended more often because they act their age instead of their perceived age.

Another reason for disproportionate rates of discipline is because of an increase in school shootings. School shootings made schools increase in security, and teachers are cautious and careful with every move they take. After the Columbine shooting in 1999, schools increased their police presence (Raufu 2017). Since the Columbine shooting, there were 304 fatal shootings that happened in schools (Vigderman and Turner 2020). Schools use machines and methods to detect threats, but some schools do not use them and that can harm an innocent student because they are portrayed as a threat. Between 1999-2012, nationally schools increased the use of metal detectors, security cameras, ID badges, and strict dress codes (Raufu 2017). Teachers' fear of violence at schools hurt black students worse than any other body of students. If students are adultified, they'll be more likely to be kicked out of schools or classes because they are seen as a threat. Between 1995-2010, out of school suspension rates doubled (Raufu 2017).

In schools, subjective behavior can add onto the thoughts of a student being older, being a threat, or not acting their perceived age. Subjective behavior is when people pick what behaviors are good and which are bad. This can correlate with adultification and have a teacher constantly thinking a student is a troublemaker. An example of how these two work together is when a teacher sees a student is arguing with another student or having a disagreement, and the teacher will instantly kick out the student because they believe they will harm another student. Another common example would be how a student is talking to a teacher. If the student's tone is perceived as being loud, the teacher may believe they are disrespectful. In this case, a student may get sent out of the classroom for talking like how they usually talk. In schools, white teachers consistently rate black students as more disruptive than white students. (Wright 2015, 1) Knowing teachers think black students are more likely to be disruptive, they will be sent out of class more often. This leads to suspension, and that leads to more punishments for smaller offenses.

Black students are not the only people affected by implicit biases. Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a part in teacher bias, and so does gender. Interestingly, students' academic success also correlates with SES and gender. Students with high SES are usually the ones to perform better in schools, but generally no matter SES, girls still perform better academically. The exception to this is that boys in high or low SES are more likely to do better in math (Auwater and Arugete 2008). One reason high SES students perform better because they might be able to get more help and resources in school. However, biases also come into play, as teachers may perceive low SES students as helpless or unable to learn, especially if those low SES students are also black students. Teacher biases play a huge role in student opportunities, such as which students are admitted to honors or AP classes. Auwater and Arugete (2008) conducted a study where they gave 106 teachers a paragraph about student behavioral and academic achievements and problems. The only difference in the paragraphs were the students' gender and parents' jobs, which showed the SES status of the student. Teachers had to fill out a questionnaire about their expectations for that student. Teachers expected high SES boys to do better than low SES boys (Auwater and Arugete 2008). Teachers could assume high SES boys would have a great work ethic because of their parents' occupations, and they could have more access to resources they need for school. For the teachers they expected low SES girls to do better than high SES girls (Auwater and Arugete 2008). The authors did not offer an explanation for this, but teachers may believe low SES girls are more diligent in their work and want to succeed.

## **The Impacts of Poor Student-Teacher Relationships**

Teacher-student relationships matter more than people think. Having a good relationship can ultimately lead to better academic performance and success in the real world because students now have resources that can guide them. In bad teacher-student relationships it harms students in the long run due to them feeling like they can not pass that teacher's class, or they may not want to go to school because of that teacher. Poor student-teacher relationships can also lead to disproportionate discipline.

Disproportionate rates of discipline harms black students majorly. According to a study conducted by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, despite making up 18% of students in the country, black students make up 35% of school suspensions annually. Across their school years, 35% of black students have been suspended once, and 46% of black students have been suspended more than once (Staats 2014, 4). Black students often get suspended for subjective behaviors and are being named disruptive in classes if they are loud or come off disrespectful. These non-violent offenses are punished disproportionately; in the 2011-12 school year, 16% of black students have received out of school suspensions, but only 5% of white students received one (Wright 2015, 2). Disproportionate discipline begins when students are young. By 8th grade, 37% of black students received a suspension while 13% of white students received suspensions (Wright 2015, 2).

These biases against black students harms their future tremendously. Students can stop caring about school, leading them in the wrong direction of life. In the 2011 academic year, 3.5 million out of 49 million students in the US received in-school detentions. 1.9 million received out of school suspensions, 1.6 million were suspended for more than one day, and 130,000 students were expelled (Raufu 2017). Being suspended in schools can be an indication that the student will most likely drop out of schools (Staats 2014, 12). Biases teachers can hold against students can also lead to an achievement gap. Frustration from high rates of discipline can lead students to be disengaged in the classroom due to teachers being perceived as unfair (Raufu 2017). Another way biases can lead to racial achievement gaps are Honors or AP classes. Nationally, white students are 1.8 times more likely to be enrolled in AP classes compared to black students (Groeger, Waldman, and Eads 2018). In Pittsburgh this problem is worse than nationally. In 2018, white students in Pittsburgh Public schools were 3.5 times as likely to be enrolled in an AP class compared to black students (Groeger, Waldman, and Eads 2018). That is a major problem, black students sometimes are not given the opportunity to show what they know because teachers may place their biases higher than the actual student.

## Improving Student-Teacher Relationships

There are multiple things that teachers and districts can do to improve student-teacher relationships. Hiring more black teachers, spending more time getting to know students well, allowing students to help create classroom rules, and doing exercises to build empathy between teachers and students can all help lead to better relationships between students and teachers.

One of the first things that schools can do to improve student-teacher relationships is to hire more black teachers. Today in schools, white students will have white teachers 95% of the time while black students have black teachers only 32% of the time (Wright 2015). This number can be greater in some schools, especially if we look at afrocentric schools where a real effort is placed on recruiting teachers who are black. In the article, "Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Disruptive Behavior: The Effect of Racial Congruence and Consequences for School Suspension," Wright predicted that if black students had same race teachers 50% of the time, the suspension rates of black students would drop by half (Wright 2015). Wright makes this prediction for several reasons. First, black teachers will be less likely to send students out of the classroom because they may have gone through the same thing as the students who are misunderstood. Additionally, from Gilliam's eye-tracking study, it is clear that many white teachers expect black students to act out, and they are closely tracked for that behavior (Gilliam et al. 2016). These implicit biases mean that black students can be easily mistaken for trouble makers, but with black teachers they are seen as someone they can relate to. This could result in students being less tense in class or more open to participation. All those positive actions result in the student performing better academically.

Hiring more black teachers alone will not necessarily help build better relationships between students and teachers, however. All teachers also need to invest in their relationships with their students. Sometimes students are just looked at as people teachers have to teach, and teachers do not take the time to learn about them as individuals. It is important for all teachers, no matter their race, to get to know their students as people. There are several simple ways that teachers can start to do this. First, teachers can survey students to see what they believe are their strengths and weaknesses, what goals they want to set for themselves, and what they like to do when they are not in school. Teachers could share things as well. Teachers can share what they believe is their strong suit, and they can tell the students what they think their individual strengths are as well. Similarly, teachers and students can also share their mistakes and weaknesses with each other and then share ways to improve them (Coombs 2016). These methods can help students humanize teachers and vice versa, which may help challenge biases that people have learned.

One of the best ways that teachers can build stronger relationships with students is to build more trust, reliability, and positivity in class. This can be a real changer for everyone, even teachers. There are a few ways that teachers can work to build trust with students. First, students should help contribute to the creation of the class room rules and add their own definitions of what respect looks like (Coombs 2016). Having large, collective definitions for words such as respect helps everyone in the room understand the group expectations so that everyone respects and follows the rules. With this plan, to gain any trust the teacher has to hold anyone accountable for breaking the rules the students created. This shows students that they can rely on the teacher to maintain the positive classroom environment.

Another way teachers can gain trust is becoming a student for a day by spending one day following a student's schedule (Yahn 2011). Teachers can see the students point of view and what they go through daily. This opens teachers eyes to work loads expected of students and struggles teachers may never see. This could help build empathy, and it lets students know that teachers are able to help them with what they go through. Building empathy and understanding student stressors may be especially important during standardized testing. Because these tests are high pressure, teachers sometimes have tunnel vision on getting the grades they want to see and usually leave relationships they have with students behind. That can stress out students even more than they already are. Students will want to be able to feel like they can go to their teacher for extra help and studying. For students to achieve higher test scores, students need to know that teachers really care about the students' outcomes and that the teacher is willing to help them (Coombs 2016). Students report that they will work harder for teachers who treat them as individuals and express interest in their lives outside of school (Coombs 2016). That can really bring teachers and students together to better futures for the students and lessens the chances of children being suspended from school and increases academic achievement.

## **Conclusion**

The relationships between teachers and students can impact students' academic achievements in school. Unfortunately, many times teachers' biases negatively affect black students' educational outcomes. Student-teacher relationships are more important than most people really think; they can not only impact academic outcomes, but how students' perceive themselves and school generally. Luckily, there are many ways that teachers can improve their relationships with students. Allowing students to help generate classroom rules builds trust between teachers and students. Talking about the strengths and weaknesses of individual



students humanizes the teacher and encourages the teacher to get to know students as individuals. Finally, hiring more black teachers may allow students to have adults who they may be more likely to relate to in schools. Teachers should spend more time building relationships with their students not only to help their academic achievement, but also to help them develop into the best person they can be.

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