

## African American Students' Perceptions of Their Treatment by Caucasian Teachers

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In this study, 160 African American seventh grade students were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to measure variables such as, 'racial preference of teacher', and their perception of the types of treatment received from their Caucasian teachers. The majority of the students, contrary to some research, believed their teachers treated them fairly, related to them, and did not use race as an excuse to mistreat them or punish them for bad behavior. However, a slight majority stated they would prefer being taught by young African American teachers over young Caucasians, but students rejected the notion of only being instructed by teachers of a specific race, African American or Caucasian.

Over the past decades, an increasing amount of attention has been given to race relations in the class room between students and teachers. For example, one of the most frequent complaints of high school students, especially African American students, is that some teachers, most noticeably Caucasians, don't relate very well to them. Numerous studies have been conducted to assess the effects of race on students and teachers, and how well they identify with one another in the classroom. Many educators (Felsenthal, 1970; Graybill, 1997) believe that a positive relationship must exist between the student and teacher if significant academic achievement is to be gained. That is, the student must identify favorably with their teachers or they will do very poorly in school, which will lead to failure in society.

Investigators (Biber and Lewis, 1997; Cook, 1978; Felsenthal, 1970) reported that African American students, as well as their parents articulated that race of teacher was not significant, as long as teachers were caring, effective and fair. Furthermore, Cau-

casian teachers were able to motivate African American elementary school kids as effectively as African American teachers.

Despite this evidence, other researchers (Brophy, 1983; Casteel, 1998; Cecil, 1988; Ford, 1985; Good, 1981; Holliday, 1985; Marcus et al., 1991; Nieto et al., 1994; Rabinow and Cooper, 1981; Rong, 1996; Troyna, 1990) have concluded that African American students were given less attention, ignored more, praised less, and reprimanded more than their counterparts when taught by Caucasian teachers.

In light of the aforementioned literature, it would seem appropriate for school administrators to make every effort to place students with a teacher of their race. Therefore, this investigation attempted to find out how students felt about being taught by someone other than a member of their own race. Simply stated: Do African American students feel they do not receive fair and just treatment from Caucasian teachers who instruct them? Also, would African Americans prefer teachers of their own race because they could relate better to them?

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### Method

#### *Sample*

Participants were 160 seventh grade African American students in a public junior high school located in a suburban area in

southeastern Louisiana. The population was comprised of 101 girls and 59 boys. Originally there were 180 participants, but 20 students were disqualified because of missing data. All participants were tested by school counselors and were considered low achievers and had stanine scores of 4 or below on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. A majority of the students received free lunch or reduced lunch. Caucasian students comprised only 21% of the school population but were not part of this study. All but twelve students were instructed entirely by Caucasian teachers. The 51 Caucasian teachers who participated in the present study were part of the school's teaching staff, whose racial makeup was as follows: 78% Caucasians (sex of teacher was split almost equally); 26% African Americans (all females) and 1% Asians. These 51 teachers taught all of the students' core subjects except physical education, so that the only contact the students had with a teacher of their own race was one class (55 minutes) a day. In this study, the teachers' average age and years of teaching experience were as follows:  $M = 32$ ,  $SD = 5.41$  and  $M = 14.18$ ,  $SD = 4.80$ , respectively.

#### *Instrument and design*

A written survey form was constructed to measure students' preferences as well as the types of treatment they received from their Caucasian teachers. Students completed a survey that was anonymous but asked for their gender type. Students were told to skip a question if he/she believed it was ambiguous or did not apply to them. Students were asked to be honest with their responses because their answers would be evaluated as being helpful to their teachers and the school. Since these students were attending the present school for the first year, we asked them about teachers at their previous schools. Students were asked to circle the number of African American teachers who taught them in sixth grade. Most students had been in-

structed by as many as three African American teachers in one school year.

#### *Results*

African American students were asked questions about treatment they received from their Caucasian teachers, the ability of teachers to relate to them and their preferences of race of classroom teacher. Findings of the present study indicated that there were marginal racial preferences in the attitudes of 160 seventh grade African Americans about the Caucasian teachers that instructed them on a daily basis. Because of the low number of boys in the group, no attempt was made to analyze the results by gender. The data were analyzed and listed in Table 1 by number and percentage for each variable asked. By necessity, only significant findings are reported. Results of the questionnaire revealed some interesting conclusions with regard to some questions.

Questions 1 and 2 asked African American students if they believed their race was the reason they received 'good grades' (Question 1) or 'poor grades' (Question 2) from their Caucasian teachers. For Question 1 on 'good grades', the vast majority (62%) believed that their race was not a factor. Only a small number (24%) felt their race was the contributing factor to any grades they were to receive.

For Question 2 on 'poor grades', again the majority of students (50%) felt race was not the reason they received 'poor grades' from their Caucasian teachers.

Question 5 asked students if they believed most of their 'teachers dislike them' because of their race. The results are overwhelming, a preponderance of students (78%) believed their Caucasian teachers did not dislike them based merely on their race.

Question 6 asked students if they felt they were treated unfairly by their teachers. Again the majority of students (53%) believed they were not treated wrongly by their Caucasian teachers. The findings of this

Table 1 <i>African American students perceptions about their Caucasian teachers</i>				
Item descriptions	Types of responses Number and (percent)			
	Y	N	NS	DM
1. Do you believe your race is the reason your teacher gives you good grades?	38(24)	99(62)	23(14)	X
2. If you were to receive poor grades, do you believe your race would be the reason?	43(27)	80(50)	37(23)	X
3. Do you feel that your teacher tries to embarrass you if you misbehave by disturbing the class because of your race?	36(23)	94(59)	30(19)	X
4. If you were to misbehave, do you feel your race would determine the type of punishment you would receive?	11(07)	124(78)	25(16)	X
5. Do you believe most of your teachers dislike you because of your race?	29(18)	112(78)	19(12)	X
6. Do you believe you are treated unfairly?	85(53)	40(25)	35(22)	X
7. Do you feel uneasy being taught by a person of a different race?	40(31)	116(69)	9(06)	X
8. Do your teachers attempt to motivate you?	74(46)	15(09)	71(44)	X
9. Do you feel your teachers help you with your daily work just because of your race?	23(14)	115(72)	22(14)	X
10. Are you praised with kind words after you answer a question correctly/incorrectly?	53(33)	107(67)	X	X
11. When you have an important question pertaining to the lesson, do your teachers ignore you?	69(43)	74(46)	17(10)	X
12. Do you feel your teachers are able to relate to you?	101(63)	33(21)	26(16)	X
13. Would you rather be taught by mostly teachers that seem young to you?	81(51)	20(12)	X	59(37)
14. Would you rather be taught by young teachers that are all African Americans?	70(44)	54(34)	X	6(22)
15. Given a choice to pick my teachers, I would choose all African American teachers.	47(29)	68(43)	45(28)	X

Note: Y= yes, N= no, NS= not sure, DM= doesn't matter.  
X= no choice presented in question

question proved inconsistent with a recent study by Casteel (1998), who found that Caucasian teachers did not treat seventh-grade African American students fairly in integrated classrooms.

Question 7 asked students if they felt 'uneasy being taught by a person of a different race'. Clearly, the majority (69%) of these African American students responded

with 'no', while only a few (25%) said they were uneasy in classrooms instructed by Caucasian teachers.

There were some interesting results for Question 8 which asked students if they felt teachers 'attempted to motivate them'. Less than one-half (46%) believed their teachers tried to motivate them. What might be viewed with some concern is the divulgence that

almost as many students (44%) weren't sure whether their teachers attempted to motivate them. Such doubt could be that some of the students weren't sure when they were being motivated. Thus this question could have been confusing. Nevertheless, only nine percent felt their teachers did not try to encourage them.

Question 10 asked students if their teachers 'praised them with kind words after answering a question correctly'.

Very surprisingly, less than a majority of students (33%) responded with 'yes'. A majority of students (67%) felt they did not receive enough praise after trying to answer a question.

Question 12 asked students if they believed their teachers were able to 'relate' to them. Overwhelmingly, a majority (63%) of students felt their teachers were able to connect with them, while a low number (21%) felt otherwise. Yet some other studies (Beady and Hansell, 1981; King, 1993) show that young African American students relate better in classes being instructed by African American teachers who they can identify with.

Question 13 and 14 asked students if they would rather be 'taught by young teachers' (Question 13) or if they preferred their 'young teachers to be African American' (Question 14). When questioned by the students on how to define a 'young' teacher, they were to use their own judgement based on a teacher's physical appearance, use of expressions in their speech, and energy level. For Question 13 about preference of young teachers, the majority of students (51%) chose young teachers. It certainly seems reasonable that young pupils would understand them better than older teachers. But in this case, a high percentage (37%) of students said it didn't matter whether they were taught by young or older teachers.

For Question 14, measuring preference of 'young teachers that are African American', most (44%) African American stu-

dents said they would choose young African American teachers if they were given a choice. Students' answers were surprising because previous responses did not indicate that African Americans might prefer African American teachers over teachers of another race while some students (22%) said it 'didn't matter' as to the race of their teachers. It appears that African American students believe they might relate somewhat better to young African American teachers as opposed to older African American teachers; the results was not surprising.

Question 15 asked students when given a choice if they would choose 'all African American teachers'. Noticeably, a majority of students (43%) wouldn't choose all African American teachers. These findings contrast greatly with the findings for question 14. It appears that African American students would prefer teachers of their race, but would not want them all to be African Americans. Results indicate that not only would students prefer a majority of young teachers, they would like them to be of both races.

### Discussion

In this study, students' feelings about their teachers and their preferences among the teachers who instruct them were evaluated. The findings of this study indicated that African American suburban seventh grade students from a low socio-economic population do not believe their race is a significant factor in the way they are treated in the classroom by their Caucasian teachers. Specifically, African American students felt their teachers were fair and were able to relate to them. These findings are contrary to aforementioned literature which showed that African American students are not treated fairly and teachers of different races have trouble accepting African American students. Furthermore, in this study, students believed that most of their teachers liked them, did not try to embarrass them, or unduly punish them because of their race. Also, students

felt that the grades (good/poor) they received did not correlate to their race. Thus a vast majority of students felt comfortable with their teachers and didn't have a preference as to the race of their teachers.

Of minor consideration in relation to the theme of this study was that students felt teachers did not devote enough attention to their questions; however, this complaint could be attributed to most classroom teachers. But one might draw some different conclusions from the question that asked whether students preferred young African American teachers over Caucasian teachers. Results revealed that African Americans might prefer someone of their own race over another race if the teacher was young, but these figures were deemed to be insignificant. Overall, the results allowed me to conclude of that race of teacher is not significant with African American suburban youths.

Because of the rapid increase in the number of African American children attending public schools, and a decline in African American teachers; Caucasian teachers must be better prepared to teach minority students, if public education is to be successful. Moreover, it is paramount that teacher training centers prepare teachers to teach in integrated classrooms since most teachers are middle class Caucasians females (Reed, 1998).

If full credence is to be given to the statistical results of the study, we must therefore conclude that, African American students appear to be appeased with teachers of another race, and they are treated impartial if compared to Caucasians. However, this researcher is not yet ready to validate these conclusions from his own limited study. Some concerns include the low sample number and the confinement to only one school, thus the researcher recommends that this study be replicated with a larger population.

Finally, results of this study in no way imply that Caucasian teachers are totally free from bias in their treatment of African

American students. Yet this conclusion can be very encouraging since researchers (Ahlquist, 1991; Nieto et al., 1994; Reed, 1998; Rothenberg, 1997.) reported that most public school teachers are overwhelmingly Caucasian and young females.

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