

What are your Expect



She's going to be my "A" student.

The Challenge of Teaching Across Race By Caralee Adams

Tuesday afternoon, fifth grader Jacob disrupts groupwork with his goofing around. On Thursday, it's his African-American deskmate, Miles, who has the class's full attention with similar antics. What was the likely outcome? Jacob got a reprimand, and Miles received a detention.

The latest government data, analyzed recently by Howard Witt in an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, shows that black students are getting a raw deal in American schools when it comes to discipline. In the average New Jersey public school, reports Witt, African-American students are almost 60 times as likely as white students to be expelled. Nationally, they are three times more likely than non-black students to be suspended or expelled for the same offenses. The problem has gotten worse, not better: In 1972, black students were suspended at just twice the rate of other students. And today's numbers can't be explained away by differences in class or income, since even middle-class and wealthy black students are being punished more often—

and more severely—than their non-black peers.

"There was a very vehement counter-reaction to this story," Witt admitted in an interview on National Public Radio recently. "About half of white readers simply don't believe the numbers, and the other half say, 'What would you expect? Black students misbehave more often.'" But Witt contends that these complaints reflect a "fallacious way of viewing this data ... it's getting cause and effect pretty much backwards."

Problems of inequity based on race are not confined to discipline. Black students are far more likely than other students to be taught by inexperienced teachers, score lower on standardized tests, be referred for special education services, and fail to graduate. It's a difficult subject to confront. But as the national population of students of color nears 40 percent while 80 percent of teachers are white, it's an issue schools need to take on.

Discipline and Achievement

There is no research to support that African-American kids misbehave more

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at ions?



**He's a future
juvenile
delinquent.**



**He's from a
good family.**



**Parents
like that don't
care about
school.**

cover story

than other children, yet racial discrepancies in school discipline exist—even when poverty status is considered, says Russ Skiba, professor at Indiana University and a leading scholar in the area of discipline and race. “We can call it structural inequity or we can call it institutional racism,” says Skiba.

Academic achievement and the discipline problem are intimately related. When it comes to academics, the achievement gap between African-American students and white students has long been documented. While improvements are being made, black students still score notably lower on national reading and math assessments than whites. The high school completion rate for black students is 87 percent compared with 93 percent for white students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. For those who do go to college, many African-Americans don’t enter with the same rigorous high school curriculum under their belt, and only 40 percent graduate from four-year institutions compared with 60 percent of whites, according to an analysis by Education Trust in Washington, D.C.

“The strongest predictor of achievement is time spent in learning,” explains Skiba. Suspended students miss instructional time, which means they may fall behind, develop low self-esteem, and drop out. When one group is removed from the classroom at a greater rate than the others, our schools are not offering equal education, maintains Skiba.

Rethinking Discipline

In the Austin (TX) Independent School District, teachers and administrators observed this firsthand. When they saw great disparities between the number of black students removed from the classroom versus other students, their concern was ignited. “If they aren’t in class, they aren’t achieving,” says Jane Nethercut, coordinator for Positive Behavior Support for Austin schools.

Four years ago, Austin schools began to implement a new process that models good behavior and rewards students for doing the right thing. The result: a reduction in office referrals and an increase in academic achievement. Students who continue to have problems are given additional supports, such as mentors or help with anger management, says Nethercut. “This is not a silver bullet, but we’ve seen strong results.”

The Teacher’s Attitude

The experience of the Austin Independent School District sheds light on a key component of success: high expectations. Much of student success can be traced to the attitude of the teacher, says Robert Barr, an expert in at-risk students and author of *The Kids Left Behind: Teaching the Underachieving Children of Poverty* (Solution Tree, 2006).

“Teachers and children bring these negative images to school with them,” agrees Mary Gardiner, professor in educational leadership at the University of Idaho, Boise. “Unconsciously, perhaps, expectations get lowered for black students.”

Indeed, Gardiner, who has an adopted African-American son, has experienced it herself. “On a few occasions, we have had teachers who seemed surprised that our son was smart. One teacher asked us

Numbers You Should Know

1 African-American student is suspended every seven seconds of the school day.

34% of African-American students attend high-poverty schools where 3% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Only 3% of white students do.

7% of teachers in the United States are African-American. The number of teachers who are black men is even lower: 1%.

3x The likelihood that black students will be suspended for an offense as compared to their non-black peers. (In 1972, black students were suspended at only twice the rate of other students.)

91% of eighth-grade black students are designated below proficiency in math.

104 of every 1,000 African-American students will drop out of high school.

68% of African-American high school students say they frequently face discrimination at school.

53 years ago, *Brown v. Board of Education* declared black students must have equal education opportunities.

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, *Chicago Tribune*, NAEP, Pew Research Center



at our first meeting whether there were any behavior issues at home, alerting us to the idea that she expected there to be,” says Gardiner.

Fitzroy Bernard, whose 13-year-old son attends the School for Children at Bank Street College in New York City, says some teachers have had lower expectations for his son and other children of color. “A teacher would tell me he is doing very well, but my observation is that she had him on a different scale,” he says. “Many white teachers have come to think that black children just don’t do as well.” To make up for the lack of challenge, Bernard says the high expectations have come from home.

As powerful as negative assumptions can be, holding every child to the highest expectations carries immense weight. “We see ourselves reflected in the people around us,” says Barr. “If people look at us as a loser, we’ll come to believe we are a loser. If a kid has one adult who believes in him, that person can have a transforming quality. If you surround a group of kids with people who believe in them, just imagine what can happen.”

Know Kids’ Reality

Anne Gregory, assistant professor in the Curry Programs in clinical and school psychology at the University of Virginia, finds promise in examples of positive relationship-building between teachers and students that work to counteract the culture gaps. “Teachers are under so much pressure with time, but small gestures can have a tremendous impact,” says Gregory, who relays this anecdote heard from one of her students: A science teacher started one lesson at his large urban high school by taking time to let a student talk about a sad event in a neighborhood a number of students lived in.

That moment was crucial for developing trust. “Before, the student saw the teacher as an old white man who didn’t know her reality,” says Gregory. But the simple five-minute opening showed the student he cared and it motivated her to work harder in class.

It’s essential to demonstrate to students that you care, agrees Keith Anderson,

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cover story

director of the Idaho Center for Racial Sensitivity. Greet kids in the hallway, go to their football games, ask about the health of their family members, participate in the community, stay late to help. Kids respond to teachers who make the effort to reach out.

Gregory also encourages teachers to make time to collaborate and compare

notes on how students are doing in different classes. Sometimes certain kids just have problems with certain teachers. A teacher may have a rigid view of a student, and then learn that she behaves differently in the eyes of another teacher.

Don't Give Up on Them

To improve the racial climate, some

school members have pushed to establish support groups for parents and children of color. Fitzroy Bernard says the formation of the Parents of Children of Color group at his son's school three years ago has been worthwhile. The school population is about 90 percent white.

At the meetings, parents talk frankly about how race affects their children both inside and outside the classroom. Group members make recommendations to teachers, such as letting them know that discussion of skiing to teach a math lesson or recounting of elaborate European trips to teach geography may alienate students of color who don't share the same experiences. When a group of black students complained that there was less tolerance for their noise in the library than for a group of white kids, the parents spoke up. "Our kids felt conspicuous ... like the discipline given to them was harsher," Bernard says.

For some students of color, encouragement comes from one another. When it surfaced at Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia that male African-American students had strong standardized testing scores, yet didn't always have the grades to match, interim middle school principal Ken Aldridge encouraged the formation of BASE (Brothers for Academic and Social Enrichment) in 2000. The boys in grades 9–12 mentor one another in academics, as well as socialize together. "It gives the boys agency in the school," says Aldridge, advisor for the group. "One of the biggest obstacles they face is this comfort level in asking for help one on one, so we role-play what it's like."

Whether it's from teachers, parents, or peers, experts agree that having high expectations for students makes all the difference in their successes. Jarvis Sanford, principal of Chicago's newly revitalized Dodge Renaissance Academy, where 98 percent of students are African-American, puts it this way: "It is incumbent on us to tell them we care and we are rooting for them. Education is the great equalizer. We have to put examples in front of students and let them know we will not give up on them."

Caralee Adams lives in Maryland. She is a regular contributing writer to *Instructor*.

Island Left

BIAS PROOF



YOUR CLASSROOM

By Emily Hopkins

Educator Gail Thompson has written numerous books, including the recent Up Where We Belong (Jossey-Bass, 2007), on the challenges faced by what she calls “America’s stepchildren”—black, Latino, Southeast Asian, Native American, and even white, low-income students. Instructor talked with Thompson about what teachers can do to improve their own practice.

1 BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

Admit that you are not color blind. Practically no one is.

“There are various common mind-sets that teachers aren’t even aware of, which are rooted in biased beliefs,” says Thompson. So she prescribes what she calls a “checkup from the neck up.” Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I truly believe that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background, are capable of being academically successful?
- Do I have beliefs about their home lives or community that prevent me from seeing their academic potential?

■ Do I treat students how I want my own children to be treated by their teacher?

2 SHOW THAT YOU CARE

When Thompson surveyed an underperforming school in California, black students were twice as likely as white students to believe that “most of their teachers didn’t like them,” even though nearly all the teachers answered that they cared about their students’ welfare. Clearly, teachers’ caring doesn’t always get communicated effectively. Remember to ask how your students are doing, listen to their answers, learn about their distinct cultures and interests, and show patience and kindness, Thompson suggests.

3 TREAT STUDENTS THEIR AGE

According to several studies, white adults tend to engage in “adultification” of black children, especially of boys. “Instead of viewing black students’ behavior as that of children,” Thompson explains, “they viewed the boys as if they were adults”—and ratcheted up punishment accordingly. Remember to grant all of your students the same status as children, and recognize the innocence and vulnerability that status entails.

4 DON’T JUDGE PARENTS TOO QUICKLY

Thompson notes that some teachers may blame students’ academic problems on bad parenting. “Most African-American parents do care about their children’s education,” Thompson writes, “but they may express caring differently from how white middle-class and upper-class parents do.” Black parents, Thompson found, ask about school, listen to their children read, and express interest in grades, but are less likely to help with homework. Working-class parents and single parents may also be less likely to attend parents’ nights and parent-teacher conferences, not because they care less about education, but because to attend might present a major inconvenience or financial hardship.

5 DON’T TOLERATE RACISM FROM YOUR STUDENTS

It is important to set strict classroom rules on teasing and the use of racist or other derogatory comments: “Leadership sets the tone—be it the teacher, the principal, or the parent—about what’s acceptable and what’s not,” explains Thompson. “And when the leader sets a tone that says, ‘We’re not going to condone certain behaviors, and every child is going to be treated fairly,’ it works.”

6 MAINTAIN EXPECTATIONS

At a recent workshop, says Thompson, “a black principal at a school that is 76 percent black told me his biggest battle was getting teachers to raise their expectations. And that’s not uncommon. Sometimes teachers assume that black students can’t do the work that kids in white, affluent, and middle-class communities can do, and so they lower the expectations. The result? Standards are very low.”

7 TAKE TESTING SERIOUSLY

“Although I have problems with the current high-stakes testing movement,” says Thompson, “it’s important that teachers take it seriously. Students often feel that because they are not spending time preparing, the tests must not be that important. I hear high school students, particularly African-American boys, say, ‘The tests don’t matter.’”

8 TREAT YOUR PROBLEM CHILD AS A “STAR PUPIL”

Thompson challenges teachers to “select a student about whom you’ve formed a negative opinion,” and for 21 consecutive school days, force yourself to view and treat this student as if he or she were the brightest student in your class. “If you actually try this experiment, even once,” says Thompson, “it just might change your teaching forever.” □

Dr. Gail Thompson taught in junior high and high schools for 14 years. She has written more than 10 books about the experiences of African-American students. Emily Hopkins is a regular contributing writer to *Instructor*.

