

**White Teachers' Reactions to the Racial Treatment
of Middle-School Black Boys**

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Abstract

This qualitative exploratory study, informed by grounded theory, used questionnaires and unstructured interviews based on fictionalized vignettes to examine urban, public, middle-school White teachers' attitudes about middle-school Black boys, questioning whether and how such attitudes might influence classroom interactions. Twenty-four participants responded to three vignettes that were fictionalized from the author's professional experiences and described White-teachers' interactions with middle-school Black boys. In these vignettes, the teachers used race either to chastise or give unfair privileges and inequitable opportunities to the Black students. The findings revealed that participants exhibited negative attitudes toward the teachers in the vignettes, indicating that the multicultural training courses participants had received may have sensitized them to classroom-based racial inequities.

Keywords: Black boys; White teachers; middle-school; urban education; multiculturalism.

Introduction

I remember that as a young Black⁶ male adolescent I was stereotyped and racially profiled primarily by White teachers as not being academically worthy of their attention. During my eight elementary school years, I did not experience racial discourse from my White teachers. Perhaps this was because I attended a Catholic school. However, when I was interviewed for the public high school I wanted to attend and during my secondary school years, I began to experience apparently racially influenced discourse from White teachers. Sadly, the experiences and challenges of my racial identification in school seem to be especially common among Black males, past and present, many of whom have been racially profiled and who struggle with being negatively labeled by some White teachers. White teachers are in a unique position of either becoming the allies of Black boys or – perhaps unwittingly – their tormentors.

It is important to consider whether and how White teachers' attitudes influence their classroom relationships with Black boys. Studying White teachers' attitudes may reveal whether it is possible for White teachers to place themselves more in the shoes of Black boys rather than to remain in the shoes of their White colleagues. Allport, as cited in Griffith and London (1980), found fractionalization among White teachers and Black students, particularly males. The authors suggested that people's attitudes and beliefs function as a mechanism for limiting the behavioral options they have at their disposal. Attitudes certainly may affect how students perceive themselves and how they perform in classrooms where teacher-student racial differences are present. It seems likely that, as pre-adolescents, middle-school Black boys are sensitive to and not oblivious of the negative attitudes of their teachers and that they may be particularly sensitive regarding their White teachers, especially if the boys sense that racial guilt is a factor in their teacher-student relationships. Considering their generally socially stigmatized racial identity of being a Black youth, the added racial tension may especially complicate their development.

Tatum (2003) wrote: "As children enter adolescence, they begin to explore the question of identity, asking 'Who am I? Who can I be?' in a way they have not done before. For Black youth, asking 'Who am I?' includes thinking about 'Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?'" (p. 53). Tatum's words are a reminder that middle-school Black boys may be navigating unknown territory as racially identifiable people who cope with and negotiate ways to avoid being stereotyped or judged by others, especially by White people. Relationships with their White classroom teachers may be particularly fraught with difficulty as these young Black boys experience racial challenges. To this end, it is important for all teachers, White teachers particularly, to be aware of potentially projecting racial stereotyping or unthinking requirements onto students of color.

Detailed in this article is an exploratory study designed to examine White teachers' interracial attitudes regarding middle-school Black boys and to determine whether and how such attitudes might influence classroom interactions. To meet this aim, I first describe how scholarly literature addresses such key issues as racial stereotyping of Black males, White teacher-Black student interracial relationships, and White privilege and Black under-privilege. I then describe how I used the qualitative methods informed by grounded theory; these methods consisted of fictionalized vignettes, a questionnaire, and unstructured interviews to collect data addressing participants' reactions to fictionalized teachers racial treatment of middle-school Black boys. I

¹ I purposely use the terms "Black middle-school boys" and "White teachers" as taken from the American context of social construct and multicultural education; these terms are used regularly in scholarly literature when discussing race (Amos, 2010; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Noguera, 2003; Sleeter, 2004; Tatum, 2003).

thematically analyzed the data, looking for themes relevant to the participants' expressed attitudes toward the fictionalized teachers' behavior and actions, along with their thoughts about the middle-school Black boys' real-life experiences presented in each of the fictionalized vignettes. Finally, I present these results and discuss their implications.

Literature Review

Racial Stereotyping of Black Males

Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya (2011) contend that stereotypes become discrimination as they are expressed within key social institutions. Historically, Black males have been misinterpreted and misunderstood in school, and they frequently are victims of stereotyping and outright discrimination (Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2008). Young Black males, who may be more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative stereotyping, receive clear messages about their strengths, capacity, and "place." Throughout their schooling, Black boys learn that they may achieve success in sports, but that academic and scholarly success are neither expected of them nor deeply valued (Noguera, 2003, p. 445). In particular, Pauker, Ambady, and Apfelbaum (2010) believed that these attitudinal evaluations can have a deep emotional effect. The experience of marginalization is not abstract but is lived, experienced, and felt. This internalization of stereotypes is what is meant by the term *oppression*, and it has strong implications for understanding oppression and, ultimately, its resolution within social institutions, especially schools. According to Kumashiro (2000):

The way that oppression may be addressed responds to the harmful dispositions of the teachers, and involving teaching to all students. Researchers have argued that educators need not only to acknowledge the diversity among their students, but also to embrace these differences and to treat their students as raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed individuals (p. 28).

Kumashiro (2000) further indicates that teachers must begin to understand not only the experience of marginalized youth, but of their own Whiteness if schools are to be less oppressive places.

Racial stereotyping by teachers leads to actual declines in student performance (Okeke, Howard, & Kurtz-Costes, 2009; Steele, 1997). The impact of stereotyping and oppression provides a powerful explanation about why Black and Hispanic/Latino(a) students have higher dropout rates at various educational stages than do White or Asian students (Woodcock, Hernandez, Estrad, & Schultz, 2012). McGrady and Reynolds (2013) also found strong evidence of a clear link between teacher bias and the performance of ethnic minority children. They noted that biases toward Black students were particularly strong. Such researchers as Copping, Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, and Wood (2013) and Okeke et al. (2009) contend that middle school-aged Black students absorb racialized beliefs and internalize racial and associated stereotypes due to the increased academic skill requirements in middle school and teacher perceptions about their ability to meet these new challenges.

White Teacher-Black Student Interracial Relationships

For decades, social scientists and educators have discussed and debated the nature of classroom relationships between White teachers and, in particular, Black male students. The phenomenon of racial differences between the two groups has been articulated by the above-mentioned

scholars as to how the differences of interracial interactions are played out in the classroom. Amos (2010) noted that the majority of teachers in public schools are likely to remain White, just as schools are becoming more diverse. Given the prevalence of White teachers who are teaching diverse students, it is essential to understand their lived experiences of diversity in the classroom. However, Milner (2011) found that “when attempting to engage in discussions about race and racism, White teachers often shut down” (p. 80). According to Nile and Straton (2003), this shutting-down behavior and withdrawal into an attitude of helplessness can be considered a common reaction stemming from historical racial wrongs that White teachers may feel badly about, potentially leading to a sense of racial guilt. Interestingly, McIntyre (1997) observed that “White teachers have a belief that as teachers, they, as individuals, will be able to control racism in their classrooms, thereby, affording them a sense of manageability over a very difficult and complex issue” (p. 119). Furthermore, Milner (2011) indicates that there could be a dismissive nature and avoidance in contact from White teachers with Black students or any student in their classroom who is racially different from themselves.

Various factors, such as the compressed time between classes and the growing number of students per class, are making it difficult for all teachers to establish close and supportive relationships with their students (Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). This is lamentable, as close relationships with teachers are important in helping students feel good about their performance and themselves. Teachers represent powerful relationships in the lives of children and have a substantial impact on children’s identities. While building relationships with students is already challenging, the complex dynamics of racial stereotyping and oppression can powerfully affect the ability of Black children to connect with teachers and may impact their school and social functioning (Irvine, 1991). Amos (2010) connected these difficulties to the need for expanded multicultural training in teacher training programs.

White Privilege and Black Under-privilege

Over time, the labeling and referencing of such racial identifications as Negro, Colored, Black, and African American have suggested under-privilege. In the twentieth century, students of color were taught about the history of the United States early in elementary school, but much of that history reflected the domination of White Americans. Toward the end of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, the nearly exclusive learning about White Americans and their involvement in U.S. history shifted for students of color. A general trend has developed toward acknowledging a multicultural presence by providing students with multicultural curricula where images of race are present and the history associated with these images are taught. This multicultural focus also is being provided to teachers through professional development training, thereby lessening the potential for racial guilt that Nile and Straton (2003) suggested some White teachers experience. The pedagogy of instruction is becoming more inclusive. However, additional efforts are needed to enhance educators’ respectful attention to racial differences. Sleeter (2008) made a key observation, which is essential to understanding an important aspect of this present study of “White privilege.” Sleeter expressed that “White and people of color experience racial identity development due to occupying very different positions in the racial order and, consequently, having very different experiences with racism” (p. 83). These differences are connected inherently to what is being called “White privilege.” Kendall (2013) noted that White privilege consists of an institutionally constructed set of benefits given to those whose race and identities are represented by those in positions of institutional power.

In general, the challenge with privilege, White or otherwise, is that it is not universal. McIntosh (1989) examined the privileges that White Americans have taken for granted. She looked at White privilege using various situational vignettes to illustrate how White Americans have been advantaged with unchallenged autonomy in the United States. Unfortunately, underprivileged individuals who are mostly members of marginalized groups often do not have the luxury of an open door to opportunities, sometimes because of their skin color, and they therefore experience racism throughout their lives from the dominant race.

The notions of privilege and under-privilege are important in understanding teacher-student relationships. Croll (2013) expressed that the “attitudes about racial inequality in the United States often are viewed through the lenses of discrimination and disadvantage” (p. 47). Thus, people may be inclined to disassociate themselves from such discrimination and disadvantage by classifying themselves as “color blind,” which theoretically absolves them of any racially connected behavior. Kendall (2013) observed the functional aspects of color blindness, which serve to conceal the institutional inequities and racial stratifications of society. The notion of color blindness has powerful implications for education. When teachers believe they do not see color, even discussion of difference can be dismissed in the classroom. By failing to recognize racial differences, some White teachers attempt to distance themselves from the history of racial discrimination in the classroom and their possible subsequent feelings of racial guilt (Sleeter, 2004).

Color blindness prevents teachers – and institutions – from taking responsibility for their part in the perpetuation of racial inequalities and oppression. Nile and Straton (2003) assert that as people allow themselves to take responsibility for their own behavior, they can let go of their historically situated and contracted guilt. Such “colorblind” behavior by teachers can be insulting to a student of color’s racial heritage and cultural self-identification. Indeed, Yu (2012) suggests that: “Race talk in the age of Obama is certainly more unpopular than ever before. The norm of Whiteness [that] his campaigns and elections helped to uphold gains strength every day and the efforts of minorities and their White allies to challenge White privilege are increasingly difficult” (p. 49). With the transition of power between President Obama and president-elect Trump, White privilege is likely to continue having a powerful presence given the return of a White president to the office in a divisive time of oppressive rhetoric about social difference.

It is especially important that students of color feel safe in classrooms when White teachers are an authority presence. As a corollary to the issue of teachers’ supposed color blindness, it is possible that “when students trust that a White teacher authentically sees them as important, valuable, and intelligent people, they begin to respect and learn from that teacher, regardless of his or her color” (Price, 2011, p. 273). It would be beneficial to both parties for teachers to have a sense of self-awareness regarding what they believe and what they transmit to their students of color in their interactions with them. To this end, it is crucial to explore questions of: How self-aware are teachers regarding race and their front-line influence with students of color? How can they become more self-aware throughout their careers?

Research Method

Methodological Framework

This research used a “grounded-theory informed” methodology (Anells, 2006). Grounded-theory informed methodologies do not conform completely to the original tenets of grounded

theory as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967), but instead are based upon key philosophical and methodological assumptions of the approach (Burk, Danquah, & Berry, 2015; Padgett, 1998; Perez, Mubanga, Aznar, & Bagnol, 2015). This method recognizes the centrality of data as the main source of theory construction or, in the case of much grounded-theory informed research, themes (Furman, Langer, Sanchez, & Negi, 2007). While grounded-theory informed research does not negate the importance of theory and literature in the development of questions and hypotheses, it encourages researchers to use an open, inquisitive approach not driven by previously selected themes and codes. Grounded-theory informed research studies use data collection and analytical strategies based-upon their utility, in an inductive, theory- or theme-building approach. While Strauss (1990) indicated that grounded theory is not always inductive, in that theory testing can indeed be a part of the grounded theory processes, the focus is on findings from one's data (Berg, 2004). As such, I searched for identifiable themes from the data that could lead to a new understanding of White teachers' self-awareness regarding how they interact and should interact with middle school Black boys in the classroom setting (Aronson, 1995).

Location of the Study

Howard and Milner, as cited in Milner and Lomotey (2014) conceptualized three types of urban communities – the *urban intensive*, *urban emergent* and *urban characteristic* – each with identifiable qualities and thematic challenges. Although in this article I use the word *urban* to describe the community where the study was conducted, Howard and Milner would describe this school district as an *urban emergent* community in that it is located in a large city that is smaller than “major cities” (Milner, 2012, p. 560). Nonetheless, Howard and Milner (cited in Milner & Lomotey, 2014) stated, “these cities are fraught with many of the same challenges as urban intensive schools, but not on the same scale” (p. 201). Given its location, I considered the school to be a microcosm of the urban schools.

Sample

The study was approved by my college's institutional review board, and it used a purposive sample from an urban middle school where my previously established professional relationship with the principal enabled access to the teachers. The principal and I met a few years prior to this research study, and remained connected professionally. There existed between us a level of professional trust that allowed me access into his school as a research site.

The school district had four elementary schools (K–5), two middle schools (6–8), a vocational high school (9–12), a traditional high school (9–12), and two alternative schools for students with special educational needs such as social/emotional and behavioral/academic disabilities. At the time of the study, the middle school had sixty-five teaching faculty. The teachers' racial breakdown was 95.4% White and 4.6% Black. No other racial categories were identified. The student population was comprised of six hundred 6th, 7th, and 8th graders with a racial breakdown of 80.1% White; 9.3% Black; 6.5% Latino; and 4.1% Asian; no students were identified as Native American.

Twenty-four White teachers (N=24) voluntarily participated; 8 were males and 16 were females. Their ages ranged from 20–29 (4), 30–39 (5), 40–49 (7), and 50–59+ (8). They were born in the following decades: 1940s (10), 1950s (4), 1960s (3), and 1970s (7). The number of multicultural training courses taken were 0 (1), 1–3 (9), 3–5 (9), 5–7 (4) and 7–9 (1). At the time of this study, participants lived in urban (7) and suburban communities (16), with one

participant providing no response (1) to this question. These demographics include the 10 interviewed participants who later engaged in one-to-one interviews.

Data Collection

The two instruments used for collecting data in this study were a questionnaire and unstructured individual interviews. The rationale for using the two instruments was to intimately personalize the attitudes of the participants and their reaction to their fictionalized colleagues' racial treatment of middle-school Black boys in the provided vignettes. I delivered sixty-five manila envelopes containing an informed consent form and questionnaire to the middle-school principal, who disseminated them to the teaching faculty's mailboxes. Participants were given 72 hours to complete and return the questionnaire.

The first part of the questionnaire asked for demographic information; the second part offered three vignettes regarding White teachers' classroom relationships with middle-school Black boys, each developed both from fictional aspects and my own professional experience. The fictionalized vignettes were presented hypothetically to participants rather than as factual events. One intention of the fictionalized vignettes was to encourage the participants to imagine they were colleagues of the fictionalized teachers, thereby providing at least a tenuous connection among them. The same three written, open-ended questions followed each fictionalized vignettes, setting expectations that participants might respond in writing differently from one case study to another. Two additional open-ended questions completed the questionnaire and helped to contextualize the participants' personal experiences with middle-school Black boys.

Because the vignettes were informed by my feelings about how White teachers may influence young Black boys per my actual high school and professional social work experiences (Battle, 2016), there was the potential for my own bias to arise in how the fictional scenarios were presented and in how I analyzed, interpreted, and integrated them into this report, as well as into my own belief system (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). To mitigate such deleterious effects, I used a form of bracketing to separate my feelings from the data. According to Tufford and Newman (2010), "given the sometimes close relationship between the researcher and the research topic that may both precede and develop during the process of qualitative research, bracketing is also a method to protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally challenging material" (p. 81). In essence, I carefully reviewed the fictionalized vignettes for my bias, revising them as needed to present the scenarios as objectively as possible. Additionally, as I analyzed and synthesized the data, I talked with a mentor who helped me separate my feelings from what the participants said and did during the study, better enabling me to examine and attempt to understand participants' expressed attitudes. These actions have helped me to be more objective about the study, leading to potentially more useful implications for practice.

Questions Regarding the Fictionalized Vignettes

As mentioned, participants responded to the same three questions for each fictionalized vignette and two additional final questions; the questions were intended to prompt participants to articulate their attitudes toward the fictionalized White teachers' relationships with middle-school Black boys in the classroom. Because the questions were asked in the second person, I anticipated that participants would use the first person in their responses.

1. How would you react to the situation in the fictionalized vignette?
2. What do you think might be the underlying issue(s) with the teacher and the student in their interaction with each other in the fictionalized vignette?
3. When you read the fictionalized vignette, did it bring up any feelings for you (negative or positive)?

In addition, participants addressed two other questions that focused on their personal and professional relationships and experiences with middle-school Black boys.

1. Have you ever had any personal interaction with middle-school Black boys?
2. What has been your professional experience as a teacher working with middle-school Black boys? If none, please write “none.”

The Fictionalized Vignettes

Although the fictionalized vignettes were presented to the participants as hypothetical, they were not entirely fictitious and had genuine roots in my experience. Derived primarily from both my experiences as a school social worker and educator with the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunities (METCO) Program Coordinator, the fictionalized vignettes considered young, Black males in school settings. As such, there were inevitable connections to my own past experiences as a Black male student. Of particular interest, the METCO program is a voluntary desegregation program that was instituted by the Massachusetts Department of Education in 1966. Today, it is called the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The purpose and perception of the program is based on the quality of education and curriculum standards in predominately White suburban school districts where students of color who reside in urban neighborhoods voluntarily attend school. The program has assisted some suburban school districts with their racial imbalances by creating a more diversified educational community.

Fictionalized Vignette One

A White, male, 8th grade Social Studies teacher at a suburban public middle school gave one of the Black boys in his class an “Incomplete” grade for the second quarter. There were a total of three young Black boys in the class. The school social worker observed an interaction between the student with the Incomplete and his teacher. He heard the teacher ask the student to stay after school to make up work from the second quarter so that the teacher could remove the Incomplete from the student’s report card. The student agreed to remain after school. The social worker later learned from the teacher that the student did not come. The teacher reported that this was not the first time the student had not “shown up.”

The teacher requested a meeting with the guidance counselor, the student, and the social worker to discuss the situation. At the meeting, the teacher acknowledged his disappointment. He felt that he had been supportive, yet the student acted unconcerned. In the meeting, the teacher spoke to the student with an irritated, raised voice:

I have tried really hard with you. I have tried harder with you than any of the other students in my class. I have broken all of my rules to get you motivated to change the Incomplete. I know being here as a METCO student in an all-White community can be very hard. There are not many Black people (student or faculty) out here. But attending school here is better than attending school in Boston. You might not

get the same attention if you went to school in Boston. You might get lost through the cracks. You have the potential to succeed much more here than in Boston. WHY DON'T YOU DO WHAT I AM ASKING?

Fictionalized Vignette Two

There were two Black boys in a 7th grade Math class. One of the boys was ten minutes late for class. The teacher, a White female in a suburban public middle school, had started the class when the student arrived late. After the teacher finished providing instruction, she asked the students to take out their homework from the previous night. She went around the classroom with her grade book and marked whether the students did or did not do their homework. The majority of the students had their homework; she refused to listen to the excuses of those students who had not completed their homework, and she marked them accordingly in her grade book. When the teacher approached the Black boy who had arrived late, she learned that he did not have his homework. The teacher did not interrupt the student as he explained why he did not have his homework. Without question, she accepted his excuse. After class, she whispered to the student, “I did not give the other students this opportunity, but I will give you the chance to bring in your homework first thing tomorrow morning before school begins.”

Fictionalized Vignette Three

A White, female, 6th grade English teacher in an urban, public, middle school was collecting homework from her class. The teacher reviewed the homework and accused the only Black boy student in her class of copying it from a student in another English class that she taught. There were three young Black girls and two young Latino boys in the classroom as well.

The teacher publicly challenged the student in front of his classmates. The student did admit that he had gotten help from his older sister (who was a 7th grader at the same school), but he said he did the work on his own. The teacher dismissed his explanation and asked him questions to test his understanding about the homework assignment. The student was embarrassed and became upset. He began to cry in front of his classmates and put his head down on the desk and remained in that position for the rest of the period.

Interviews

The second instrument used for the study consisted of unstructured, one and one-half hour long, individual interviews based on the same case studies and questions, as well as additional responsive questions. Only ten teachers from the original 24 participants were chosen for the interview, and the principal himself made the selections. He expressed that his main criterion was his sense of the teachers' investment in their students' lives. We discussed the importance of his not selecting respondents that would represent a biased response to the questions, whether the response was a positive or negative predisposition to the subject matter. Although there was a risk of selection bias, he wanted an active role in both disseminating the questionnaires and selecting teachers for the interviews. Based upon conversations with the principal, I believed his desire was to ensure the study's success and not to push the findings in a certain direction. The principal was the de facto gatekeeper of the school, which influenced the political feasibility of conducting the study in his building; Buchanan and Bryman (2008) astutely noted that research always has political actions involved. They suggested that access to the field often mandates adapting research protocols to the needs of “the field.” Had I not

acquiesced to his request to be the gatekeeper, the principal might not have agreed to participate in the study despite our professional relationship.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analyses were used to organize the findings by creating patterns and finding themes consistent with the body of scholarly literature. According to Aronson (1995), “Themes that emerge from the informants’ stories are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience” (pp. 1-2). In the first stage, the responses were typed in bold print and italicized for legibility purposes. In the second stage, a process of color-coding was implemented to narrow and to define patterns and themes of responses. The emergence of these patterns and themes connected participants’ responses. Thematic categories, which to a degree mirror the extant literature, included racial stereotyping of Black males, White teacher-Black student interracial relationships, White privilege, and Black under-privilege. Finally, during the third stage, an index and matrix were created to cross-reference the patterns and themes relevant to the studied literature.

Results and Discussion

Fictionalized Vignettes One and Two asked participants to consider what they thought about the White teachers’ attitudes and relationships with middle-school Black boys. Fictionalized Vignette Three asked the same questions as One and Two, but the case it described appeared to provoke more challenging responses. One might assume that participant-teachers responding to a scenario involving another teacher might defend the teachers’ attitudes and actions, particularly given the encouragement to see these fictionalized teachers as colleagues. Instead, analyzed data from both instruments revealed that participants openly criticized the teachers’ relationships, behaviors, and attitudes with the middle-school Black boys. They not only gave their interpretations of what had transpired between the two, but also expressed alternatives for how to handle those incidents as if they were the White teacher in the case studies.

The following excerpts illustrate that there were no clear differences in participants’ written responses to the case studies, in that all participants indicated they were disenchanted with how the fictional teachers had acted toward the students. However, in the face-to-face interview format, which allowed people to respond more personally and passionately than they could in the written questionnaire format, the ten participants talked specifically about how they would have acted as teachers, and their responses showed some differences among them. These responses are categorized by the three major themes that emerged from the analysis and that formed the basis for this article’s literature review.

Racial Stereotyping of Black Boys

The participants generally responded in both written and oral forms as White allies to the Black boys, and they did not perpetuate or align with stereotypes in their responses despite the fictionalized White teachers’ stereotypical comments in the case studies. Participants’ written and oral responses addressing stereotyping in Fictionalized Vignettes One and Two articulated negative opinions of the fictional White teachers, suggesting that those teachers were insensitive in their treatment of the middle-school Black boys even though the teachers may have had good intentions.

In his written response, one male participant wrote about Fictionalized Vignette One, “The White teacher was probably honestly trying to help the student, but may have been masking feelings that made the student feel that he was not up to par because of his racial identity.” Also regarding Fictionalized Vignette One, another male participant wrote that his family and friends provided him with seemingly false, stereotyped impressions of people from marginalized groups. When the participant entered college, he independently developed a more sensitive attitude toward people of different races. This participant suggested that the vignettes’ White teachers’ stereotypical attitudes may have stemmed from a distinct period of time or generational beliefs; he further suggested that the White teachers’ ages, birth years, and geographic places of residence might have contributed to such attitudes.

In interviews regarding Fictionalized Vignette Two’s White teacher’s behaviors and feelings toward the Black male student, participants used such phrases as “not good enough” and “not capable.” A female participant expressed in the interview, “I’m sure that the White teacher has given off messages that the middle-school Black boy was not as good enough as a White student and therefore gave him preferential treatment [over] the other students in the classroom.” A second female participant stated in her interview, “I would have supported the White teacher prior to meeting the student, but what the teacher said simply backed the middle-Black boy into a corner and possibly validated his feelings of not belonging and not being good enough.”

These teachers seemed to realize that even good intentions toward students can backfire when the actions are wrong. As Milner (2012) stated regarding his research:

Teachers generally had good intentions, and although all of them seemed to struggle to understand how to meet the needs of all their students most effectively, their hearts seemed to be in the right place. Unfortunately, good intentions gone wrong can dangerously affect students’ academic, intellectual, and social success, in both the short and long term (pp. 162–163).

This study suggests that the participant teachers outside of this Boston school district would agree.

White Teacher-Black Student Interracial Relationship

Thirteen of the 24 research participants expressed written concern for how the White teacher in Fictionalized Vignette One used inappropriate statements with the middle-school Black boy to make him feel inferior, “I have tried harder with you than any of the other students in my class;” “I have broken all of my rules to get you motivated to change the Incomplete;” “... attending school here is better than attending school in Boston;” and “You have the potential to succeed much more here than in Boston. WHY DON’T YOU DO WHAT I AM ASKING?” Participants indicated they wanted to be supportive of the White teacher because they recognized his frustration; however, 20 participants tended to resist supporting him and referred to his comments as “uncalled for” or words to that effect. “I am angry” was a common response. One person wrote: “Um, what’s going on here?” One male participant wrote:

The Black male student cannot be characterized with only example. Some students are engaged and interested in learning. Others would prefer to be elsewhere. Generally speaking, middle-school Black males have a clear sense of your sense of

justice and whether or not you, as a teacher, are racist. When given trust and time, students will open up and share their experiences about themselves.

Similarly, a female participant wrote about Fictionalized Vignette One:

It seems to me that there is a lack of connection. Both student and teacher are at odds for whatever reason. Is the teacher not making himself accessible to the student? Did the student have a negative interaction with this teacher or others in the past? Why is there a lack of comfort? What is the source of the student's ambivalence toward the teacher?

These responses do not suggest that participants are making excuses for the Black student or that they totally blame the White teacher; rather, they indicate thoughtful concern about the relationship in a broader context than one failed interaction.

Participants expressed especially strong reactions to Fictionalized Vignette Three. All ten participants interviewed articulated feelings of being “disturbed” and “appalled” by their colleague's behavior. One female participant said, “I am angered that the teacher humiliated the student in front of the class. I would have seen him privately. I am also angered that she assumed the student copied from someone else's work. That is racist. Maybe someone else copied the student's work.” Another female participant said:

Yikes! This woman should not be teaching! To address a student's cheating in front of a class, no matter what message you want to get across is not fair, not kind, not right. If she has some question about it, she should have asked separately. She challenged the only Black male in the class. What does that mean?

Participants generally reacted with shock and anger at the insensitivity and cruel behavior of the White teacher who perpetrated this encounter in front of the student's peers. They expressed that the student should have been allowed to remove himself from the situation to regain composure. It seems possible that such responses may be attributed to the cultural training courses that twenty-three out of the twenty-four respondents stated they had taken.

In this study, participants suggested that poorly executed disciplinary actions might be racially motivated by a belief that the student was incapable of doing the work. One participant articulated in the interview how it felt when teachers are confronted with racial differences and lack cultural understanding; in such cases, he suggested, teachers might personalize the situation to maintain control. Such ill-gained control can be costly to the student's sense of self as well as to the teacher's own integrity.

White Privilege and Black Under-privilege

Notions of White privilege and Black under-privilege appear to have shaped the research participants' responses to White teachers' attitudes in Fictionalized Vignette One primarily. In their written and oral-interview responses, fifteen participants stated that the White teacher's interaction with the middle-school Black boy seemed hurtful and disrespectful and that notions of privilege should be considered. One participant wrote:

[Fictionalized Vignette] One reminds me of an incident that seems to speak to the sense of being privileged. When I was in Tulsa, Oklahoma, we had our first African

American kid come into school. There wasn't busing then – certainly not in Oklahoma! – so the kid moved into the area with his family. The student was mainly alone in the school and I remember another kid going up to him and trying to befriend him in a really awkward way and the African American kid just kind of smiled and said “Thanks, but no thanks” and walked off. The White kid was screaming at him in the hallway. “You know, I am just trying to be your friend and help you here and you're snubbing me.” And then, of course, the “N” word came out and everything started flying.

One wonders why the Black boy in this participant's past was reluctant to accept the White boy's attempt to befriend him; did he know that lurking beneath the surface of the would-be friend's outreach was the possibility of angry, racist name-calling? Was he simply afraid based on past experience or wary based on being racially unique in the school?

According to Obidah and Teel (2001), “the distrust of White people is nurtured in every African-American child as part of his or her ethos of existence in America” (p. 70). Obidah stated, “As an African-American person, you ask yourself, ‘How can I trust someone who thinks, consciously or subconsciously, that something is wrong with me to the extent that this something (tangible only in terms of physical difference) makes me an inferior human being?’” (p. 70). This study's data and results confirm Obidah's belief that a felt-sense – if not a proven reality – of White privilege and Black underprivilege may affect a person of color who on some level is challenged by race daily. Indeed, a female participant orally stated regarding Fictionalized Vignette One:

I can understand how [the] teacher felt trying to make it so a child succeeds and to have a kid not take that opportunity is sometimes flabbergasting. I'm concerned that the White teacher has such a sense of privilege as indicated by his saying, “You're going to get a better education here (meaning suburbs) and you'd get lost in the cracks if you were somewhere else.” He could get lost through the cracks in the suburbs, too, and maybe that's why the teacher is so frustrated because he's trying to make sure that he doesn't get lost through the cracks.

Desire for student success and even good intentions can fail when White teachers, like the one in Fictionalized Vignette One, fail to realize the sense of privilege that may leak through their attempts to help students of color, particularly young Black boys who already may have learned not to trust their teachers' words.

Implications for Practice

Implications for this study are framed by Singleton's (2015) assertion that since Whites are the primary beneficiary of racial privilege, they bear the primary responsibility for the perpetuation of racism within key social contexts and institutions. This observation suggests that the phrase “I don't notice color” serves as a mechanism for a White teacher to suppress feelings regarding the racial complexion and differences among their students in the classroom.

However, twenty-three of the twenty-four participants in this study indicated they had received cultural and/or multicultural training. That many of the White teacher participants aligned themselves with the Black students and not their White colleagues suggests the power of multicultural training. This study, then, supports such training as a corrective for school districts where the leadership wants to achieve positive, supportive relationships with students

of color in the classroom. To this end, committing funding and time for in-service and outside resources is vital.

Another option for providing and promoting anti-racism awareness is to employ consultants as outside resources; such consultants should have extensive experience working in school districts and especially with White teachers regarding race and racism, especially regarding teachers' relationships with Black males and how to incorporate teaching and learning of race and racism into their classroom. Michael (2015) provided solid guidance for how such work can occur:

Invite antiracist colleagues into your classroom to help you see your own culture and your own biases. Ask them to give critical feedback, and thank them when they do. Make time to work in small groups (pairs even) with people you trust. Use these opportunities to ask the “untouchable” questions, the questions you are afraid to verbalize because of what they might say about you and begin to explore them (p. 41).

In short, teachers need opportunities to embrace the consultants' feedback with open minds. This approach in empowerment and vulnerability can better prepare and equip classroom teacher for working effectively with students of color, particularly young Black boys.

At the beginning of this article, I asked how White teachers can become allies of middle-school Black boys and whether they are able to see themselves as walking in these children's shoes, so to speak. Certainly, some White teachers allow their personal and professional backgrounds to cause them to stigmatize groups of students from marginalized backgrounds. However, in this study, the participants appeared to align themselves thoughtfully with the middle-school Black boys rather than the White teachers of the case studies. Having an opportunity to step back and examine their self-awareness regarding how they interact and engage with students' racial differences can assist White teachers in being present and understanding of their students' differences in the classroom. Such self-reflection, which often is engendered in cultural competence training, can be connected to awareness of the social and emotional needs of the students (Battle & Hill, 2016). Both initial and ongoing multicultural awareness and practical training can provide useful ways of understanding and practical strategies for working with students of color at any age – and particularly at this liminal preadolescent age that is especially crucial for Black males. The potential benefits are powerful in assisting White teachers and middle-school Black boys in improving their teacher-student relationship to establish positive communication and expectations for both in the classroom.

Conclusions

Through the use of White teachers' responses to case studies about White teachers and middle-school Black boys, this research offered a snapshot into the participants' attitudes and their reactions toward their fictionalized colleagues. The racial differences between the case studies' White teachers and middle-school Black boys engendered views that were generally supportive of the Black boys and critical of the White teachers regardless of the participants' own racial identities as White teachers. Participants' responses varied but strongly indicated that they would try to establish an agenda of academic success by maintaining a positive relationship with middle-school Black boys and by not showing misplaced anger or favoritism. Participants expressed wanting to stay true to themselves as the classroom teacher by initiating equity for all students. The participants' criticism of the unequal treatment of student behavior by the

White teachers in the fictionalized vignette indicates they believed that the fictional White teachers' were perpetuating the stereotypical relationship with the described middle-school Black boys.

The findings suggest that the participants were fairly astute in their education and knowledge of the racial complexities of their students. Indeed, although I had hypothesized that participants would align with the White teachers in each fictionalized vignette because of potentially limited racial awareness and sensitivity to middle-school Black boys, the data strongly indicated that participants were more allies to the children than not. Interestingly, some participants articulated that the White teachers may have feared being labeled “racist,” indicating racial identification as a possible reason for granting inequitable opportunities to the middle-school Black boys. Nonetheless, the participants appeared to recognize that this intention alone can be seen as racist because of subsequent preferential treatment.

Certainly, it would be beneficial for all teachers, especially White teachers who may have limited experiences with cultural competence, to receive training for anti-racism/cultural competence that would enable them to engage students who are racially and ethnically different from themselves in the classroom. Exploring and proposing policy changes for U.S. school districts regarding establishing mandatory anti-racism/cultural competence training would be essential and necessary for professional development of teachers. Advancing such proposed policy could help to mitigate the racial and cultural disparity between White teachers and both boy and girl students of color and it may help to improve their teacher-student classroom interactions and relationships.

Limitations

The participants in the written questionnaire interpreted the three fictionalized vignettes in one of two ways: as third-party observers and as first-person actors. The questions that followed the vignettes were written in the second person (i.e., “What do you think?”) with the expectation of eliciting first person responses. Some participants responded in the third person without including much of their own experiences. However, other participants who answered the questionnaire described their assessment of the teacher-student relationship by offering their own experiences that were somewhat similar to the fictionalized vignettes, especially with the oral interview responses. Overall, the intention of eliciting first-person responses within the questionnaires was not achieved in the majority of the participants' responses, which suggests that the wording of the questions may have limited the study's results. However, this intention was achieved within the interview phase, likely because of the intimacy of a face-to-face meeting and the possibility of personal accounts of similar stories shared by the participants.

The selection of the ten participants for the interview phase of the study may have been done from the principal's own bias and/or agenda. The participants may have recognized the principal's investment in the study by his asking them personally to participate in a one-to-one interview exchange with the researcher beyond responding to the questionnaire portion of the study. The participants may have felt comfortable filling out the questionnaire but not with the interview. However, given the principal's decision to choose interview participants, the authoritarian school structure may have left participants feeling obligated to take part and it may have influenced their responses.

As a qualitative study with a small sample size, it is not generalizable to a broader population. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) examined the justifications of eighty-three

qualitative research studies; they recommended that “grounded theory qualitative studies should generally include between 20 to 30 interviews” and that more than “the maximum [30] [is] where additional interviews fail to produce substantial new insight” (p. 20). In the case of this study, had all sixty-five eligible teachers consented to participate in the questionnaire portion, the study could have been challenged by repetitive information from participants that offered no new valid information based on the authors examination. With twenty-four total participants, the study provided sufficiency in data, but had there been a few more interview participants, the study might have provided greater insight into the problem.

Implications for Future Research

This study offers data and interpretation for developing a deeper appreciation of on-going, challenging, and complex cross-racial teacher-student relationships. Additional research is needed to determine more about how interracial differences impact the racial complexities between White teachers and middle-school Black boys. For example, this exploratory study was conducted in the northeastern U.S. It would be beneficial to discover whether the outcomes would differ for participants of other school districts, as well as from other geographical areas of the country. Additionally, an understanding of student views versus teacher views needs attention. Thus, a qualitative study of how middle-school Black boys experience their racial interactions with White teachers would be useful for obtaining and presenting findings from both sides of the aisle for the two populations. A research method combining both interviews and focus groups could be helpful. Such studies might consider whether the relationships between White teachers and middle-school Black boys are more homogenous in the classroom than suggested in some literature.

Additionally, this study addressed the teacher-student interracial relationship of White teachers with middle-school Black boys in the classroom. A qualitative study using other methods or replicating this research design should be conducted regarding other racial groups (e.g., Black teachers and middle-school Black boys, Black teachers and middle-school White boys, White teachers and middle-school Hispanic boys, Hispanic teachers and middle-school Hispanic boys). Any configuration of the racial construct between such groups might yield data helpful in improving teacher-student interracial relationships in the classroom; such data could help shape multicultural curricula training for pre-service White teachers within their educational programs and for existing White teachers within their ongoing professional development training.

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