

COMMENTARY

Fluttering Around the Racial Tension of Trust: Proximal Approaches to Suspended Black Student–Teacher Relationships

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I was honored to be invited to write a response to this wonderful article by Gregory and Ripski (2008) on adolescent trust in teachers. The authors have done a thorough job of explaining the background literature on teacher–student relationship trust, laying out how this relationship might lead to suspension rates and discussing the consequences of teacher trust for student well-being and future life challenges within the educational, employment, and justice systems. They also rightly identify that the vulnerability of school suspensions disproportionately falls on Black students and target student–teacher relational dynamics as the troubling source of this injustice. The case has been made elsewhere, I might add, that this disproportionality of suspension and expulsion rates for Black youth is not associated with a greater preponderance of misbehavior on the part of Black youth compared to other youth (Advancement Project, 2005). Gregory and Ripski’s (2008) article provides a highly useful, albeit somewhat distal, analysis of the problem. Their research highlights the need for a more proximal anal-

ysis of the racial dynamics within the student–teacher relationship that might contribute to misinterpretation, disrespect, and hostility towards Black youth in general, and Black males specifically (Stevenson, 2003a).

I have been most interested in how racial tension influences teacher–student, police–student, and peer– and parent–student relationships in which Black youth become the recipients of unfair and life-threatening interactions (Stevenson, 2003b). This racial tension can be defined as the ways in which teachers and students are anxious and stressed about how a poor relationship might lead to public humiliation, accusations of being racist, a reputation of incompetence, or confirmation of stereotypes. The salient element of this racial tension, however, is its invisibility, which is fueled by a national reluctance to face head-on the thorny issues of racial conflicts and which is reflected in the dodging of racial discussions, interpretations, and analyses of social phenomena.

The fear of discussing racial matters in familial, societal, and collegial relationships is understandable given Americans’ abysmal

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race relations history whereby dominance and subjugation of people of color, women, and children was supported by laws and regulations designed to promote the power and influence of wealthy individuals and businesses. This history has had long-term ill effects on the formation of family, on social mobility, and on the benefit of educational uplift for those who start their intergenerational story with little to no social capital. Yet, in school systems, we have always expected there to be an American dream that each child would be able, despite historically intransigent societal oppression based on race or gender, to overcome this oppression through education. The school was and is still seen as the place of equality where we learn how to compete in the larger marketplace of civic stability, but also to learn the rules of the game of life and play as well as anyone else. Unfortunately, schools and educational systems are no less immune to the hegemonic and hierarchical myths of racial and gender stereotypes. These myths are based upon the assumption that some groups in our society have no talent or motivation for procuring the skills to successfully navigate this competitive egalitarianism or do not deserve access to the secret codes or cheats to the “egalitarian game.”

So, I was immediately intrigued by Gregory and Ripski’s opening premise with regard to how student–teacher relationships are particularly challenging for Black student suspensions. When they state, “Given these trends, understanding how teachers successfully exercise their authority and elicit cooperation in their classrooms becomes paramount reduce the racial discipline gap” (p. 337), I found myself wanting more of a discussion about the problem of teacher authority and lack of success rather than the opposite. This is no small issue, because the problems of disproportionate treatment and misinterpretation of Black student behavior that are rooted in student–teacher relational dynamics are mostly related to unsuccessful interactions and the misuse of authority. This is not meant to blame teachers versus students in these student–teacher conflicts because students also contribute significantly to authority conflicts and interactions. It is to point out that teachers hold more power and influence in such a relationship and when corrective action is required, this

is when the relational power dynamic needs more exploration in how discipline is subsequently administered.

But here lies the point of the article and my dissonance regarding a generalized focus on adolescent trust and teachers. The authors begin with adolescents’ perspectives on trusting teachers and are more positive than may be the case or than is necessary given the enormous literature on the racial discipline gap. The statistics regarding suspensions of Black students suggest that this is an epidemic. There is no hint from the title that we are eventually going to discuss Black student–teacher relationships, let alone “suspended” Black student–teacher relationships. Therefore, I see the relatively distant or wide-angled perspective of the racial gap and suspension taken by the authors as part of the larger problem of not addressing racial matters directly, even as I applaud their commitment to the relational approach to teaching.

Of what meaning does the avoidance of racial fears of incompetence have in a commentary on the racial gap in teacher suspensions of Black students, fueled by low adolescent trust of teachers? First, I believe this tendency to not state directly that racial tension presents unique challenges is reflective of the need for greater awareness of how racial stereotyping influence perception, judgment, and decision making. As Americans, we are trained to think of racial tension as inherently pathological; its mere mention is a sign of instability or unfair and dirty politics. The knowledge base on the psychology of race relations is deep, however, and can inform not only how we interpret teacher–student interactions and trust but also influence our questions regarding racial processes and outcomes. Furthermore, there is a fairly large body of research that highlights the underperformance bias of teachers (mostly White) towards Black students. The expectation of Black student underperformance by teachers has sizable literature support spanning four decades (Bennett, 1976; Chang & Sue, 2003; Clark, 1965; Kellow & Jones, 2008; Lewis & Kim, 2008; Murray, 1996; Oates, 2003; Plewis, 1997; Richman, Bovelsky, Koovand, Vacca, &

West, 1997; Zirkel, 2005). In their literature summary of Black–White student evaluations, Chang and Sue (2003) found that teachers consistently report lower academic expectations, and lower personality, behavior, motivation to learn, and classroom performance outcomes, for Black students. Further, teachers are more likely to treat Black students less positively in the classroom.

That Black students are disproportionately suspended (and expelled) alone is not useful if we simply assume that their racial status is the key dynamic in that statistic. To be Black within this line of reasoning does not reflect one's cultural or historical background or ways of knowing and being (Stevenson, 2003a). It simply reflects that this status group is not White, or as compared to Whites or other status groups, not performing well. By focusing on racial status and not the relational anxieties as explanation for the achievement and discipline gap, we become blind to the proximal and tested reasons for children learning—qualified teachers who are not afraid to challenge, motivate, and care for their students as they teach them. Focusing on racial status prevents us from considering other funds of knowledge about how teachers and schools might disproportionately suspend and expel Black students. In my view, it is the fears that are triggered in those interactions, not just the behaviors of the students or teachers and not just their particular racial classification that account for these suspensions. In exploring the range of questions about Black youth disproportionate suspensions, it is essential to recognize the literature that more proximally explains relational tensions around race, fueled by prevailing stereotypes, and their effects on teacher and student decisions to teach, comply, resist, or listen. Without a deeper exploration of trust in Black student–teacher relationships beyond status characteristics, we will assume that these students deserve to be referred for suspension. Without understanding the nature, demeanor, and history of the referring teachers' impressions of Black youth and their behavior, we remain in the dark about how racial dynamics may influence both the nomination and referral of teachers. Furthermore, if the racial backgrounds and experiences of the teachers are not fully consid-

ered in exploring the trust dynamic, we will depend mostly on the status characteristic (Black vs White) as the fulcrum of understanding. This is another form of invisibility and does not allow us to investigate potentially other antecedents that drive positive or negative resolution of uncomfortable, subtle, or blatant racial politics.

The authors correctly point to the racial and cultural match of teachers and students as a key issue to consider for future research, but in the current study, no attention is made to this issue. What is more important than match by racial status as biological marker (skin color) is to match students and teacher by racial identity, socialization, and/or ideology, and then determine if we see the same results. There is sufficient evidence pointing to the fact that Black teachers by and large do not make the same underperformance judgments of Black students as do White teachers (Oates, 2003). Still, the same critique to this work would apply. If we do not know what type of matching among Black teachers may contribute to less bias of student behaviors, we cannot fully or proximally understand what trust means in these relationships.

I am currently proposing that to understand more fully the dynamics of Black student–teacher relationships, there must be more attention given to a theoretical framework that encompasses the need for culturally relevant constructs (Stevenson & Thomas, 2008). Using transactional stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), I suggest that teacher–student relationships are stressful interactions that have the potential of being perceived as threats or challenges by both parties and that this primary appraisal is followed by the secondary appraisal of controllability or self-efficacy (“Can I manage this stress and do I have any skills to be successful?”). Coping reactions to these two appraisals of threat or controllability rest at the heart of our analysis of teacher–Black student relationships, except for one significant condition: The stressful nature of the relationship is racial and the skills necessary for managing such a stressor are often nonexistent in preservice and veteran teacher corps or within teacher education degree programs. It is my contention that what explains, some, not all of the tension in the

Black student–teacher relationship is the set of fears many teachers have of being (a) found out to be undereducated at understanding Black youth behavior, (b) humiliated and called out as a “racist” when conflicts with these students arise, and (c) devastated if one’s egalitarian model of teaching may in fact lead to unfair consequences for these students. The racial tension in this “stressor” is the fear of incompetence. For students, a similiar fear of incompetence is prevalent but is expressed in more specific concerns about being (a) perceived by teachers to not be smart enough as a function of one’s race, (b) treated unfairly by teachers as a function of one’s race, and (c) duped into believing that effort in the area of academics is setting oneself up for humiliation and derision. Claude Steele’s work on stereotype threat is relevant here (and more recent work suggests the threat does not have to be permanent; Nussbaum & Steele, 2007), but it is also teachers who are concerned about being stereotyped. I would propose this is as unconscious as it is conscious. Neither teachers nor Black students have to be aware of these dynamics for them to be operating in the classroom, especially if there are rituals and traditions that solidify or normalize teacher and student identity practices. The solutions to these subtle racial tensions rest in identifying the specific stressors that account for the lack of trust and train for the specific self-efficacy skills necessary to repair and/or build the trust necessary to more proximally meet the needs of all students, but especially those who are most likely to be targeted for suspension or expulsion. Basically, admitting to these tensions where they might exist is the first step to recovery, repair, and resolution. Teachers and students can only become competent at those knowledge funds, attitudes, and skills that they practice over and over again in the classroom situations of relevance.

The implications for Gregory and Ripski’s work are very hopeful. As the trust in the teacher–student relationship develops, so does the reduction of disproportionate suspension rates of Black students. This benefit of adolescent trust of teachers is likely true for all students from various racial backgrounds and

is important, although this conclusion is not related to the data that these two authors have presented in the article. They are simply investigating the experiences of suspended Black adolescents.

We should flutter less around this racial tension that is at the core of distal approaches to studying Black student–teacher relationships. The implications of this article for policy and practice are significant in that the authors challenge teacher training programs to consider how adolescent trust is understood and taught. Frankly, how student teachers in training are cognizant of adolescent development and how trust is understood within that developmental frame is essential (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2007). Another implication of this research is how teachers are rewarded within school systems for developing closer relationships with students through their practices. There are implications for the development of school-wide or district-wide teacher incentive policies. In particular, this research points to the importance of ongoing continuing education for building competencies in managing stress that arises for teachers in relationship to all of their students. For students, there are implications for how to help students improve their relationship-building skills. By influencing teachers, students may gain greater access to teacher support as this reinforcement of teacher competence can lead to positive judgments of students.

Given that the angle within the Gregory and Ripski article does not specifically target racial matters, I would say that the implications for policy and practice need to be more specific to Black student–teacher relationships. My comments are meant to be supportive of the direction this article is going and at the same time cautious that we not become satisfied with simply skimming the surface of Black student–teacher relationships. Perhaps teachers’ perceptions of Black students or ability to manage racial tension might be as meaningful a factor in Black student trust in teachers as any other variable. Investigating how Black students’ trust in teachers may be different than and similar to other groups would be in order. A more focused approach

inclusive of Black student life and meaning—making experiences has to be at the center of our investigations. This distal analysis of trust in teacher–Black student relationships is an important start in the journey toward the center of understanding the racial tensions I am discussing. Still, this generalized understanding of adolescent trust comes in many sizes and colors and is not the same for Black students—at least the consequences of teachers’ misperceptions of Black students is not the same. Nevertheless, I am heartened by the authors’ work as it points to a more direct approach to uncovering trust and mistrust issues in teacher–student relationships. Like a butterfly that flutters around a flower before finally landing, I see this work as an agent of pollination with potential to move researchers closer to understanding the Black student–teacher relationship. This more proximal exploration of “telling it like it is” is one that offers much hope. If researchers, teachers, and policy makers will land and rest on the development of trust that can come from addressing racial tensions, we may yet see the fertilization and growth of trust in Black student–teacher relationships and the reduction of disproportionate suspensions.

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