Personal Safety and Teacher/Student Relationships Viewed Through Black/White Framework in a Suburban Middle School, an Exploratory Study

By Dana C. Mester and Sherill A. Spruill, Joseph Giani, Ed.D., Elsa-Sofia Morote, Ed.D., and Albert Inserra, Ed.D.

Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of teacher-student relationships and personal student safety differences between Caucasian and African-American middle school students. The research was conducted using a survey in a suburban middle class school on Long Island, New York. Twenty-eight of 176 Caucasian students were chosen through random sampling to contrast with the 15 African-American students who participated in this study. An independent sample T-test was used. It showed a significant difference between African-American and Caucasian students in teacher-student relationships (p=.05) and approaching significance on personal safety significance (p<.10). Caucasian students in the sample tended to feel safer in their school, and the Caucasian students showed better student-teacher relationships than the African-American students.

The schools in the United States are in the midst of an identity crisis. Schools are institutions, which reflect the architecture of the society (Asante, 1991). The natal culture of African-American students is generally ignored in the Eurocentric framework that American society is based upon. However, the existence of African-American culture is present in school hallways, communities, expressed through student attire, and is heard in casual expressions. America's dilemma lies in indoctrinating White epistemological perspectives into a multicultural student population. These perspectives ignore the thoughts, ideas, and various views of people of color (Bernal, 2002).

The goal of education is to help students of all ethnicities find cultural relevance within society and to learn how to be open-minded with regard to other cultural views (Asante, 1991). Educators must take a step back from societal views to see the world through the eyes of the children they are teaching.

A large part of academic success can be determined by the quality of relationships teachers forge with their students. Unfortunately, school culture continues to exhibit wide disparities between Caucasian and African-American students socially and academically. Some teachers lack the tools needed to connect with their students. According to Hughes and Wu (2012) lack of candor and preparation can have an indirect effect on student achievement. The absence of connection felt by some students with a number of teachers creates a suspension in educational achievement.

This may lead to what is perceived as inappropriate classroom behavior resulting in unnecessary referrals and school suspensions, which generates a cycle of conflict. Eighty three percent of all teachers are White middle class females, and half of the students in public K-12 schools are students of color, the quality of teacher-student relationships warrants attention (Henfield & Washington, 2012).

The issue of personal safety in school and who is affected by it is largely dependent on the ethnic makeup of the school itself. For many African-American students in a predominantly Caucasian academic setting, school is an "alien and hostile place" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). In academic institutions where the predominant ethnicity is that of the influential majority, personal safety can become an issue where bullying and other forms of violence hinder the voiceless ethnic minorities. Therefore, educators must always strive to create an environment that is "safe, welcoming, and responsive" to the needs of all students (Ford, 2005, p. 29). This article focuses on the different perceptions held by Caucasian and African-American students regarding personal safety and student-teacher relationships.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate how student perceptions of personal safety and teacher-student relationships differ between Caucasian and African-American middle school students. This article will explore the following question:

How do teacher-student relationships and personal safety differ between Caucasian and African-American students in public schools?

Literature Review

While the literature related to in-school violence and student safety is extensive, the above issue needs further scrutiny. According to Klonsky (2002) the smaller-scale violence in American public schools such as racial conflict, bullying, and intimidation are often overlooked but nevertheless omnipresent, and is what concerns students, teachers, and parents most; the article, *How Smaller Schools Prevent School Violence*, (Klonsky, 2002) publicized the quality of student-teacher relationships and personal safety in schools.

In the article *School discipline and security: Fair for all students?* Kupcik and Ellis (2007) conducted a study regarding the fairness of school discipline tactics on students of color compared to White students. It was revealed that the demeanor of students of color dictated more disciplinary action than the demeanor of White students. Since incidents are reported to occur frequently, students of color expect to be unfairly disciplined. This unfair treatment resulted in feelings of alienation and rejection in the school setting, leading to poor academic performance. Kupcik and Ellis (2007) hypothesized that student race/ethnicity dictated school safety as well as the frequency of disciplinary action, and eventually affect school safety. Similarly, Shirley and Cornell (2011) found African-American students were three times more likely to be sent to the office for discipline problems and received suspensions five times more than Caucasian students. Moreover, these actions do not improve school safety. This problem is not atypical to the United States. England and France disproportionately administer disciplinary actions to students of African and Caribbean origin much more than Caucasian students (Shirley & Cornell, 2011). Excessive punishments only breed frustration, anger, resentment and cause students to disconnect from school. For these children, school is synonymous with prison and is not a safe place; especially in urban schools (Noguera, 2003).

In *Welcome all students to room 202: Creating culturally responsive classrooms*, Ford (2005) envisioned the concept of the classroom as a home. This implied safety and comfort for students, who are viewed as guests in classrooms where "learning environments are safe, welcoming, and responsive to their needs" (Ford, 2005, p. 29).

Teacher-Student relationships are discussed in the article, *But that's just good teaching,* Ladson-Billings (1995) which stated that "Culturally relevant" pedagogy is an important influencer in teacher-student relationships, contributing to the success of African-American and other students "who have not been well served by our nation's public schools" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 163). "Many students who are not part of the White, middle class mainstream, asserts Ladson-Billings, experience difficulty in schools because of the way culture is perceived." Labels such as "culturally appropriate", "culturally responsive", "culturally compatible", and so on were assigned to the work of anthropologists who looked at connections between students' home culture and school.

According to various data obtained by researchers (Diamond & Randolph, 2004; Ford, Grantham, 2003; Landsman, 2004) the expectations set by a number of teachers towards culturally diverse students such as African-American, Hispanic-American, and Native-American students tend to be lower than the expectations set towards Caucasian and Asian-American students. That may affect teacher-student relationships, claimed Ford (2005).

Ladson-Billings (2006) proposed that anthropological training might be the answer to preparing teachers for the diverse students they will face in their classrooms. The problem seems to be "the poverty of culture" as opposed to Harrington's (1997) often quoted phrase "the culture of poverty." The deficit model appears in Ladson-Billings' research in which African-American boys are overwhelmingly perceived by student-teachers as a problem they are dealing with.

Henfield and Washington (2012) believed that the issue with teacher-student relationships referred to what teachers believed about students of color. They said that 'Deficit Thinking' "focuses on what one believes members of another group lack" (p.149). These teachers blame student failure on lack of family values and their home life. Fortunately these concepts are being replaced by promoting understanding one's own culture in order to teach from the perspective of another.

Data Gathering Techniques

This study is part of a larger study performed by Author (2008). Author used a survey instrument to collect data from students among several variables who are of interest to this study regarding the perception of personal safety and teacher-student relationships. Author collected the data during the 2006-07 school year. Letters of consent were mailed to the parents of students. The mailing included the survey along with a postage-paid return envelope.

Survey Instrument

A 32-item questionnaire developed by Author (2008) was used in order to collect data regarding student perceptions of climate and environment in schools, 5 items for personal safety and 12 for teacher-student relationships (the rest of the items are not part of this study). The questionnaire had subscales with factors that contributed to school climate. Responses to the questionnaire are in Likert scale: 1=Strongly Agree to 5=Strongly Disagree (to see entire survey see Author, 2008, p. 45).

This study focused on Personal Safety (reliability = .797), and Teacher-Student Relationships (reliability = .936). Personal safety refers to one being free from harm or risk of danger within and around the school building. Student-Teacher Relationships refer to the connection, association, or involvement between teachers and their students for the purpose of academic advancement.

Table 1						
Differences Between Caucasian and African-American Students						
	Ethnicity	**N**	**M**	**S D**	**t**	**p**
Teacher - Student	African-American	10	39	18.02		
	Caucasian	24	48.12	8.48	-2.02	0.05
Personal Safety	African-American	13	19.15	6.10		
	Caucasian	28	21.75	2.81	-1.87	0.06

Methodology

The present study took place in a suburban middle school on the North Shore of Long Island, New York, with an enrollment of approximately 643 students. The ethnic breakdown of the school was 15 percent Black (not Hispanic), 2 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 23 percent Hispanic, and 60 percent White. The study focused on African-American and Caucasian ethnicities. Out of 213 students who responded to the survey, 176 were Caucasian students. The two variables used addressed personal safety and teacher-student relationships. Only 15 African-American students answered the survey. For that reason the researchers randomly selected 28 students out of the total 176 Caucasian students to be contrasted with African-American students. One of the major limitations of this study is the small number of African Americans who responded to the survey.

Data Analysis

How do teacher-student relationships and personal safety differ between Caucasian and African-American students in public schools?

An Independent Sample t-Test was performed in order to determine the level of significance of the two variables. This design was selected because it was believed to be the best for this type of analysis.

Table 1 shows No significant differences were found in personal safety (p=.06) and significant differences in student-teacher relationships (p=.05).

Table 2 shows frequency analysis per item. Here are the findings:

Personal safety: two items PS1 "I usually feel safe in the school building during the day" and PS2 "I usually feel safe in the building before and after school" revealed that African-American students disagreed 23 percent while none of the Caucasian students disagreed with these items. In the same way item PS3 "I usually feel safe to come to school for meet-ings and programs in the evening" showed a 20 percent gap between Caucasian and African-American students, where Caucasian students agreed more with the item.

Teacher-student relationships: items TSR3 "Teachers help students to be friendly and kind to each other", TSR9 "Teachers praise their students more often than they scold them", and TSR10 "Teachers are fair to students" showed a big gap. Fifty percent of African-American students in TSR3 agreed, versus zero percent of Caucasian students. In TSR9, zero percent of African-American students agreed versus 60 percent of Caucasian students. In TSR10, zero percent of African-American students agreed versus 72 percent of Caucasian students. In addition, item TSR2, "Teachers in this school are on the side of their students", African-American students disagreed 38.5 percent compared to four percent of Caucasian students.

Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to find out how perceptions of teacher-student relationships and personal safety differ between Caucasian and African-American students. This study took place in a school with a large Caucasian population. Study results may have shown greater significance with a more evenly distributed demographic. Although no significant differences were found in school safety, major differences were found in teacher-student relationships. Items such as "Teachers in this school are on the side of the their students", "Teachers are patient when a student has trouble learning", "Teachers praise students more often than they scold them, " and "Teachers do not shame or humiliate students" showed a large gap between African-American and Caucasian students, showing trouble in the teacher-student relationship for the first group. This agreed with Ladson-Billings (1995), when she confirmed observations regarding the role of culture in our public schools when students are alienated from White middle class mainstream. Viewed through the lens of White middle class culture, these teachers perpetuate deficit thinking.

Table 2   Item by Item Analysis

#	Question	Afro-American		Caucasian	
		Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree
PS1	I usually feel safe in the school building during the day	**23.1**	63.3	**0**	92.9
PS2	I usually feel safe in the school building before and after school	**23.1**	69.3	**0**	96.5
PS3	I usually feel safe to come to school for meetings and programs in the evening	7.7	**72**	0	**92.8**
PS4	I do not feel safe because I have witnessed a person being pushed or shoved on school property	69.3	23.1	85.7	14.3
PS5	I do not feel safe because I have witnessed a person being hit or beaten up by another person on school property	69.2	23.1	85.7	7.2
TSR1	Teachers in this school like their students	35.7	64.4	80	64
TSR2	Teachers in this school are on the side of these students	**38.5**	61.6	**4**	88
TSR3	Teachers help students to be friendly and kind to each other	35.7	**50**	72	**0**
TSR4	Teachers treat each student as in individual	21.4	28.5	28	72
TSR5	Teachers are willing to help their students	7.1	64.3	4	96
TSR6	Teachers are patient when a student has trouble learning	0	69.2	4.2	91.7
TSR7	Teachers spend extra time to help students	14.3	64.3	4	84
TSR8	Teachers understand and meet the needs of each student	14.3	64.3	8	72
TSR9	Teachers praise students more often than they scold them	35.7	**0**	16	**60**
TSR10	Teachers are fair to students	50	**0**	4	**72**
TSR11	Teachers explain carefully so that students can get their work done	**61.6**	38.5	**12**	64
TSR12	Teachers do not shame or humiliate students	**38.5**	46.2	**12**	76

Henfield and Washington (2012) explained many White student teachers looked down on African-American students because of deficit thinking. African-American students have more difficulty in school as a result of the way culture perceives them. Zero percent of African-American students in the study agreed with the statement in "TSR9. "Culturally appropriate", "culturally compatible", and "culturally responsive" labels, expressed Ladson-Billings (1995), are introduced in order to highlight a discrepancy between home culture and school. As a result of Eurocentric framework, it is perceived African-American students do not fit the societal expectation and patterns, as stated by Ford (2005). The expectations set by some teachers for African-Americans and other diverse students tend to be lower according to Diamond and Randolph (2004).

When culturally relevant pedagogy is not utilized, students are unable to learn and experience difficulty in school because of the way their culture is interpreted. Climate that promotes safety and comfort for students does not embarrass or degrade. These students do not feel welcome in the classroom, confirming the need for more multicultural training in schools.

References

Asante, M. (1991). The afrocentric idea in education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 170-180.

Bernal, D. D. (2002). Critical race theory, latino critical theory, and critical race gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(105), 1-23. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800107

Diamond, J., Randolph, A., & Spillane, J. (2004). Teachers' expectations and sense of responsibility for student learning: The importance of race, class, and organizational habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 35(1), 75-98.

Ford, D. Y. (2005, Fall). Welcome all students to room 202: Creating culturally responsive classrooms, *Gifted Child Today,* 28(4), 28.

Ford, D., Grantham, T. (2003). Providing access for culturally diverse gifted students: From deficit to dynamic thinking. *Theory into Practice*, 42(3), 217-225.

Giani, J. (2008). *A comparison of teachers, students, and parents attitudes of school climate and student behavior in a suburban middle school* (Published doctoral dissertation). Dowling College, Oakdale, NY/USA.

Henfield, M. S., & Washington, A. R. (2012). "I want to do the right thing but what is it?": White teachers' experiences with African American. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 81(2), 148-161.

Hughes, J. N., Wu, J.-Y., Kwok, O.M., Villarreal, V., & Johnson, A. Y. (2012). Indirect effects of child reports of teacher-student relationship on achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(2), 350-365. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0026339

Klonsky, M. (2002). How smaller schools prevent school violence. *Educational Leadership*, 65-69.

Kupchick, A., Ellis, N., (2007). School discipline and security: Fair for all students? *Youth and Society,*39(4), 549-574. Doi: 10.1177/00441118X07301956.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). It's not the culture of poverty, it's the poverty of culture: The problem with teacher education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 104-109. http://dx.doi.org/1548-1492

Landsman, J. (2004). Confronting the racism of low expectations. *Educational Leadership*, 62(3), 28-32.

Noguera, P. (2003). Schools, prisons, and social implications of punishment: Rethinking disciplinary practices. *Theory into Practice*, 42(4), 341-350.

Shirley, E., Cornell, D. (2011). The contribution of student perceptions of school climate to understanding the disproportionate punishment of African-American students in a middle school. *School Psychology International*, 33(2), 115-134. Doi: 10.1177/0143034311406815.

Dana C. Mester is a Dowling College Doctoral Student and Foreign Language Teacher on Long Island, NY.

Sherill A. Spruill is is a Dowling College Doctoral Student and Director of Choirs on Long Island, NY.

Dr. Joseph Giani is Superintendent of Schools at South Country Central School District, Long Island, NY.

Elsa-Sofia Morote, Ed.D., is a Professor, Department of Educational Administration Leadership and Technology, at Dowling College, in Oakdale, NY.

Dr. Albert Inserra, Ed.D., is President of Dowling College, in Oakdale, New York.