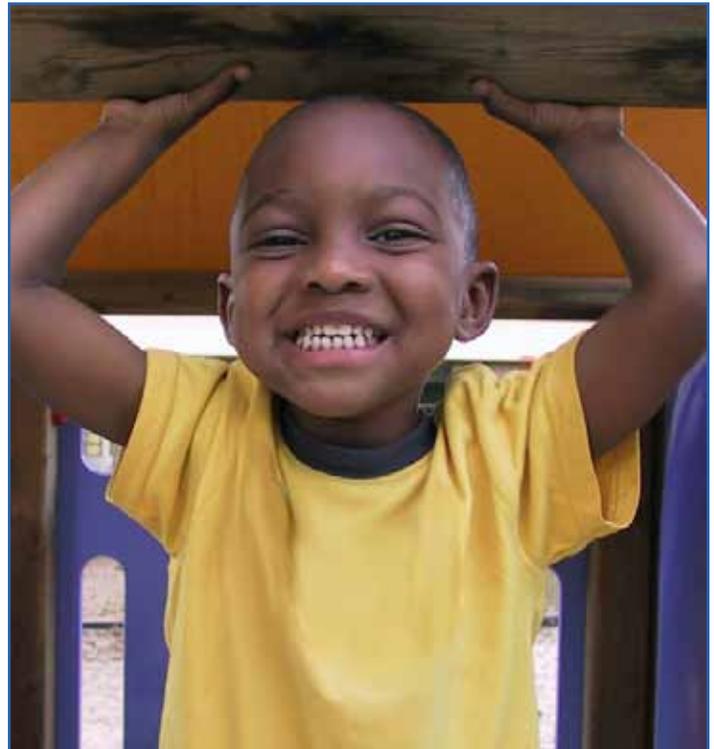


Increased Teacher–Student Conflict Over School Year for Young African American Children

Exploring teacher–student relations in rural kindergarten and first grade classrooms

In the first study of teacher–student relationships that examines student behaviors and literacy skills in an exclusively rural population, researchers have determined that boys and African American students experience increasing conflict with their teachers as the school year progresses.

Increasing evidence suggests that relationships are important for children’s academic and social skills. Understanding how relationships develop between teachers and students is crucial. Previous studies have shown that students in better relationships with teachers are more engaged in their work, participate more often in classroom activities, and like school more. Not surprisingly, conflict in teacher–student relationships negatively impacts children’s adjustment to school and learning. Earlier research also suggests that African American students may reap more academic benefits from positive relationships with teachers than do White students.



The Teachers, the Students, and the Method

This study examined student–teacher relationships in a sample of 199 kindergarten and first-grade students attending 20 classrooms in rural schools in the southeastern United States. The highly diverse participants were 30.9% White/non-Hispanic, 45.5% African American, 17% Native American, and 8% other. Mothers of 20% of the sample had less than a high school diploma. Forty-eight percent of the participants were male. All participating children were participants at control schools in a longitudinal intervention study of early reading development.



The 20 kindergarten and first-grade teachers in this study were female. Thirteen teachers identified as White, six as African American, and one teacher selected “Other” to describe her ethnicity. All participating teachers had at least a college degree and all were licensed teachers. They ranged from early career to late career, but as a group, were relatively experienced. The average number of years teaching was 16.

Child- and teacher-level data were collected in the fall via family and teacher questionnaires and a child assessment battery. Teachers completed questionnaires on student behavior in the fall, and teacher-student relationship quality in the fall and spring. Students also participated in formal assessments of their early literacy skills in the fall.

The Increasing Conflict with Boys and African Americans

Boys and African American students in this study experienced increasing conflict with their teachers as the school year progressed, regardless of the teacher’s ethnicity.

Teachers commonly struggle in their relationships with children of both genders who are less self-regulated, less attentive, and more hostile in their reactions. Indeed, in this study, the increasing conflict that teachers reported in their relationships with boys was explained by the boys’ challenging behaviors.

However, regardless of student behavior, teachers reported more conflict in their relationships with African American students at the end of the year than the beginning, even after researchers accounted for additional factors that included gender, maternal education, and teacher experience and ethnicity. Student literacy skills also had no bearing on the increasing conflict in these relationships.

These findings contradict a previous study in which non-White teachers were more likely to rate their relationships with non-White students positively. In this examination of rural southern classrooms, African American and White teachers did not differ generally in their reported relationship conflict with African American students.

Conclusion

The current study affirmed research findings supporting boys’ relationship disadvantage in early education, in that teachers perceived more conflict in their relationships with boys than with girls. However, when behavior problems were considered, gender of the child mattered less for the student–teacher relationship.

Possibly more important than the mediation of gender effects, teachers reported increasing conflict with African American students over the school year. What processes explain teachers’ apparent relationship bias against African American students in this rural sample? While the sociocultural mismatch between White teachers and African American students could lead to relationship challenges that teachers are ill-prepared to address, one third of the teachers in the present study were African American.

Teachers’ difficulty in relationships with boys and African Americans may be due to the tendency for these groups of students to be less well prepared for school academically (according to standardized tests) and to be perceived by teachers as having more behavior problems. Teachers may need strategies to enhance the quality of their interactions and teaching of boys and African Americans, and may benefit from professional development that guides their interactions with boys and ethnic minorities—ideally strategies that address behavior guidance and building positive relationships.

Because the study determined that teacher relationships with African American students not only grow in conflict but also begin with less closeness, thoughtfully building relationships with children’s families—on the families’ terms—may be essential. By visiting students’ homes and providing ongoing opportunities for communicating and connecting, teachers might help to provide a foundation for better teacher–student relationships.

It is possible that an early feeling of less closeness arises from early uncomfortable interactions that emerge into growing conflict over the school year. The challenge is to identify factors that enhance positive relationships and minimize conflict for all children. ■

To Learn More

Gallagher, K., Kainz, K., Vernon-Feagans, L., & White, K. (2013). Development of student–teacher relationships in rural early elementary classrooms. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28, 520–528.



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