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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of 2,409 7th-12th graders regarding teacher ethnic bias. Participants comprised three groups: school dropouts, students at risk of dropping out, and a control group of students. Students responded to questions regarding teachers' liking of Mexican American students and non-Latino white students. This was done regarding teachers in elementary school, 7th grade, and during the last year. Ethnicity, gender, and school status were the independent variables. Data analysis indicated that ethnic background was the strongest factor influencing students' perception of bias. Mexican American students were more likely to perceive bias than were non-Latino white students. School status was also a significant factor in models predicting perception of high bias. Dropouts perceived high bias more often than did students at risk of dropping out, who perceived high bias more often than did the control group of students. These gaps widened as the students progressed through school. A discussion of implications for teacher education and staff development focuses on assessment of student perspectives, identifying one's own biases, learning by doing, and committing more firmly to multicultural education. (Contains 30 references.) (SM)

Student Perceptions of Teacher Ethnic Bias: Implications for Teacher Preparation and Staff Development

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Introduction

Dropping out of high school is a result of the convergence of many events and no one event is commonly the cause. Taking every opportunity to identify and understand issues which are a part of this collection of events serves to enable educators and researchers with more information to alleviate this problem and help students. In addition, many proposed solutions for reducing dropout often are ones which can help spur academic achievement in all areas of the student population.

Many causes and correlates of dropping out have been identified, one of which is the nature of the school-student relationship. School alienation is a significant factor when explaining dropout and low academic achievement, particularly so among minority students (Calabrese & Poe, 1990; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock ,1986; Fine, 1991; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). More specifically, poor teacher-student relationships can be a cause of alienation since these relationships are at the very heart of the educational process (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Tidwell, 1988; Turner, Laria, Shapiro, & Perez, 1993). It has been suggested that the teacher-student bond is particularly important for Mexican American students (Alva & Padilla, 1995).

One aspect of poor teacher-student relationships results from student perceptions that teachers treat students differentially according to ethnic background. Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick (1993) state that when presented with a school situation which is a cultural mismatch, some minority children may reject the situation as belonging to "them", and not "us". Given Alva and Padilla's (1995) findings, this may be especially true for Mexican American students. In fact, Katz (1999) reported that discrimination was the primary cause of Latino student disengagement from school. Students report many different manifestations of perceived teacher ethnic bias, including low academic expectations, differential disciplinary tactics and being told not to speak Spanish at school (Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Fine, 1991; Katz, 1999).

This paper expands upon a study by Wayman (2002a) which examined perceptions of teacher ethnic bias in a large-scale database of dropouts and in-school students of Mexican American and non-Latino white descent. Results from Wayman (2002a) indicated that although perceptions of teacher ethnic bias are not rampant, such perceptions exist, more so in Mexican American adolescents, high school dropouts, and males. Accordingly, the issue of student bias perception is one which must be addressed – regardless of whether these perceptions represent actual teacher bias, the fact is that these perceptions represent reality for students who possess them. These realities hold implications for teacher preparation and staff development; the aim of this paper is to explore these implications.

A Study of Student Perceptions of Teacher Ethnic Bias

In order to frame the implications discussion, it will be helpful to first present a very brief description of the Wayman (2002a) study (this study supported by National Institute on Drug Abuse, grant R01 DA 04777).

Participants

The sample included 2409 7-12th grade adolescents in the Southwestern U.S., comprising three groups: school dropouts, students at risk of dropping out, and a control group of students. Dropouts were defined as students in grades 7-12 who were not participating in any sort of schooling, and who had not contacted the district for readmission. At-risk students were matched with dropouts on school, ethnicity, gender, grade and GPA. Control students matched dropouts for all these except GPA.

Analysis

Dependent variables. The participant's perception of teacher ethnic bias was assessed by analyzing responses to questions regarding teachers' liking of Mexican American students and non-Latino white students. Responses were categorized as "high", "mild", and "no" bias.

Participants were given sets of questions asking how much teachers liked the Mexican American or non-Latino white students. This was done regarding teachers in elementary school, seventh grade, and during the last year (e.g., "How much did the teachers at your school like the kids who were Spanish or Mexican-American when you were in seventh grade?"). Each question offered a 4-point Likert response scale. Participants who responded two or three points lower to the Mexican American question than the non-Latino white question were placed in the "high bias" group; participants who responded one point lower to the Mexican American question were placed in the "mild bias" group; participants who answered equally to both items were placed in the "no bias" group. A very small amount of participants (approximately 4%) responded lower on the non-Latino white item than the Mexican American item and were not considered for analysis

Independent variables: Ethnicity, gender, and school status (dropout, at-risk, control) were used as independent variables in the present study. Gender was based on self-report items from the survey, ethnicity (Mexican American and non-Latino white) was based on school records, and school status was determined by the sampling procedure.

Logistic regression modeling: Logistic regression was used to identify a parsimonious set of factors related to each measure of teacher ethnic bias. For each measure of teacher ethnic bias, a model was estimated comparing those who perceived some bias (mild and high groups) to those who perceived no bias. Then, a model was estimated comparing those who perceived high bias to those who did not perceive high bias (mild and none groups). Main effects and interactions involving the independent variables were considered for significance. Socioeconomic status and grade were initially considered as control variables, but were not statistically significant and were eliminated from the models.

Results

Table 1 gives the distribution of the bias measures and indicates that as much as 30% of the sample perceived some degree of bias in their teachers. Tables 2 and 3 present the final logistic regression models. These models suggest that ethnic background is the strongest factor influencing perception of bias, as it was the only factor significant in all models and typically carried the highest odds ratio. Mexican American participants were more likely to perceive bias than were non-Latino white participants.

School status was also a significant factor in models predicting perception of high bias. Dropouts perceived high bias more than did students at-risk of dropping out, who perceived high bias more than did the control group of students. Further, these gaps widened as the students progress through schools, e.g., the difference in bias perception between dropouts and the student groups was smaller when asked about their elementary school teachers than it was when asked about their teachers of the last year.

Implications for Teacher Preparation and Staff Development

Many studies have investigated the conduct of teachers and how this relates to biased actions, but it is not common for research to examine bias from the student view. The Wayman (2002a) study provided a view of student perceptions of bias from a large-scale database and offered needed ethnic and student status comparisons. These results first indicate that perceptions of teacher ethnic bias exist, in proportions which are not epidemic, but clearly unacceptable. This study also indicated that perception of bias is not only an "ethnic thing", but is also sometimes a "dropout thing", even after controlling for ethnicity.

Such studies are enlightening, for this is a phenomenon which demands a response. These perceptions, justified or not, are reality for these students, and it is incumbent upon the education community to respond appropriately. The problem is, how? What do the perceptions of students tell us which can shape future directions toward eradicating this problem? How can we prepare teachers and future teachers to understand such perceptions and respond to them in a manner which makes the student feel valued and respected?

Our knowledge base to answer these questions is not large, and the Wayman (2002a) study is not extensive – it was designed to present only a preliminary set of results for previously unexplored comparisons and was not designed to make causal inferences. Despite these limitations, studies of student perceptions, bias research, and multicultural research still provide a sufficient information base from which to begin consideration of the implications of for teacher preparation and staff development. The following discussion will describe such implications. In considering this discussion, it is important to keep in mind that these implications speak to improved educational experiences for all students, not only ethnic minority students.

Assessment of Student Perspectives

Although many good studies have been published which examine bias in the schools, Witty and DeBaryshe (1994) note that there exists far more literature regarding teacher issues than regarding student issues. Further, the results of Wayman (2002a) indicate that there is still vast room for improvement in reducing the level of bias perceived by the students, as over a quarter of participants reported feeling some level of bias. The lack of research surrounding student perceptions of bias is troubling, since perception of bias is one component of school alienation, and such perceptions could tell us so much about the directions we need to go in order to create a more respectful environment. Put another way, students are the focus of schools, so why are their perceptions often left out of this issue? Therefore, the primary implication of these

results is the need for far more research regarding the student perspective. Many studies have displayed the oft-underrated insight that students are capable of offering (e.g., Fine, 1991; Wayman, 2002b), and this is a perspective which needs to be included.

To respond to this call, there are many forms of research that can and should be undertaken, and any research will be helpful – large-scale, small-scale, quantitative, qualitative, action research, etc. Such research can inform ways teachers can change, ways schools and systems can change, and ways that schools can help the students change. Where perceptions are involved, the truth often lies in the middle, so it is important that our research on this topic be comprehensive and from many perspectives. Naturally, it is important to study the points of view of ethnic minority students. However, research should also include the perspective of non-minority students. Wayman's (2002a) results indicated that non-Latino white dropouts also hold these perceptions; the perceptions of this population could provide a broader, possibly untapped perspective on the problem.

Identify Your Own Biases

Much of the contemporary thinking in multicultural education suggests more in-depth analysis of personal biases and experiences, and how these may affect interactions with students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Pullen, 2000; Spindler, 1999; Tatum, 1998). Such self-introspection is probably the first step in understanding student perceptions of bias. Tatum (1998) perhaps states this perspective best:

> Each of us needs to look at our own behavior, particularly as educators. Am I perpetuating and reinforcing the negative messages so pervasive in our culture, or am I seeking to challenge them? If I have not been exposed to positive images of marginalized groups, am I seeking them out, expanding my own knowledge base for myself and my students? Am I acknowledging and examining my own prejudices, my own rigid categorizations of others, thereby minimizing the adverse impact they might have on my interactions with those I have categorized? Unless we engage in these and other conscious acts of reflection and reeducation, we easily repeat the process with our students.

Although a great number of educators are eager to engage in such reflection, the problem is that many are not properly prepared to respond to such a call. Traditional multicultural education, if presented at all, is often implemented superficially in both teacher preparation and staff development, teaching a degree of understanding of the experiences of others but not sufficiently challenging personal belief systems or promoting action (Lewis, 2001; McIntyre, 1997). Consequently, teachers are left to fumble alone through self-analysis, which becomes an incredibly risky endeavor. With such a charged topic, and without the proper tools, many people are afraid of such an undertaking for fear of being judged based on exposure of previously held beliefs. My own experiences talking with preservice teachers about multiculturalism have highlighted this fact. One can see and feel the students advancing, pulling back, advancing again, trying to maintain some balance between learning and not exposing so much of themselves to risk judgment because of what they don't know – to risk being called "racist".

Teacher preparation and staff development programs must begin to offer proper training to help personal bias exploration, and the literature is growing regarding these tools. Spindler (1999), for instance, suggests a means called "cultural therapy", which involves gaining an awareness of one's own culture in order to recognize it as a potential bias in social interactions, of which teaching certainly is one. Lewis (2001) supports "critical multiculturalism", where the goal is to go beyond fostering appreciation of diversity and create systems which produce equal access, to help individuals understand where these differences create inequity in our schools and society. Marshall (1998) describes the use of a method called "issues exchange", which helps students learn by taking roles and debating points of issues, often in situations which are contrary to their beliefs. Many have suggested the use of essays, autobiographies, and narratives in order to truly explore personal biases (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2000). In addition, there also exists a plethora of writing pertaining to the function of the effects of majority culture – "white privilege" – in the promotion and maintenance of hidden bias teachers (e.g., McIntyre, 1997; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997).

Obviously, personal assessment is critical in improving student perceptions of bias, because it is hard to assess perspectives of others when one does not fully understand one's own perspectives. With many educators ready and willing to undertake such exploration, it is important to provide these tools for them, and to do it now.

Learning by Doing

For years, common wisdom in education has suggested that people learn by doing. Exploring the nature of student perceptions of bias is no different. Studies have shown that efforts involving service learning, action research and the like can help teachers to explore their own biases, understand their students, and present more inclusive environments (McIntyre, 1997; Noguera, 1995; Vadeboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, & LeCompte, 1996). Participatory research is especially important when studying student perceptions, because such research can provide teachers with real knowledge of their students' situations. Noguera (1995) suggests that when teachers are unfamiliar with their students and their students' cultures, teachers are more likely to rely on stereotypes to explain student actions.

There are numerous forms of participatory research which teachers could perform inside and outside of their own classrooms which could illuminate reasons why students perceive bias. For example, Noguera (1995) describes a situation where teachers were taken to inner parts of a city where many of their students resided, to see first-hand the everyday experiences of their students. Vadeboncoeur et al. (1996) described the utility of a service learning project, where preservice teachers undertook service commitments in a diversity of community settings. Cochran-Smith (2000) described sweeping curriculum changes in a teacher preparation program which were made with the input of their students, stemming from complaints received by students.

Although these learning opportunities were part of organized development, such organization is not needed for educators to learn more about the nature of student perceptions in their own schools or classrooms. Simple action research projects can be constructed which could provide needed information. Examples of themes which could drive these projects include:

- Ask the students their opinions. Students can be remarkably forthright in stating their perceptions, and often provide a perspective not found on the adult side. Marginalized students are especially important, because they often carry the strongest criticism of schools (Fine, 1991).
- Which students get the most of the teacher's attention, and why? There are various ways to explore this theme, such as raw counts of the number of classroom interactions per student, identifying whether these interactions were initiated by the student or by the teacher, assessing the nature of these interactions, etc.
- Identify students a teacher likes best and worst. This seems dangerous at first, but when combined with some observation of interaction and attention, this could be very illuminating.
- Observe language and actions of the teacher. Are these they used fairly and equally for each student? Do they promote a positive environment for everyone? Are there hidden messages in these actions which may be perceived as biased by the students?
- Observe other teachers. Observing classrooms of experts, such as suggested by Ladson-Billings (2000), is one way to learn. Also, there is much which can be learned by observing not-so-expert teachers, observing "what not to do".

Presenting participatory learning as a solution is optimistic for most of our current educational situations. Even for the most well-meaning educators, problems exist in actually carrying out these projects, most notably time, incentive, and abilities. Teachers have enough to do without putting action research projects on their plates, and it is optimistic to believe that many will participate in such research without proper incentive. Further, such research skills are not commonly taught in preparation programs or staff development, so such projects would be difficult to carry out for many teachers.

This is an area where education can easily respond. In order to endorse participatory learning, educational systems must provide support and incentive to perform such projects. Stipends could be offered to support these projects and compensate teachers for the extra time required. Release time could be granted to perform these projects. Quality projects could be part of promotion or tenure. Perhaps most importantly, systems must make participatory research training available. For teachers currently in the profession, inservices can be conducted within schools, or release time and tuition programs can be arranged so teachers can take professional development courses. On the preservice side, not only should students be well-schooled in the needed research abilities to carry out these projects, they must have ample opportunity to practice and learn them, and the attitude that this type of research is important needs to be prevalent throughout the preparation curriculum.

A Greater Commitment to Multicultural Education

Underlying all the discussions about, implications of, and solutions to the problem of student perception of bias is that multicultural education and development is often not suitably implemented in our schools, if at all. This is not due to a lack of attention to the problem or work on the subject – there is currently a vast literature base surrounding multicultural education, and many good scholars and teachers are performing and advancing the science of multicultural education every day. Still, it is obvious that education in the United States is not deeply committed to multicultural education.

Many scholars charge that the staff development and preparation offered does not go deep enough – descriptions of various populations are offered, and in some cases, understanding and empathy is even promoted, but rarely is action taught, nor do programs challenge the participant to take action or change belief systems (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lewis, 2001). This is often due to the brief nature of course offerings – whether it be staff development or teacher preparation, multicultural education is typically presented as a topic within a course, or if a full course is offered, it is often isolated from other curriculum and experiences (Kailin, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997). Further complicating the situation is that schools often conceive of multicultural education as an activity which effects changes to teachers as individuals rather than a whole-school activity which changes and benefits both the organization and the individual (Sleeter, 1992). It is unreasonable to expect educators to consider fairness, diversity and multiculturalism a full-time attitude if we do not make the multicultural theme a prevalent one throughout their learning and throughout the organizations of which they are a part.

There are many issues which are important in making multicultural education a central consideration; I will briefly mention two here. One would be the offering of pedagogical tools regarding multicultural education. Multicultural education can be considered its own area – it has its own knowledge base and requires specific preparation (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Preservice students should be required to learn pedagogy surrounding multicultural education and learn to apply these methods in a variety of ways throughout their preservice experience, much the same way as a mathematics teacher takes math methods courses and applies these methods while learning to teach. Similarly, inservice teachers should be offered this set of skills, and be required to maintain them, just as they do their content skills. We do not offer one-credit courses in "how to teach" or "math" before we turn out teachers; neither should this happen with multicultural skills.

A second issue involves helping teachers to understand the notion of majority privilege. In schools, as in society, there is a dominant culture which permeates the school experience from the curriculum on down through personal interaction. In fact, some implementations of multicultural preparation have contained specific focus on "white privilege" to foster multicultural understanding among teachers (McIntyre, 1997; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997) and to help teachers to understand how majority privilege drives educational systems. Care must be taken with the implementation of this aspect of multicultural education, however, that teaching about majority privilege is not focused at certain groups. Too often, multicultural courses are focused only toward helping European American individuals to understand the oppression of minority individuals. The result is often a narrowly focused course which brings about the ultimate irony – description of majority culture privilege done only for...majority culture individuals. Cochran-Smith (2000) presents a good description of her own struggle to implement truly inclusive discussion of majority privilege in a teacher preparation curriculum. True, it is more likely that a person of the majority culture might have less awareness of the leverage of the majority culture. However, a holistically-focused curriculum regarding multicultural privilege will serve to provide a well-rounded education for all students and send the right message – if we desire to teach inclusion, we must practice inclusion.

Conclusion

Although the data taken from Wayman (2002a) is new, the implications suggested in this paper are not. However, until these changes are implemented, it will be necessary to continue making these points. There are all varieties of wonderful work being done in multicultural education, but the sad truth is that their implementation is far too infrequent. Our educational systems require more awareness and more backing of the issues surrounding multicultural education, and promotion of issues such as student perception of teacher ethnic bias must continue until diversity and inclusion are common themes in every school. As Lewis (2001) points out, school systems can be the equalizers they're supposed to be, and it is necessary they recognize the power they have to promote socialization, both good and bad.

Responding to student perceptions of teacher ethnic bias is a means to accomplish many ends. Not only should such response create a more welcoming, fairer environment for minority students, but it should provide an environment of respect which will benefit all students. The data from Wayman (2002a) tells us that it's not just minority students who are critical of teachers regarding bias, but even after controlling for ethnicity, dropouts as well. Research is abundant in describing the positive effects of a more comfortable, inclusive environment, and the common-sense value of this environment is even stronger. It is my hope that raising this issue can prove worthwhile and helpful for those seeking to provide a better education.

Table 1
Distributions of Measures of Teacher Ethnic Bias

	Elementary Teachers	Seventh Grade Teachers	Teachers Last Year
Perceives no bias	1748 (76%)	1732 (70%)	1730 (70%)
Perceives mild bias	413 (18%)	453 (20%)	434 (19%)
Perceives high bias	143 (6%)	224 (10%)	245 (11%)

Table 2
Models Describing Student Perception of Mild Teacher Ethnic Bias or Worse, Regarding Elementary, Seventh Grade and Last Year Teachers

Factor	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	β	se(β)	Wald	df	p
Model for Elementary:								
Dropout Status								
Dropout/Control	0.98	0.78	1.24	-0.016	0.119	0.02	1	0.895
At-Risk/Control	1.07	0.84	1.36	0.064	0.122	0.28	1	0.598
Gender	0.99	0.82	1.20	-0.011	0.098	0.01	1	0.909
Ethnicity	1.25	1.01	1.53	0.219	0.107	4.24	1	0.040
Intercept				-1.364	0.124	120.21	1	0.000
Model for Seventh:								
Dropout Status								
Dropout/Control	1.07	0.86	1.33	0.07	0.111	0.40	1	0.527
At-Risk/Control	1.04	0.83	1.30	0.036	0.116	0.10	1	0.757
Gender	0.96	0.81	1.15	-0.037	0.092	0.16	1	0.690
Ethnicity	1.38	1.13	1.68	0.323	0.101	10.30	1	0.001
Intercept				-1.181	0.118	100.95	1	0.000
Model for Last Year:								
Dropout Status								
Dropout/Control	1.22	0.98	1.52	0.198	0.112	3.13	1	0.077
At-Risk/Control	1.15	0.91	1.44	0.137	0.117	1.39	1	0.238
Gender	0.90	0.75	1.08	-0.103	0.092	1.25	1	0.264
Ethnicity	1.47	1.20	1.79	0.382	0.101	14.29	1	0.000
Intercept				-1.265	0.119	112.81	1	0.000

Note. Dependent variable is Mild or High Bias/No Bias.
Note. Gender is Male/Female.
Note. Ethnicity is Mexican American/non-Latino white.

Table 3

Models Describing Student Perception of High Teacher Ethnic Bias, Regarding Elementary, Seventh Grade and Last Year Teachers

Factor	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	β	se(β)	Wald	df	p
Model for Elementary:								
Dropout Status								
Dropout/Control	1.49	0.96	2.31	0.400	0.223	3.21	1	0.073
At-Risk/Control	1.44	0.91	2.26	0.364	0.231	2.48	1	0.115
Gender	1.38	0.97	1.97	0.323	0.180	3.20	1	0.074
Ethnicity	1.71	1.13	2.57	0.534	0.209	6.56	1	0.010
Intercept								
Model for Seventh:								
Dropout Status								
Dropout/Control	4.06	2.88	5.73	1.401	0.345	16.53	1	0.000
At-Risk/Control	2.21	1.52	3.20	0.791	0.373	4.49	1	0.034
Gender	2.78	1.95	3.96	1.023	0.354	8.36	1	0.004
Dropout Status X Gender								
Dropout/Control	0.30	0.20	0.46	-1.197	0.412	8.45	1	0.004
At-Risk/Control	0.58	0.38	0.90	-0.539	0.439	1.51	1	0.220
Ethnicity	2.00	1.68	2.38	0.694	0.175	15.67	1	0.000
Intercept				-3.859	0.335	132.86	1	0.000
Model for Last Year:								
Dropout Status								
Dropout/Control	2.28	1.59	3.26	0.823	0.184	20.08	1	0.000
At-Risk/Control	1.78	1.21	2.60	0.574	0.194	8.75	1	0.003
Gender	1.52	1.15	2.01	0.419	0.143	8.58	1	0.003
Ethnicity	1.90	1.37	2.63	0.642	0.166	14.95	1	0.000
Intercept				-3.442	0.219	247.14	1	0.000

Note. Dependent variable is High Bias/Mild or No Bias.

Note. Gender is Male/Female.

Note. Ethnicity is Mexican American/non-Latino white.

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