

The Quality of Teacher-Student and Home-School Relationships in Black and White Students in West-Central Wisconsin



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Introduction

The Black-White achievement gap is a well-documented phenomenon, but factors contributing to the achievement of Black students throughout the state of Wisconsin have not been adequately researched. Research in this area is needed. In 2007, Black fourth graders in Wisconsin had the lowest average scores of reading achievement among Black fourth graders nationwide.

The purpose of the current study was to examine two factors known to be strong predictors of student achievement within a Wisconsin school district. Specifically, the quality of teacher-student relationships and home-school relationships was compared between White and Black students and parents.

Past research has demonstrated that teachers who provide emotionally supportive classroom environments contribute to the academic achievement of their students. However, Black children are less likely to experience positive teacher relationships than White children, contributing to lowered academic achievement among Black students.

Furthermore, parent involvement at school has been shown to have a strong, positive effect on students' academic achievement. Unlike parents from a European American background, parents from ethnic and racial minorities perceive barriers to their involvement in the school setting, which negatively affects their children's achievement.

Research Questions

Two research questions were addressed in the current study:

1. Do Black students report differences in the quality of relationships with their teachers when compared to White students?
2. Do Black parents report differences in the quality and frequency of home-school contacts when compared to White parents?

Method

Student participants responded to 48 items on the *Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction* regarding interactions with their classroom teacher or English teacher. Teacher behavior was rated on a five-point response scale. Participants selected whether a teacher behaved in a particular way "never" (1), "almost never" (2), "sometimes" (3), "almost always" (4), or "always" (5).

Parents answered 27 items on the *Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire*. Items were rated on a five-point response scale where "0" indicated no involvement or experience and "4" indicated high involvement or experience.

All questionnaires included a brief demographic section that asked about the student's sex, grade, and the rater's racial/ethnic identity.

Questionnaires were sent via mail to 135 Black families and 165 non-Black families in a school district in West-central Wisconsin. The school district had a racial composition of 85.5% White, 2.1% Black, 9.6% Asian, 1.7% Hispanic, and 1.1% American Indian. Families with a child in the third, fourth, sixth, seventh, ninth, or tenth grades were selected to participate. Questionnaires were returned to the principal investigator via postage-paid return envelopes.

Results

A total of 46 parents (15.3%) and 41 students (13.7%) returned questionnaires. The number of responses for White and Black parents and students were as follows:

	White	Black
Parents	n = 39	n = 5
Students	n = 31	n = 6

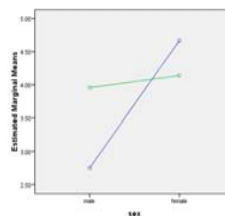
When examining the following results, strong consideration should be given to the effects of such a small sample size on the statistical outcomes.

Table 1 displays the mean student ratings of teacher interactions in the areas of teacher Understanding (e.g. empathy, patience, listening), Admonishing behaviors (e.g. expressing irritation and anger), Helpful/Friendly behaviors (e.g. providing assistance, consideration), and Dissatisfied behaviors (e.g. questioning, criticizing). No significant differences between White and Black students were found.

Table 1. Mean Student Ratings of Teacher Interactions by Race

	White	Black	t	p
Understanding	4.18	4.39	-0.75	.46
Admonishing	1.84	1.78	0.19	.85
Helpful/Friendly	4.03	4.03	-0.002	.99
Dissatisfied	1.58	1.31	0.99	.33

Figure 1. Sex by Race Interaction of Student Ratings of Teacher Helpful/Friendly Behaviors



A two-way ANOVA (sex x race) was completed to investigate the role of student sex in teacher-student interactions. Main effects of student sex and race were not significant. A significant interaction effect was found for teacher Helpful/Friendly behaviors ($p = .037$). Given the small sample size, this finding only suggests that Black male students perceive teachers to be significantly less helpful and friendly than Black female students and White students of both sexes.

Table 2 displays the mean parent ratings of home-school relationships in the areas of frequency of parent-teacher contact, quality of the relationship between parents and teachers, parent involvement in educational activities, and parent endorsement and confidence in their child's school. No significant differences between White and Black parents were found. Possible interaction effects between student sex and parent race were also examined. No significant interactions effects were found.

Table 2. Mean Parent Ratings of Home-School Relationships by Race

	White	Black	t	p
Frequency	0.90	0.80	0.47	.64
Quality	2.85	2.87	-0.06	.95
Involvement	1.46	2.00	-1.55	.13
Endorsement	3.49	3.50	-0.04	.97

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in teacher-student interactions and home-school relationships between Black and White students in Wisconsin. No significant differences between racial groups were found for student ratings of teacher interactions. Similarly, Black and White parent ratings did not reveal any significant differences. A lack of significant findings may reflect the small number of respondents. A larger sample may have revealed differences between racial groups.

The significant sex by race interaction effect for student ratings of helpful and friendly teacher behaviors deserves further investigation in future research. Based on this research, no meaningful conclusions can be drawn concerning the apparent lack of helpful and friendly teacher behaviors from the perspective of Black male students. However, this finding is interesting given that male minority students in Wisconsin and across the nation have a high drop out rate when compared to White students. Also of interest are the relatively positive ratings of parent-teacher relationship quality among the parents of Black male students. This apparent discrepancy in ratings between students and parents deserves further investigation.

Limitations

A serious limitation of this study is the small number of respondents. Actual differences between groups may not be apparent given the current data. Additionally, parent involvement in schools tends to decrease as their children grow older. A larger sample could have allowed for a comparison of racial differences for students across grade levels.

There may also be differences in responses of individuals who returned the questionnaires versus individuals who did not return the questionnaires for any reason.

Finally, participant ratings reflect the perceived behaviors of many different teachers and school personnel. Variations in teacher and school characteristics may account for differences in student and parent ratings.

References

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