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Black and Latino Teacher-to-Student Interaction: Is Race a Factor?

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It is now the twenty-first century and a lot has changed within the world. Computers and the Internet are allowing us to do everything at home from grocery shopping to online banking and scientists are finding cures for life threatening diseases more rapidly than every before. But one thing that will always remain the same, is the right for all children to receive an equal education. Receiving an equal education means that children are getting the same treatment from their teachers and are receiving the same opportunities regardless of race or gender. Teachers are interacting with their students equally and are in no way showing favoritism based on race.

For many years, attention directed to race relations in the classroom between students and teachers has increased. When examining these race relations within schools the focus has been on the interaction between White teachers and Black students (Casteel, 2000). Since the integration of schools over forty year ago, Black parents have tried to make sure that teachers are treating their Black children the same as their white peers. These concerned parents constantly tried to find out whether the interactions occurring between the White teachers and the White students were the same as the interactions between the White teachers and the Black students, and were White students getting singled out in a positive way and receiving more attention from the teachers?

It is necessary for parents to find out whether differential treatment exists because Black students can be affected in various ways. Over time, a teachers' differential treatment can influence students' self-concepts, achievement, motivation and their levels

of aspiration (Good, 1981 in Marcus, Gross & Seefeldt, 1991). Even more importantly is how the student perceives his/her treatment by the teacher. Some existing research supports the notion that teachers do treat groups of students differently. If students realize that they are being treated differently based on their race, their academics can be negatively affected (Marcus, Gross & Seefeldt, 1991).

Several studies have been conducted to evaluate the effects of race on students and teachers, and to see how well they identify with one another in the classroom. Many educators believe that a positive relationship must exist between the student and the teacher if the students are to succeed. Researchers have concluded that Black students are ignored more, praised less, and reprimanded more than their white counterparts when they are taught by white teachers (Casteel, 2000). The lack of positive interactions and the wealth of negative interactions from White teachers are problematic and detrimental to the academic success of Black children, but this treatment may also occur when teachers of other races and ethnicities are instructing them. A study conducted in Tennessee of 6,000 students suggested that both Black and White children score higher on mathematics and reading tests when the teachers are the same race as the students. Researchers were not able to pinpoint the reasoning for their findings. They were not sure whether or not the students performed better because they saw same-race teachers as role models, or because teachers treat students differently based on race. They clearly realized though that the interaction between teacher and student could affect how well students perform on tests (Viadero, 2001).

It has always been important and will always be important to assess how White teacher's interact with Black students in comparison to the White students in their classes. This is especially imperative when after years of implementing legislation

intended to guarantee the equality of educational opportunities for all students, there are still differences in academic achievement (Marcus, Gross & Seefeldt, 1991). However, Whites are not the only ones teaching in schools anymore. More and more Blacks and Latinos are now teaching, and they are instructing classes that are comprised of Black and Latino students. Minority students make up forty percent of elementary and secondary enrollment nationwide and minority teachers account for 13.5 percent of the teaching force and that percent is expected to increase (Viadero, 2001). Realizing that the racial dynamics of classrooms are changing, but the issue of race and equality will always be a concern, I am directly interested in whether or not Black and Latino teachers interact differently with same-race students than with other-race students.

An article by Debra Viadero (1996) talks about the culture clash that can take place within a classroom when a White teacher is not aware of the cultural differences of her Black students, and is not aware of how this difference can affect their learning. In certain communities, Black children learn things differently at home, and so they do not always understand ideas and concepts the same as their white counterparts. The White teacher asks the class what time it is and only the white students respond. The teacher notes that she will have to review this with the Black students because they must not know the answer or understand what she is teaching. What the white teacher does not understand is that there is a cultural roadblock. She just told the class what time it was, so to ask the students again, may have seemed pointless to the Black students. White students are accustomed to being quizzed by their parents the way teachers quiz them. Black students are only asked question by their family when the answer is actually needed. So in this situation, the teacher did not realize the cultural difference and evaluated the Black students incorrectly. Although this cultural roadblock has existed as

long as the integration of classrooms, White educators are only now realizing that their own backgrounds and the culture of the schools have an affect on how Black students learn. Unfortunately, rather than the educators thinking of the minority students as having a culture that is “valid and distinct” from theirs, they label the students as slow and deficient (Viadero, 1996).

Although this article only discusses the cultural difference between Whites and Blacks, this culture clash can exist between Blacks and Latinos. Even though the cultures of Blacks and Latinos are more similar than Whites and Blacks or Whites and Latinos, a cultural difference can affect the way a Black teacher interacts with same-race or other-race students and the way a Latino teacher interacts with same-race or other-race students. Even so, within this idea of cultural roadblocks, there is a lot more to be investigated between the interaction of Blacks and Latinos. As stated earlier, research has supported the idea that teachers do treat groups of students differently, and knowing that it can affect their academics, the focus cannot just be kept on White teachers. In the new millennium we need to realize that educational equality issues are not just Black and White anymore. The assumption cannot be made that differential treatment only exists between White teachers and Black students.

Blacks and Latinos within our society are both grouped as minorities. They have faced and are continuing to face hardships and obstacles due to the color of their skin. Because of that, society might not think that they would discriminate against others who have had the same experiences as them, but that is not necessarily true. Black and Latinos are two different groups of people. Regardless of what is right or wrong, and whether or not it is conscious or unconscious, Black and Latino teachers can interact with their students differently and pay more attention to their same-race students. Especially within

a city like Hartford where the schools are comprised of mostly Black and Latino students and there are Black and Latino teachers educating these children assessments need to be made because inequality can be occurring. Based on the notion that regardless of race and social experiences inequality can arise amongst all people, I predict that Black and Latino teachers will have more positive interactions with their same-race students and more negative interactions with their other race students.

Methods

I did a non-intrusive observational study at a Magnet Middle school in Hartford Ct. that I will refer to as James Middle School. I observed the classroom of two teachers, one Black female and one Latino female who teach seventh grade classes of different subjects. The classrooms of both teachers had fifteen to twenty students, and were comprised of mostly Black and Latino students with the exception of two non-Black and non-Latino students. The Principal gave me permission to observe classrooms in James Middle School, and the Principal's secretary set up when I could enter the classrooms. When asking for the teachers' permission to observe their classrooms the teachers were told that I would be looking at the interaction of teachers and students within a magnet school. The Institutional Review Board at Trinity College also approved my study.

I observed four classrooms for both teachers for a total of eight classroom visits to James Middle School. Within the eight times that I visited the classrooms, I observed three different groups of children. I observed one set of students with both teachers and both teachers only had of the other two groups that I observed. Each time I visited a class I sat in the back or to the side of the classroom and did not interact with the students or

help within the classroom, although both teachers occasionally drifted over to me to have a conversation about my attending Trinity College.

In recording my observations, I used a modified version of interactional analysis, both verbal and non-verbal. I broke the interaction of the teacher to the student in three categories: Positive, Neutral and Negative. I considered positive interaction as praise-P, encouragement-E, physical interaction-F (i.e. Patting on back/shoulder), and recitation-R. I considered neutral interactions to be the teacher calling on student-CS (whether or not the student raised his/her hand), answering the students' questions-EX, asking the students questions-Q, and just making general comments to the students-C. Negative interactions were labeled as Yelling-Y (Discipline), Criticism-C, and Ignoring-I. This is an example of how I coded a positive and neutral interaction:

The teacher asked the class a question. The teacher called on a student who raised his/her hand. The student answered the question. The teacher praised the students' answers saying it was very insightful.

↓CS ↑↓P

I also took field notes of general observations that I thought should be recorded. My notes consisted of the activities assigned to the students for that class period, the teachers overall personality, how she interacted with her students, and whether or not students had to raise their hand to speak in class. I also noted the behavior of the students, how the teacher labeled the behavior of the students and whether or not one group of students raised their hand and participated in class discussion more than the other (See figure 1 for copy of data collection sheet).

Analysis of data

After the data collection was completed, all interactions were tallied by category for each of the eight classroom observations on an excel sheet. I then totaled up all the

tallied interactions for each category giving me a total number of interactions for Positive, Neutral and Negative. To make things easier to look at and understand, I then combined all the totals for both group of students for both teachers. This combining of student by race showed that there was about a fifty-fifty split between the groups, meaning that fifty percent of the students are Black and the other fifty are Latino. The Latino teacher had forty Latino students and thirty-nine Black students that she taught within the four classes observed and the Black teacher had thirty-one Latino students and thirty-two Black students within the four classes observed. Therefore if the teachers were treating the children equally, then the number of interactions should be about the same for both teachers towards the Black and Latino students.

Combined to total of all Classes Observed

	Latino Teacher	Black Teacher
Latino Student	40	31
Black Student	39	32
	Approx. 50/50	Approx. 50/50

Results

For positive interactions the Latino teacher had as many positive interaction with the Black students as she did with the Latino students. There were 6 positive interactions towards her Black students and 4 positive interactions towards her Latino students.

Although this is not exactly half for each group of students, it is very close and reflects my expected fifty-fifty split of interactions between Black and Latino students. The data

for the Black teachers positive interactions shows that the Black teacher had more interactions with her same-race students. The Black teacher had 20 positive interactions with the Black students and only 9 positive interactions with the Latino students.

Positive Interactions of Teacher to Student

	Latino Teacher	Black Teacher
Latino Student	4	9
Black Student	6	20

Neutral interaction results also showed a difference in teacher interaction towards the students for the two teachers. The Latino teacher had just as many neutral interactions with her Black students as she did with her Latino students. She had 60 neutral interactions with her Black students and 62 neutral interactions with her Latino students. This again fits the expected fifty-fifty interactions towards both groups. In the case of the Black teacher, she had more neutral interactions with her Black students than she did with her Latino students. She had 35 neutral interactions with her same-race students and only 24 neutral interactions with her Latino students.

Neutral Interactions of Teacher to Student

	Latino Teacher	Black Teacher
Latino Student	62	24
Black Student	60	35

For negative interactions both teachers' did not have more interactions with their other-race students. In fact the coded interactions reflected the fifty-fifty expected split between groups for both teachers. They had just as many negative interactions with one group of students as the other. The Latino teacher interacted negatively with the Black students 16 times and with the Latino students 15 times. The Black teacher interacted negatively with the Black students 19 times and with the Latino students 21 times.

Negative Interactions of Teacher to Student

	Latino Teacher	Black Teacher
Latino Student	15	21
Black Student	16	19

Discussion

As my results show, my prediction was partially supported. The Latino teacher in no way interacted any differently with her same race students than with her other race students. Across the board for all three categories of interactions, she treated her students equally. On the other hand, the Black teacher did interact more with her same-race students than her other-race students for both positive and neutral interactions, but interacted equally with both groups of students for negative interactions.

In the future if I were to repeat this study there are quite a few things that I would do differently that would hopefully improve the outcome of the study. The first thing would be to have a larger sample size of teachers to work with. I do not think that two

teachers, one from each group is sufficient enough to say whether or not my supported or unsupported predictions are conclusive. Possibly five to ten teachers from both groups might be better numbers to work with and really have conclusive results. Also I would observe the classrooms over a semester because the longer the observations, the less variation between classroom activities and assignments between teachers may occur.

In redesigning my study, I would add one extra category to specifically look at, which is how many times Black students or Latino students raised their hand and participated in the class discussion. Having that, as a part of the data will make a difference because the number of interactions between teachers and students can be affected by the amount of times a student is raising their hand. Not specifically looking at that this time around may have affected the outcome of my study. In one case when I was observing. The Black teacher was having a discussion with the students and the Black students were raising their hand more than the Latino students were. Although it is not certain that the Latinos not interacting as much may have affected the results, it is something that should be coded for in the future.

The last changes, but important changes I would make are having a few controls within the classrooms I was observing. If possible I would try to keep the groups of students being observed as small as possible. Looking at the same groups of students who are taught by the same teachers may be important. Although it may be harder to control the more teachers there are, but I would try to keep the groups of students as small as possible. I would also keep in mind the subjects the teachers are teaching because that can have an affect on how the teachers interact with their students and the teaching experience of the teachers. More experienced teachers may be a little bit more comfortable with the students and be willing to have more playful discussions with their

students than with less experienced teachers who are still trying to gain control and respect from their teachers.

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