

TEACHER RESPONSES TO RACIST ACCUSATIONS AND THEIR  
RELATIONSHIP WITH BLACK STUDENTS  
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## ABSTRACT

Black students' relationships with teachers are an integral part of their academic and personal growth. How teachers handle racially salient conflict likely affects the nature of this relationship. The current study systematically examined the range of teacher responses to Black students' accusations of racism and whether type of response was linked to the quality of Black student-teacher relationships. The research sample included 28 predominately White teachers and 35 Black freshmen and sophomores from one high school surveyed during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. On surveys, Black students rated the quality of their relationships with their teachers as measured by support and academic press scales. Teacher responses to accusations of racism were coded from transcripts of semi-structured teacher interviews. As hypothesized, the study found that the majority of teachers were accused of being racist by their students. Also as hypothesized, teachers responded in a variety of ways by a) dismissing the accusation entirely, b) dismissing the accusation but also asserting they treat all students fairly, or c) taking the accusation seriously by engaging the student in a discussion about the accusation. In light of these results, schools need to provide training to teachers on the presence of racism in the classroom and potential ways to respond. That said, the study did not find that the type of teacher response to accusations of racism was linked to the quality of Black student-teacher relationship, as had been hypothesized. Specifically, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) did not support the hypothesis that teachers who prevented racist accusations altogether or engaged students, compared to those teachers who were dismissive, would have higher quality relationships with their Black students—as reported on student surveys. However, given that the HLM estimates were in the

expected direction, future research might detect the hypothesized association with a larger sample of teachers.

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## **Introduction**

Relationships between teachers and students have been identified as an important factor in students' development (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002; Walker, 2009). Unfortunately, students do not always have a positive connection with their teachers. One of the potential reasons for a fractured relationship can be due to issues of race in the classroom (Stevenson, 2008). Given pervasive experiences of microaggressions, Black students can experience unfairness and racism in schools and in their classrooms with teachers (Feagin, 1991; Martin et al., 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2010; Thompson & Gregory, 2011). Unfair treatment due to race can lead some students to withdraw from their education (Solórzano et al., 2000). How students and teachers handle perceived racism in the classroom is likely important for keeping students engaged in the learning process. Yet, we know little about the degree to which students accuse their teachers of racism. Moreover, as far as the author is aware, there has been no systematic study of teacher responses to accusations of racism. Finally, it is informative to understand whether certain teacher responses were associated with higher quality teacher-student relationships. The current study addressed these gaps in our knowledge using teacher interviews and student surveys drawn from participants in an urban high school.

### **Poor Quality Teacher/Black Student Relationships**

Black students have disproportionately higher rates of discipline when compared to other ethnic groups (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000), a trend which has been documented since the 1970's (for a review see Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). A recent statewide study demonstrated the continued pattern (Fabelo et al., 2011). The study followed every student in the Texas public school system who entered the 7<sup>th</sup> grade

in the years 2000, 2001, and 2002, for at least 6 years (grades 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>). Out of the almost 1 million students, 14% were Black (133,719 students). Seventy-five percent of the Black students encountered some type of disciplinary action when compared to Hispanics (64.8%) and White students (46.9%). Regarding out-of-school suspensions, Black students (26.2%) were more likely to receive this form of discipline in response to a first infraction when compared to Hispanics (18%) and Whites (9.9%). This pattern was also seen with students who received repeated conduct violations (11 or more times): Blacks (25.7%), Hispanics (18.1%), and Whites (9.5%). In the ninth grade, Black students were 31% more likely to receive a discretionary discipline referral compared to White students, when a variety of factors were taken into account (e.g., socioeconomic status, academic test scores, and number of days absent).

In a study of 11,000 middle school students, Skiba et al. (2000) found that Black students, when compared to White students, were more often referred for disciplinary problems deemed as less severe and at the discretion of teachers. Lack of respect, loitering, and level of noise were some of the more subjective disciplinary referrals. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) analyzed data collected from an urban high school consisting of 2,882 students. Results indicated that 67% of all discipline referrals were for “defiance of adult authority.” Fifty-eight percent of this was for Black students, even though they only made up 30% of the school’s overall population. This is to be contrasted with 5% of the defiance referrals being issued to White students (37% of the school’s student body). Inappropriate language, insolence, and an unwillingness to cooperate were several of the behaviors categorized as defiant. All of these can be considered somewhat subjective in nature. Taken together, these two studies as a whole suggest that teachers

are having difficulty in their relationships with Black students (Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

In a commentary, Stevenson (2008) put forth that issues around race influence problems between Black students and their teachers. Extending his argument, it may be the case that issues of race handled wrongly may reduce the quality of teacher/Black student relationships. One study showed that Black students who perceived unfair treatment in the classroom, due to race, gender, and/or achievement, were more likely to be viewed by their teachers as defiant, obstinate, and thereby receive more discipline referrals (Gregory & Thompson, 2010). Taken together, information on discipline referrals and the racial discipline gap indicates there may be poor quality teacher/Black student relationships— with some Black students indicating they feel unfairly treated and less supported. This suggests we need a better understanding of how issues of race and fairness are handled by teachers.

### **Black Students and Perceived Racism in School**

Perceived discrimination based on race is pervasive in society. For instance, in a study of 897 Black families across two states, Martin et al. (2011) found that 80% of Black youth reported being the recipient of some type of discrimination based on their race by the age of 13. The study further revealed that 66% of Black youth between the ages of 10 and 12 years old reported experiencing discriminatory comments made toward them, 40% encountered racially laden insults, and 33% received unfair treatment in a store. Threats and harassment by police officers were reported with less frequency, 17% and 6% respectively.

Forms of perceived racism vary. Scholars have conceptualized a distinction between overt and covert discrimination. Overt racism is defined as actions and behaviors blatantly conducted by an individual, such as hate crimes, destruction of a person's belongings, injury, and even death (Tougas et al., 2004; Ture & Hamilton, 1992). On the other hand, covert racism is subtle in nature and entrenched in the values of society (Coates, 2008; Ture & Hamilton, 1992). Over the years racism has become more covert in nature and the term microaggressions is more commonly used. Microaggressions are racist insults directed toward individuals who are from a minority group (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). They can occur in the form of body language, verbal comments, jokes, and behavior. In addition, microaggressions can be seen in the environment. For example, positive representations of racial minority groups may be lacking in media images (e.g., billboards, literature, and movies). Microaggressions are pervasive in every day experiences and, as such, to those who are not targets they may seem trivial. However, to those who are the recipients of microaggressions the impact can be powerful (Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Discrimination can occur in a variety of contexts. Feagin (1991) examined 37 in-depth interviews with Black Americans and found they experienced racism at their work places, restaurants, stores, hotels, as well as many other public settings. Adolescents spend much of their time in the school setting, which may also be a context in which Black teens experience racism. Thompson and Gregory (2011) followed a group of ninth graders at a large public high school for two years. On average, students perceived being the recipient of racial discrimination "on occasion." Thirty-seven percent of the students reported that if they were discriminated against due to race, they would *not* inform a

teacher or other school personnel. This suggests that a majority of students would inform an adult within the school. However, given the lack of research on this topic, it is unclear as to whether or not this would still be the case if the student perceived the teacher as the source of the discrimination. Additional examinations are needed to understand the degree to which high school teachers are confronted about racism.

Studies exploring college students and perceived racism can be informative when research is lacking at the high school level. In one study, focus groups were conducted with Black students attending predominately White universities (Solórzano et al., 2000). The students reported feeling racial discrimination both within and outside the classroom (e.g., cafeterias, dorm rooms, and hallways). Black undergraduates often believed their teachers were ignoring them, overlooking their needs, and not pushing them to reach the same academic goals as their White classmates. This led to feelings of self-doubt and further thoughts regarding dropping classes, changing majors, and even withdrawing from the institution.

Another study examined how Black college students reacted to discrimination based on their race (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). In daily diaries, students recorded all of the race-related events they encountered over a two-week period. The diary asked them to describe the incident and then answer several questions regarding the event. Results showed on average that students perceived one discriminatory experience every other week. Students were significantly affected by the incidents and the most frequent emotion experienced was anger. Many of the perceived racist events were subtle in nature, further lending support for the occurrence of microaggressions. The authors also examined how the individuals responded to these racist

incidents. Forty-two percent of the Black college students responded in a direct manner, 21% in an indirect manner, and 33% did not respond. Further analysis showed the target of the racist incident influenced the manner of response. If individuals felt the racist incident was personally aimed toward them, they were more likely to respond directly. Whereas, if the event was focused on another individual it was less likely the person would respond in a direct manner. This college study suggests students may respond to perceived racism in the high school setting.

In sum, research shows that racism is pervasive in society at large, with some studies indicating it occurs within schools (Fabelo et al., 2011; Feagin, 1991; Martin et al., 2011; Thompson & Gregory, 2011). Solórzano et al. (2000) found that Black college students perceived being treated unfairly due to their race by professors. Research at the college level also demonstrated that individuals confront the perpetrators of discrimination. However, research is lacking as to the frequency to which Black high school students confront their teachers regarding perceived racial discrimination. For more information regarding Black experiences of racism see Appendix D.

### **Teacher Responses to Racist Accusations**

Given students may be confronting teachers in regards to their experiences of racism, it is important to consider the ways in which teachers might respond. The research and theory on White racial identity is suggestive that teachers may have a variety of responses. Literature on White racial identity is applicable given that the teaching profession is 84% White, according to a study conducted by the National Center for Education Information (NCEI, 2011).

White teachers vary in their levels of racial consciousness, which may result in a range of responses to racially salient material. Helms categorized White racial identity into six statuses (Helms, 1984; Helms, 1997). For instance, the “contact” status is when an individual does not acknowledge race and what that means to him/her and society as a whole. According to Helms, the highest status of White racial identity is “autonomy.” This stage is when a White individual is able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his/her group membership, while internalizing a nonracist identity. In order to develop a positive racial identity and reach this last status, White individuals must understand who they are, what that means in the larger culture, and then choose to abandon racism (Helms, 1997). This theory suggests that White teachers may respond to racially salient material in a variety of ways given they also vary in their consciousness about issues of race (See Appendix D for a more in depth description of White racial identity).

This assertion is confirmed by Ullucci’s (2011) case study of White teachers. She concludes that some teachers want to evade the issue of race and the role that it can play in the classroom. One teacher stated, “this [racism] isn’t my issue, I teach math” (Ullucci, 2011, p. 562). The teacher’s comment suggests she is “dismissive” of race-related issues. Other teachers in Ullucci’s study acknowledged that racism was an issue in schools, tried to involve the students’ families, and incorporated material that would be relevant to the students’ racial backgrounds. These efforts aim to “engage” students in racially salient material. Given Ullucci’s work and the theories on White racial identity it can be postulated that teachers may have a range of responses including being “dismissive” or “engaging” in response to racist accusations.

**Differentiating Characteristics of Teachers**

If teachers vary in how they react to racist accusations it is important to identify qualities that differentiate them. How teachers deal with racially salient material may reflect the quality of their relationships with Black students. In other words, teachers who are able to either prevent racist accusations or engage students may have higher quality relationships with their students.

One way to measure quality is the degree to which students experience their teachers as highly supportive and highly structured. In other words, structure and support in a classroom creates a strong relational base for the teacher and his/her students. Teachers who are preventing racist accusations and engaging students when these do occur may have stronger relationships with their students. Baumrind developed a theory on parenting addressing how different levels of structure and support relate to his/her child's development (Baumrind, 1968). This theory is useful in understanding the quality of teacher-student relationships (Walker, 2008; Walker, 2009).

Diana Baumrind put forth three different styles in which parents respond to their children's behavior (Baumrind, 1968). First, the permissive parenting style has a high level of care and verbal interactions, but little to no structure or guidelines. Second, the authoritarian parenting style is opposite of the permissive approach, by placing significant demands on the children and providing very little affection and communication. The third parenting style is authoritative. This style describes parents who provide high levels of structure, along with appropriate care and responsiveness in both verbal and nonverbal ways (Baumrind, 1968; Walker, 2008).

The authoritative style has been shown to be most effective compared to permissive and authoritarian styles in socializing children (Baumrind, 1968; Baumrind, 1971; Baumrind, 1991; Walker, 2008; Walker, 2009). Preschool children with authoritative parents were found to be appropriate with other individuals, able to carry out a task on their own, and exhibit restraint (Baumrind, 1971). A longitudinal study tracked these children into their teenage years (Baumrind, 1991). These adolescents were more successful in both academic and social arenas, compared to teens with parents who demonstrated authoritarian and permissive styles.

Baumrind's parenting theory has since been applied to teachers (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; Walker, 2008; Walker, 2009). Structure and support, with effective communication, define the authoritative teacher (Walker, 2008). This authoritative teaching style provides an educational environment in which teachers can successfully deliver lessons and manage the classroom (Walker, 2008). Students thereby view their teachers more positively, become engaged in the material, and learn the necessary content (Pianta et al., 2002; Walker, 2008; Walker, 2009;).

Structure and care may be two key components in building a strong relationship with all students, including Black students. This assertion is supported by Gregory et al. (2011), who found that schools characterized as low on structure and low on support had high rates of suspension. In addition, these schools had the widest Black-White racial discipline gaps, compared to schools with more authoritative features.

The notion of teachers providing support and structure in the classroom fits well with Ladson-Billings research on "culturally relevant teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1992) found that effective teachers acknowledge the potentially difficult

environments of their students (support) and then push them to overcome barriers (structure). These teachers believe all of their students can succeed and therefore try to identify and utilize students' skills and abilities (structure and support).

Culturally relevant teaching is a component of being an authoritative teacher. Teachers must understand their students (support) and provide them with the guidelines to reach their highest potential (structure). Research is needed to determine whether the types of teacher responses to a racist accusation differentiates teachers in terms of the quality of their relationships with Black students, as measured by student experiences of structure and support.

### **Summary**

Many Black adolescents experience poor quality schooling ensuing from a long history of unequal education in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A particular concern is students' experiences with teachers, given the value of positive relationships in fostering optimal outcomes (Klem & Connell, 2004; Pianta et al., 2002; Stuhlman, Hamre, & Pianta, 2002). The racial discipline gap indicates there may be problematic teacher/Black student relationships—reflective of poor quality teaching and/or student perceptions of unfair treatment or lack of teacher support. Given this concern, more research is needed to understand how teachers respond to issues of race and fairness in the classroom. Specifically, research is needed to assess teacher behavior when confronted with racist accusations by their students. A teacher's ability to prevent accusations or engage their students after an accusation may reflect the quality of teacher-student relationship—yet this remains to be tested in empirical research.

Given the gaps in knowledge about teacher/Black student relationships and how teachers handle racially salient conflict with students, the study examined the degree to which teachers reported being accused of racism by their students and how teachers responded to the accusation (dismiss or engage), as indicated through their own self-report. Next, it investigated the link between accusations of racism and the quality of the teacher/Black student relationship. Relationships were characterized by the students' perception of the degree to which teachers supported them and provided structure. Three central research questions were put forth:

**I. To what extent did teachers report being accused of racial discrimination by their Black students?**

**It was hypothesized that the majority of White teachers were accused of racial discrimination by their Black students.**

**II. What were the typical teacher responses to racist accusations?**

**It was hypothesized that teachers responded in a variety of different ways. Some dismissed the comment, others dismissed the comment while asserting their fairness, and still others engaged the students in a dialogue regarding the comment.**

**III. Was the way in which the teacher handled the accusation associated with the quality of the teacher/Black student relationship?**

**It was hypothesized that teachers who successfully prevented racist accusations or actively intervened (engaged) when presented with racist accusations would be perceived by students as more authoritative compared to teachers who dismissed the comment. More specifically,**

**those who prevented or engaged would be perceived as providing more support and structure, the characteristics of an authoritative teacher.**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Adolescents in the present study were enrolled in a public high school with approximately 1,200 students. The large high school was located in a southeastern city. All students who participated in the study were enrolled in a ninth grade transition program for students deemed low achievers in eighth grade. Almost every student received either a D or an F in at least two core subjects during their eighth grade year. Collectively, the students received 180 discipline referrals with an average of six referrals each. The majority of the students in the high school transition program were Black and 80% were enrolled in the free/reduced lunch program.

Seventy-five percent of Black students in the high school transition program participated in the study during the 2006-2007 school year ( $n = 40$ ). Five of these students did not continue for the 2007-2008 school year due to transferring schools or being placed at a state run facility (e.g., Department of Juvenile Services). During the 2007-2008 school year, 35 Black students participated. Forty-nine percent of the students were female ( $n = 17$ ) and 51% were male ( $n = 18$ ). Of the 35 students, 30 were promoted to the tenth grade while the other five were retained.

All core subject teachers (i.e., English, science, math, and history) who had at least one participating student in their class were asked to participate during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. Two of the teachers did not agree to participate in the study. A total of 28 teachers participated, however one teacher was not asked the

questions relevant to the study and is therefore excluded ( $n = 27$ ). One teacher stated he/she was a Korean American and another teacher self-identified as Black.

### **Procedures**

All students in the ninth-grade transition program were presented with the aims of the study by researchers. Students who returned signed student assent and parental consent forms participated in the study. Survey data was collected throughout the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. Students were given a movie ticket upon completion of the interview and surveys.

During both the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years researchers presented the aims of the study to all teachers who taught a core academic class (i.e., English, science, math, and history) to at least one student participant. The teachers were interviewed during the spring of either the 2006-2007 or 2007-2008 school years, depending on the year in which the teacher had one of the participating students. Teachers were provided modest compensation for their completion of the one-hour interview.

### **Measures**

**Student surveys.** Students completed a survey packet. Two scales were used to measure the students' perceptions of teacher support and structure. The scales are described along with the Chronbach's alpha, which measures the internal consistency of the items.

**Teacher support.** Students rated each of their teachers on a *Teacher Care Scale*, which was being used to measure a student's perception of a teacher's level of support (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). This scale has three items, but the alpha was higher for two of the three items. As such, the two-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.76$ , taken at one time point)

included: “The teacher likes me” and “This teacher really cares about me.” The ratings ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*very true*). Past research has shown that higher care, as measured by this scale, was associated with higher trust in teachers and obedience to their authority (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

**Teacher structure.** Students rated each of their teachers on the *Academic Expectations Scale*, which is being used to measure student perceptions of teachers’ level of structure (Midgley et al., 2000). The seven-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ) included: “When I’ve figured out how to do a problem, this teacher gives me more challenging problems to think about”; “This teacher presses me to do thoughtful work”; “This teacher asks me to explain how I get my answers”; “When I’m working out a problem, this teacher tells me to keep thinking until I really understand”; “This teacher doesn’t let me do just easy work, but makes me think”; “This teacher makes sure that the work I do really makes me think”; “This teacher accepts nothing less than my full effort.” The ratings ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*). Past research has found that academic expectations were associated with lower levels of suspension among White and Black students (Gregory et al., 2011).

**Teacher interviews.** Teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, approximately one hour in length, regarding their teacher practices and interactions with students (See Appendix A). The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes using the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach. This model has three components for qualitative data analysis— data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Three researchers read the teacher transcripts and independently noted themes regarding teachers’ report of racist accusations and their response to these claims. Researchers

developed a coding manual with an agreed upon range of teacher responses. Three graduate students were trained on how to use the coding manual, which contained explanations of the codes and quotes from teacher transcripts as examples (See Appendices B and C). Graduate students individually coded each transcript. As such, each transcript was coded a total of three times (once by each coder). Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were used as a measure of coder reliability. The high ICCs reflected high reliability.

**Teachers' report of racist accusations.** Coders examined whole transcripts for incidents when teachers discussed the issue of racist accusations. One question tended to solicit the most relevant responses— “Have you ever been accused of being racist?” The coding manual asked raters to give each teacher a single code on racist accusations: 1) no, 2) accused of unfair treatment due to race, and 3) yes, racist accusation (See Appendix B for the coding description) (ICC = .967). A teacher coded as ‘no,’ stated that he/she had not been called racist by a student. If the teacher stated this but then described a situation in which a student accused him/her of being unfair due to race, the teacher received an ‘accused of unfair treatment’ code. A teacher coded as ‘yes,’ stated that he/she had been called racist by a student. For the purposes of this study, two of the codes were combined (i.e., accused of unfair treatment due to race and yes, racist accusation reported) as they both reflect the notion that the teacher was the recipient of a racist accusation.

**Teachers' responses to racist accusations.** After asking the question mentioned in the previous theme, interviewers then asked— “If so, how do you handle it?” Another prompt (“Why do you think students might say that?”) also elicited relevant responses. Five codes were developed regarding this theme: 98) question not discussed, 1)

dismissive, 2) dismissive but asserting fairness, 3) engaging, 4) preventing (See Appendix C for the coding description) ( $ICC = .917$ ). If the teacher was never asked the follow-up question nor was the topic discussed during the interview, the teacher was coded as 'question not discussed.' A teacher coded as having a 'dismissive response' may have brushed off the comment by laughing at the student or by not acknowledging the accusation. A teacher coded as 'dismissive but asserting his/her fairness' stated that he/she is not racist toward the student because of his/her background/experiences or where he/she teaches. The teacher could have been seen as defensive about the comment or behavior. A teacher coded as 'engaging' discussed how he/she interacted with the student and acknowledged his/her feelings and thoughts. If the teacher clearly stated he/she had never been accused of race related unfairness or racism then he/she was given a 'preventing' code. Teachers who have never been accused may have managed their classroom or interacted with their students in a way that prevented accusations.

### **Data Analyses Plan**

- I. **To what extent did teachers report being accused of racial discrimination by their Black students?** A percentage of teachers who reported being accused of racial discrimination was calculated.
- II. **What were the typical teacher responses to racist accusations?** The three different types of responses are described and examples are provided from teacher transcripts.
- III. **Was the way in which the teacher handled the accusation associated with the quality of the teacher/Black student relationship?**

First, descriptive statistics were examined for the care and academic expectations scales. Second, Pearson's correlations were run to assess the relationship between type of response to a racist accusation and the structure (care) and support (academic expectations) measures given by students for each teacher. Lastly, this same relationship was analyzed with Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). Typically in high school, teachers encounter many students in one day as students change classes. Therefore, multiple students are nested within each teacher and the data from students cannot be seen as independent from one another. Thus, analyses need to account for within- and between- student variation. HLM is used in nested designs (Peugh, 2010). In the current study, level one included the students' report of care and academic expectations. Level two included the teachers' type of response to a racist accusation. The first model, the unconditional model, is a two-level HLM with no predictors. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC), the proportion of the within-student variance (i.e.,  $\sigma_{u0}^2$ ) to the total variance (i.e.,  $\sigma_{u0}^2 + \sigma_e^2$ ), were calculated. The second model, the conditional model, included a predictor: type of teacher responses to racist accusations. The unconditional model and the conditional model were compared to assess the proportion of variance explained (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). The final models used for both care and academic expectations are presented below.

*Level 1 Model:*

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + r_{ij}$$

*Level 2 Model:*

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} * (\text{RESPONSE}_j) + u_{0j}$$

### **Missing Data**

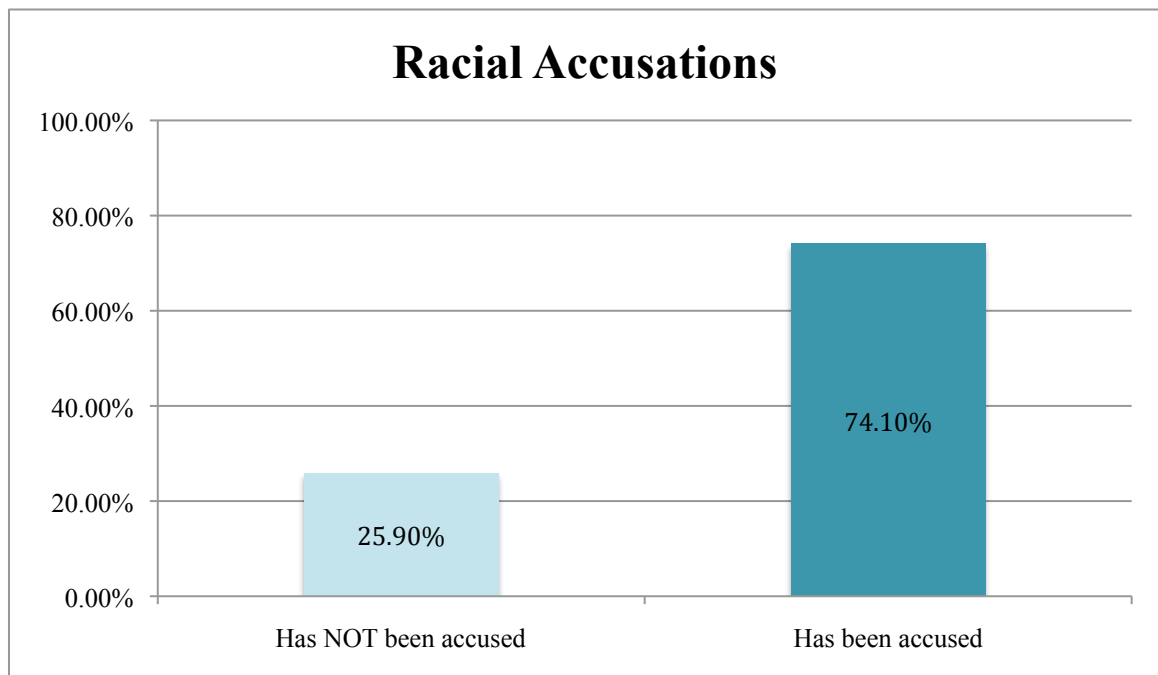
Of the 27 teachers interviewed, two teachers (7.4%) were never asked the follow-up question to discuss how they responded to the racist accusation. Therefore, the sample

size for the second hypothesis is 25 teachers. For the third hypothesis, data was missing for one teacher. As such, the sample size for this hypothesis is 24 teachers. Another teacher was missing student data due to maternity leave for 9<sup>th</sup> grade. However, data was used from students' ratings of that teacher in the following school year.

## Results

### Teachers' Report of Racist Accusations

Teachers' reports ( $n = 27$ ) of whether or not they have been accused of racist accusations by students were examined. Overall, the majority of teachers ( $n = 20$ ) indicated they have been accused by students of racist accusations, or unfairness due to race (74.1%; see Figure 1). This is compared to 25.9% of teachers who denied being accused of racism.



*Figure 1.* Teachers' reports of whether or not they have been accused of racism by students.

### Response to Racist Accusations

Twenty teachers reported they had been accused of racism or unfairness due to race by their Black students. Two teachers were not asked the follow-up question, regarding how they responded to the accusation. Eighteen teachers were asked to describe their responses to these accusations (see Figure 2). Their reactions were categorized as follows: six teachers dismissed the accusation entirely, six teachers dismissed the accusation but asserted their fairness, and six teachers engaged the students in further discussion.

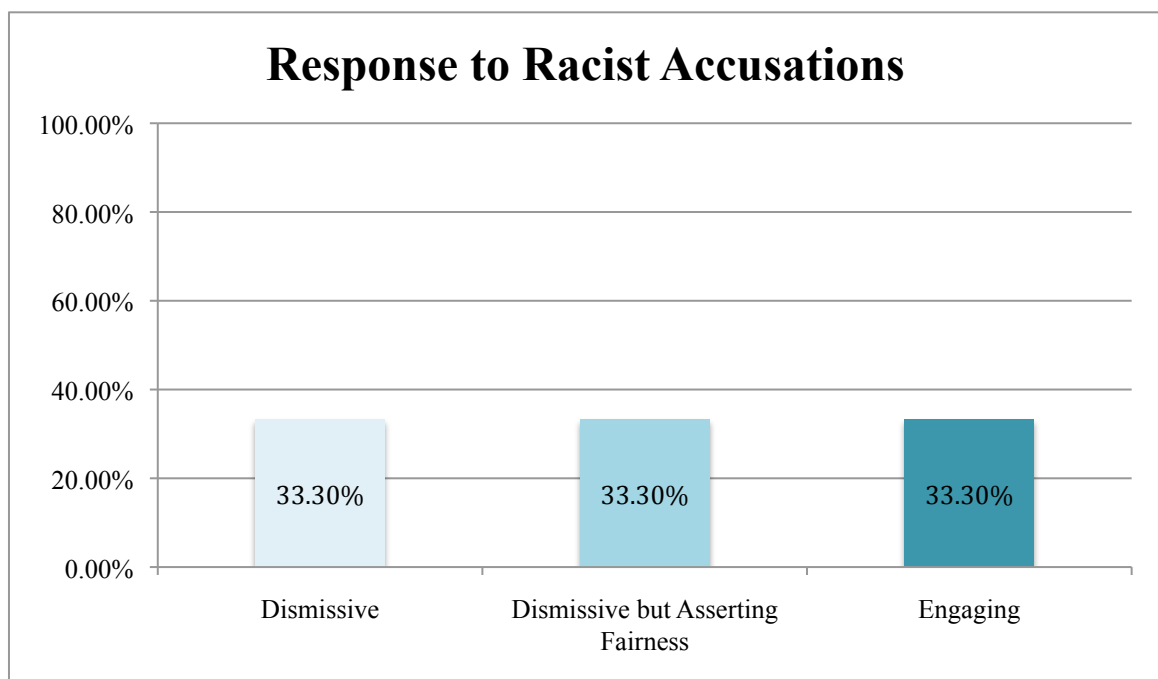


Figure 2. Types of teacher responses to racist accusations.

**Dismissed accusation.** A majority of the six teachers classified as having dismissed student allegations of racism, did this by responding with laughter. One teacher reported, “I just laugh. [...] It’s just some flippant thing they say, cause they

know that what I'm asking them to do is not any different than any other teacher in the building." A second teacher reported,

I was told that I let a certain student do something that I normally wouldn't have done [...] only because he was Black and I just looked at him and burst out laughing, because I thought that was the funniest thing in the world.

Another teacher stated that he/she runs an informal class, which allows for teasing and joking between him/her and the students. After being accused of hating Black students one teacher replied, "I say, 'Oh, you're so wrong, I hate you all (laughs).'" This teacher attributed the accusation to the student 'playing the race card.' Another teacher believed the accusations were a learned response. He/she responded to a student by stating, "It has nothing to do with that you're Black." A different teacher described a situation where he/she made a comment to a White student, to which a Black student stated, "Why, because he's White?" The teacher replied, "That's exactly right" believing that he/she should "just play along almost because half the time, they're joking."

All of these teachers who responded by laughing at the student and/or by not acknowledging the accusation were coded as "dismissive." By responding in this manner the teachers may have implied, consciously or unconsciously, that the problem lies with the student, rather than with their own behavior. Dismissing the accusation also tends to avoid seriously engaging with the idea the student is experiencing racism. Dismissing with humor seems to help the teacher move to another topic quickly. Perhaps it helps diffuse the teachers' own emotional reaction. Additional research might ask how students experienced the laughter.

**Dismissed accusation but asserted their fairness.** Teachers also responded by dismissing the accusations of racism and then stating evidence to demonstrate their

fairness. Three of the teachers asserted their fairness by reporting information based on the racial makeup of their class. One teacher stated, “I’m like, ‘Okay, in this classroom how many Whites are there? Two? Okay, so what is the percentage that I’m gonna send, if I send someone out? They’re gonna be Black or White.’” Another teacher responded, “I pointed out to him that lots of other kids in the room were Black.” A third teacher shared the percentage of Black students at the high school with the student. This suggests that by pointing out the racial composition of the classroom the teachers’ actions should not be viewed as racist. By responding in this way the teacher ignores the student’s comments and immediately proceeds to defending himself/herself. The teacher is attempting to demonstrate that he/she is free of bias given how he/she works with diversity in the classroom or school.

Another way teachers defended their behavior was by providing biographical information they felt demonstrated that they were not racist. One teacher stated, “Well if I’m racist, then how come I am teaching at [high school].” This suggests that by working at a school with a diverse population he/she could not be racist. Another teacher spoke of his/her personal characteristic of fairness— “I am an equal opportunity enabler and I am an equal opportunity confronter.” This implies that he/she treats everyone equally regardless of skin color. Family relations and upbringings were also used to justify why an individual should not be seen as racist. One teacher reported, “I have said things before like, ‘Well then, I would have to hate half of my family.’ Or I will say, ‘I grew up in a household that was not racist and neither am I.’” In sum, many of the teachers put forth information about themselves or the school as evidence that they do not discriminate.

**Engaged students.** One-third of the teachers responded to the racist accusations by discussing the situation with the students. One teacher stated, “It’s really interesting because it almost, it opens up a dialogue.” The teacher then goes on to describe having a conversation between the student, himself/herself, and other students in the classroom regarding the issue of skin color. Another teacher reported,

We started to kind of open up that dialogue and we got somewhere, we didn’t get anywhere I think where I transformed his mind, but we resolved the issue to where he understood, because in that particular instance [the student accused the teacher of being racist for defending another teacher], it wasn’t motivated by race.

Teachers also responded by asking the students questions to further understand their perspective. One teacher stated, “What is your example?” This question led to a discussion between the teacher and the student. The teacher reported, “Sometimes they don’t understand, what really, what the term racist means.” In response he/she tries to “educate them” about the meaning of the word ‘racist.’ Another teacher asked students, “What did I do wrong? [...] I don’t know everything, help me out.” This teacher then tries to learn about the student’s race and background stating he/she is “trying to understand different cultures as a White person and not being color blind.”

These comments suggest that some teachers responded to racist accusations by further engaging the students. Teachers expressed a desire to understand the student’s perspective and learn more about his/her race and culture. In addition, one teacher responded in a way to encourage his/her student by stating, “I just want you to be successful in the classroom and I’m going to give you what you need to be successful in the classroom.” The teacher went on to apologize to the student for singling him/her out in this manner. This implied that the teacher was concerned about how the student felt regarding the exchange between them.

**Prevented accusations.** Seven teachers reported their students had not accused them of being racist. This suggests that in some manner they might have prevented racist accusations from occurring. These teachers may have managed their classroom or interacted with their students in a way that students did not feel the need to accuse.

### **Teacher Responses and the Quality of the Teacher/Black Student Relationship**

**Descriptive statistics and correlations.** Overall, student-perceived teacher care ranged from “not very true” ( $Min = 2.17$ ; see Table 1) to “very true” ( $Max = 4.00$ ), with the majority of students ( $M = 3.26$ ) reporting that their teachers “sort of” cared about them. In addition, students perceived it was “somewhat true” that teachers held high academic expectations ( $M = 3.49$ ). Table 3 shows that the correlation between care and academic expectations was approaching significance ( $r = .40, p = .05$ ), suggesting that students who perceived teachers as higher on academic expectations were also more likely to perceive them as caring.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for perceived care and academic expectations for each type of response to racist accusations. Teachers who were coded as “preventing” had the highest care and academic expectations means, as perceived by students, when compared to the other teacher responses. However, the difference was not statistically significant when comparing the mean for “preventing” teachers to the combined mean for the other three groups of teachers on care ( $t(22) = 1.17, p = .25$ ) and academic expectations ( $t(22) = .91, p = .38$ ). Pearson’s correlations show that type of response was not correlated with care ( $r = .05, p = .82$ ; see Table 3) or academic expectations ( $r = .25, p = .23$ ).

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Student and Teacher Measures*

<i>Measures</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Perceived care	3.26	0.37	2.17-4.00
Perceived academic expectations	3.49	0.40	2.75-4.14

*Note.* *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Student and Teacher Measures based on Type of Response*

<i>Measures</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Dismissive			
Perceived care	3.25	0.17	3.00-3.50
Perceived academic expectations	3.31	0.42	2.75-3.88
Dismissive but asserting fairness			
Perceived care	3.36	0.38	2.75-3.75
Perceived academic expectations	3.54	0.44	3.00-4.14
Engaging			
Perceived care	2.96	0.46	2.17-3.34
Perceived academic expectations	3.50	0.35	3.12-3.95
Preventing			
Perceived care	3.40	0.37	2.85-4.00
Perceived academic expectations	3.61	0.43	3.00-4.01

*Note.* *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

Table 3

*Correlations for Student and Teacher Measures*

	1	2	3
1. Response style	-	.05	.25
2. Perceived care		-	.40 <sup>+</sup>
3. Perceived academic press			-

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ .

**Hierarchical linear modeling.** The unconditional Model 1 showed that 11% of the variance for student-perceived academic expectations of teachers was between teachers ( $ICC = 0.11$ ; see Table 4). A majority (89%) of the variance was within students. The unconditional model further demonstrated little systematic difference on student-reported care ( $ICC = .03$ ; see Table 5). In other words, students within the same classrooms were experiencing teacher care very differently and therefore had less of a shared experience. Also, noteworthy is that the between-teacher difference was greater for student-perceived academic expectations than for care.

Model 2 included response style as a predictor of student differences in both academic expectations and care. The type of response style (i.e., dismissive (1), dismissive but asserting fairness (2), engaging (3), preventing (4)) did not have an association with student perceived academic expectations ( $\gamma_{01} = .09, p = .18$ ; see Table 4). Yet, the response style accounted for 9% of the variance in academic expectations, when compared to the unconditional model. Similarly, no significant relationship was found between type of response style and student perceived care ( $\gamma_{01} = .03, p = .37$ ; see

Table 5). Yet, 33% of the variance in student perceived care was accounted for by type of response, when compared to the unconditional model.

Table 4

*HLM Analysis of Student Reported Academic Expectations*

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
	<i>Estimate (SE)</i>	<i>Estimate (SE)</i>
Between student predictors (level 2)		
Response style $\gamma_{01}$		.09 (.07)
Random effects		
Within students (level 1) $\sigma^2$	.89	.90
Between teacher level (level 2) $\sigma^2$	.11	.10
Reduced variance within students <sup>a</sup>	-	0%
Reduced variance between teachers <sup>a</sup>	-	9%

*Note.* HLM = hierarchical linear modeling; *SE* = standard error; Response style = response to racist accusations, 1 = dismissive, 2 = dismissive but asserting fairness, 3 = engaging, 4 = preventive.

<sup>a</sup>Proportion of unexplained variance reduced from Model 1 (unconditional model).

Table 5

*HLM Analysis of Student Reported Care*

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
	<i>Estimate (SE)</i>	<i>Estimate (SE)</i>
Between student predictors (level 2)		
Response style $\gamma_{01}$		.03 (.04)
Random effects		
Within students level	.97	.98
Between teacher level	.03	.02
Reduced variance within students <sup>a</sup>	-	0%
Reduced variance between teachers <sup>a</sup>	-	33%

*Note.* HLM = hierarchical linear modeling; *SE* = standard error; Response style = response to racist accusations, 1 = dismissive, 2 = dismissive but asserting fairness, 3 = engaging, 4 = preventive.

<sup>a</sup>Proportion of unexplained variance reduced from Model 1 (unconditional model).

**Post hoc inspection of extreme cases.** A post hoc inspection was conducted of three cases that represent three of the different types of responses. This was conducted to help identify any trends that might not have emerged in the above statistical analyses given the small sample size. The three teachers made the following comments in response to how they handle racist accusations:

Teacher A- "I just laugh. [...] They're not serious. It's because I'm purple, its just ya know, its because I wore green today and its just some flippant thing they say."

Teacher B- "I really can't take it seriously [...] I have said things before like, 'Well, then I would have to hate half of my family.' Or I will say, 'I grew up in a household that was not racist and neither am I. I am teaching my child the same thing.'"

Teacher C- “I try to have a conversation with them. [...] We started to get into his perceptions, and perhaps he had some perceptions [...] that in his mind were unequal like, I said ‘because you feel like I’m supporting another teacher, because I’m White and he’s White, and you think I’m siding with him, does that make you a little bit racist?’ And we started to kind of open up that dialogue, and we got somewhere. We didn’t get anywhere I think where I transformed his mind, but we resolved the issue to where he understood, because in that particular instance it wasn’t motivated by race.”

Table 6 displays the coded response style along with each teacher’s classroom mean on student-perceived care and academic expectations. The dismissive but asserting fairness teacher (Teacher B) had the *lowest* ratings on both the care and academic expectations scales. Teacher A (dismissive style) and Teacher C (engaging style) were viewed similarly by their students. However, teacher A had a higher perceived level of care and Teacher C had a higher perceived level of academic expectations. This is a somewhat complex pattern deserving of some speculative explanations that could be explored in future research, as will be outlined in the discussion.

Table 6

*Post Hoc Inspection of Three Teachers*

<i>Measures</i>	Response Style	Care (1.00-4.00)	Academic Expectations (1.00-5.00)
Teacher A	Dismissive	3.50	3.26
Teacher B	Dismissive but asserting fairness	2.75	3.00
Teacher C	Engaging	3.34	3.50

*Note. Values are mean of students’ ratings for that particular teacher.*

### **Discussion**

The present study examined the issue of race and teacher/Black student relationships in the classroom. Researchers put forth three hypotheses— the majority of White teachers will have been accused of racial discrimination by their Black students; teachers will have responded in a variety of different ways; teachers who successfully prevented racist accusations or actively intervened (engaged) will have been perceived by students as more authoritative compared to teachers who dismissed the accusation. Findings supported two of the three hypotheses. The majority of teachers (74.1%) were accused of being racist. Teachers' responses were categorized in three ways— one-third dismissing the comment, one-third dismissing the comment but asserting fairness, and one-third engaging the students. Lastly, HLM analysis did not support the hypothesis that teachers' responses were related to the way students perceived the teacher, in the areas of support and structure. Future research is needed to further understand teacher/Black student relationships and the role of race in the classroom.

### **Accusations of Racism in the Classroom**

When asked if they had ever been accused of racism by their students, 74% of the teachers in this study answered affirmatively. One teacher responded: “Yes, by the Black kids.” Another teacher stated, “I had one student say that one day.” While some teachers reported they were not accused of racism, they later gave a situation in which they were confronted with being unfair due to race. One teacher said,

No, no [...] but in seventh period, like the group of guys that are all friends, mostly African Americans. But there's one white boy who's like good friends with them so he's one of them. And one time, like, I don't know, he had gotten in trouble, or, you know, but I said something about the white kid, and they said, “Why, because he's White?”

All of these examples share the common theme whereby the teacher is accused of discrimination based on race.

Previous research confirms the present study's findings that Black adolescents experience racism in today's society (Brown, 2008; Sue, 2010). Martin et al. (2011) found that by the age of 13 the majority of Black youth reported they had suffered some type of racial discrimination. Discrimination was reported in schools as well as in a multitude of other settings such as restaurants, offices, and stores (Feagin, 1991; Solorzano et al., 2000; Thompson & Gregory, 2011). Further research has found that the majority of students, both at the high school and college levels, chose to respond when they experienced racism as opposed to ignore the problem (Swim et al., 2003; Thompson & Gregory, 2011). The present study expanded on this research and specifically demonstrated that Black high school students are confronting their teachers.

### **Teachers' Responses to Racist Accusations**

Teacher responses to racial accusations were grouped in three categories—dismissive, dismissive but claiming fairness, and engaging. In this study equal number of teachers responded in each of the three ways. One way to understand these responses is through the theories of color blindness and multiculturalism, both of which are present in schools (Schofield, 2010). Color-blindness holds that race should not be acknowledged in the classroom or when making decisions (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Multiculturalism puts forth that race should be acknowledged and considered when taking action (Schofield, 2010). This approach urges teachers to bring awareness to race and ethnicity within the classroom.

The first group, dismissive teachers, responded to student accusations by ignoring the comment or by laughing at the student. By not acknowledging the student's allegation, the teacher does not take responsibility for his/her own actions. This may foster feelings within the student that the problem lies with him/her. The response of laughter, possibly even sarcasm, may further cultivate a sense of rejection, inequality, frustration, and anger. The second group of teachers dismissed student accusations giving an explanation as to why they should be viewed as fair. For example, one teacher challenged his/her students by stating, "Okay, in this classroom how many Whites are there? Two? Okay, so what is the percentage that I'm gonna send, if I send someone out? They're gonna be Black or White." Teachers attempted to justify their behavior to the accusers with their background or demographics of the school.

This study demonstrated that 66% of the teachers surveyed responded by dismissing racial allegations in some way. Color-blindness is closely aligned with these two dismissive responses by moving quickly over the accusation and ignoring the issue of race. The goal of color blindness is to protect against the negative effects of racism, however, research shows just the opposite— color-blindness can result in feelings of racism (Schofield, 2010; Stephan & Stephan, 1984). People of color have discussed the need to have their experiences recognized and valued (e.g., Williams, 2011).

The remaining group of teachers (33%) responded by engaging the students in a discussion and acknowledging the student's thoughts and feelings. These teachers seemed interested in the student's perspective and believed it was necessary to take the time to establish this understanding. This engaging response is in line with the theory of multiculturalism as the teachers are promoting a deeper understanding of race-salient

encounters. Ultimately, the goal of multiculturalism is to teach students and teachers the importance of respecting one another's differences (Schofield, 2010).

### **Relationship Between Responses and the Teacher/Black Student Relationship**

Hierarchical Linear Modeling revealed that the teacher's response style did not have a statistically significant relationship with the student's perceived academic expectations (structure) or care (support). However, when including the response type in the statistical model, 33% of the variance for student-perceived care was explained. Although the results were not statistically significant, the predictor explained a sizable portion of the variance for care. It is anticipated that a larger sample size would demonstrate a significant relationship, given the estimates were in the expected positive direction (academic expectations  $\gamma_{01} = .09$ ; care  $\gamma_{01} = .03$ ).

Teachers who had not been accused of racism (i.e., coded as preventing accusations) were perceived by their students as having the highest care ( $M = 3.40$ ) and academic expectations ( $M = 3.61$ ). Although these teachers' care and academic expectation averages were not statistically different from the means of the other three response types, speculation is still warranted given a larger sample size may confirm this trend. "Preventing" teachers may discuss the issue of race frequently and educate their students to respect differences. They may also seek information to better understand students' backgrounds and cultures (support) while driving them academically (structure) (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ullucci, 2011). These two forces, which make up the authoritative approach to teaching, provide for students' social and academic growth (Baumrind, 1991; Pianta et al., 2002; Walker, 2008; Walker, 2009).

Additional findings related to student experiences of structure and support in classrooms are worthy of further discussion. Upon examining the preliminary model (i.e., care and academic expectations without the response predictor), data showed that 89% of the variance was within-student. This demonstrates that although several students shared the same teacher, their experiences of the teacher differed. Along with creating a positive supportive environment in the classroom, there is a need for teachers to work one-on-one with students to build individual relationships (Pianta et al., 2002; Stuhlman et al., 2002). Researchers put forth that teachers are better able to understand student cues through a strong individual relationship, which more readily helps to resolve conflicts.

The between-teacher difference was larger for academic expectations ( $ICC = .11$ ) than for care ( $ICC = .03$ ). Teachers were distinguished from one another when it came to academic expectations. This supports previous research that teachers' expectations of students vary across classrooms (Good & Brophy, 2003; Rubie-Davies, 2006). Students are able to assess teachers' verbal and nonverbal behavior to discern expectations (Babad, 1998). Students can then make decisions regarding which classes require more focus and work. For care, students viewed teachers relatively consistently. One possible explanation is that most of the teachers are supportive. Another possibility is that the student felt a sense of support from the school as a whole, which flowed into each classroom. Research has found that when students view the school as a caring place they in turn perceive their teachers more positively (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study need to be considered to cautiously interpret the data and provide direction for future studies. First, the non-randomly selected sample of both

teachers ( $n = 27$ ) and students ( $n = 40$ ) was small and relatively homogenous. Teachers were selected based on whether or not they taught one of the student participants. All Black students who participated in the study were enrolled in a ninth grade transition program, received discipline referrals, and either a D or an F in at least two core subjects the previous year. In light of the non-significant results for the third hypothesis, a larger sample size may strengthen the existing data. The experiences of Black students, not enrolled in this program for “at-risk” students, and their teachers would provide a greater range of classroom contexts, student level of achievement and behavior. Future research could compare similar classrooms with high discipline referrals to those with relatively low rates.

Another limitation regarding the study is the possibility of student rater bias. Some of the students rated multiple teachers, which led to unaccounted nesting of student ratings. In other words, student ratings of one teacher should not be seen as independent from another teacher, resulting in cross-classified data. Researchers handled this issue by using cross-classified multilevel modeling as the statistical method. Future research would need to account for this complex nesting structure (Hox, 2010).

A richer picture is needed to examine the nuances of racist accusations occurring in the classroom and the impact on teacher/Black student relationships. As such, the type of data collected in the study is the third limitation. Teachers’ report of and response to racist accusations were derived from interviews. Research has shown that due to social pressures individuals may deny racism (Van Dijk, 1992). This could lead to underreporting of confrontations based on racial unfairness. In addition, information was collected during a semi-structured interview in which the issue of race was not the only

topic discussed, thereby limiting the amount and depth of information. Also, retrospective-memory can alter information about events.

The majority of teachers reported they were accused of racism by their students. However, it is unknown as to whether these accusing students were the same as those surveyed. Teachers may have reported confrontation with previous students and have since altered their teaching practices. The lack of classroom observations and in-depth interviews with students leads to uncertainty regarding experiences of race in the classroom and students' relationships with teachers. Hopefully, this study provides a foundation from which to launch future studies investigating racial discrimination and teacher responsiveness in the classroom.

### **Future Directions**

In the post hoc analyses, the examination of three teachers' responses to racist accusations and their teaching style raises specific directions for future research. Of the three teachers, Teacher C (engaging response) had the highest perceived academic expectations. He/she expressed concern and urged the student to understand the situation and express his opinions— "I try to have a conversation with them. [...] We started to get into his perceptions." This may be reflective of a teacher who strives for his/her students to reason beyond the material presented on paper. Engagement in deeper dialogue and critical thinking may be inherent in his/her teaching style. Future research should examine how the teacher's behavior, mannerisms, and communication in the classroom impact the teacher/Black student relationship. Do teachers who engage their students in race-related dialogues also strive for students to have a deeper level of understanding in their coursework (i.e., high academic expectations)?

The teacher who dismissed the accusation but asserted fairness (Teacher B) had the lowest ratings on student perceived care and academic expectations. Teacher B reported that he/she did not take students' comments seriously. He/she responded to the student by providing a reason as to why he/she should not have been viewed as racist. By qualifying his/her words or actions to the student(s), Teacher B may have been defending his/her actions. Gibb (1978) put forth that a defensive communication style is used when an individual identifies a potential threat. He theorized that this style creates a reciprocal pattern whereby other individuals perceive the defensive messages and in turn respond defensively. Those who utilize a defensive approach slowly begin to lose the ability to understand another's perspective (support). For teachers, this form of interaction could be pervasive in his/her teaching style, resulting in the students' lower perception of care and academic expectations, when compared to the other two teachers. Future research should examine the way teachers communicate and interact with students. Specifically, Gibb's defensive communication style should be explored. Does this style manifest in the classroom? Does it only occur when discussing certain topics (i.e., race-based issues) or does it penetrate all aspects of the teaching style?

Teacher A (dismissive response) had the highest perceived care of the three teachers. When asked how he/she responded to the racist accusation Teacher A stated, "I just laugh." Many of the teachers viewed as dismissive used laughter in their response. A well-liked teacher might effectively use humor to diffuse a racist accusation. Moreover, despite a response being coded as dismissive, if the teacher/Black student relationship is characterized as warm and trusting, then humor may be appreciated. In other words, if the teacher has strong relationships with his/her students, then his/her response may be well

received. This theorizing corroborates past research that has emphasized the importance of the quality of the teacher-student relationships over the teachers' specific behavioral intervention with students (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Future research might use a longitudinal design and ask: Does a high quality relationship established in the fall facilitate positive exchanges around racially salient material in the spring—no matter the specific response style of the teacher?

It is important to note that caution should be taken when examining the responses, as these are brief excerpts from only three of the interviews conducted. Research further investigating teacher response styles could be conducted in a variety of ways. Ideally, videotapes or observations could be used and then reviewed by coders. Alternatively, teachers could keep a daily diary in which they record any instances of racial accusations. Reports should include events leading up to the accusation, what the student said, and then how the teacher responded. In addition, students could be interviewed regarding the issue of race and relationships. It would be necessary to obtain as detailed a picture as possible of the dynamics (both spoken and unspoken) in the classroom.

### **Implications for Practice**

Teachers are being accused of discrimination based on race within classrooms. Research has shown that some high school students are experiencing racism and teachers play a role. Racism has moved away from blatant actions (i.e., physical attacks and destruction of property) to more subtle and indirect forms (i.e., being ignored, jokes, and gestures) (Coates, 2008). The latter is referred to as microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Sue (2010) explains that microaggressions are rooted in the customs of everyday life. The perpetrators of these racial slights may be well-intentioned individuals who are not aware

of their actions (see Appendix D for further information). As such, it is important to address with teachers the issue of microaggressions and the potential effect on students (Sue et al., 2009).

Fear, discomfort, and shame are just some of the feelings experienced by teachers when it comes to handling race dynamics (Young, 2003). These emotions may influence a teacher's response to an accusation. The present study demonstrated that teachers reported responding in a variety of ways. What is unknown is the extent to which this response impacts the teacher/Black student relationships. Research, based on focus groups, found that when professors felt comfortable (i.e., addressing the student's concerns, acknowledging the dynamics, and keeping open communication) handling difficult situations, the discussion was seen as beneficial to the learning process (Sue et al., 2009). Whereas, when the professor appeared uncomfortable or ignored the incident, college students felt frustrated and invalidated. School-based training seminars or workshops should address the issue of discrimination and microaggressions so that individuals are prepared to respond in a constructive manner.

Sue et al. (2009) put forth four principles that teachers need to be made aware of. First, teachers should be prepared to handle difficult encounters based on race. Second, teachers need to be aware of their own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. Time should be taken to explore their racial identity. Third, teachers should practice these difficult conversations not only during training or workshops, but also in their everyday life. Lastly, teachers need to understand group processes and how to utilize the group to deal with these situations.

A broader approach to handling differences in the classroom is described by Ladson-Billings and her research on “culturally relevant teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). She argues the need for education to be inserted into the culture of the students, rather than trying to sprinkle components of the students’ culture into the educational curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Effective teachers acknowledge the students’ difficult environments (support) and then push their students to overcome (structure) (Ladson-Billings, 1992). They believe all of their students can succeed and try to identify and utilize the skills and abilities the students possess (structure and support).

Ladson-Billings (1995) outlines three factors essential for culturally relevant teaching. First, students should feel they can succeed academically (structure). This sense of empowerment will then motivate the students to do just that— succeed. Second, students need to maintain their diversity and not feel as though they need to change to fit into their environment (support). Ladson-Billings (1995) points out that teachers should embrace the students’ culture and use it as a means for teaching (support). Third, students need to be able to view the world around them and critically analyze the beliefs and values of society and how they play a part.

In light of the study’s findings and previous research, principals or school administration should hold workshops (i.e., in-service or professional development) through which school personnel are made aware of microaggressions and learn ways to respond (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sue et al., 2009). Based on previous research and the current study’s findings, trainings should cover the following information:

- Teachers may be accused of racial discrimination
- Teachers need to think about ways to respond
- Teachers need to understand their own racial identity and awareness
- Teachers need to learn about group dynamics and how to use the process to foster positive relationships

Training should provide teachers with the opportunity to practice having race-based dialogues, including responding to an accusation of racism. They should also be encouraged to continue practicing outside of the workshop. Overall, time needs to be taken to acknowledge the presence of race dynamics in the classroom and the potential impact on the teacher/Black student relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The present study offered new insights regarding the issue of race in the classroom and the teacher/Black student relationship. The study found that the majority of teachers were accused of racial discrimination by their students. Findings also demonstrated that teachers responded in a variety of ways— dismissing, dismissing but asserting fairness, and engaging. However, data did not support the hypothesis that the type of response was associated with the quality of the teacher/Black student relationship. Future research needs to investigate this hypothesis with a larger sample size and more comprehensive methods (i.e., student interviews, observation, and daily diary).

This study demonstrates that students in the classroom perceive racism. School administrators should talk with teachers about microaggressions as they are subtle and can be unknown to the perpetrator. Teachers, if they are accused, need to be prepared to respond in a way that promotes understanding and deeper relationships. School

workshops can provide teachers with a forum to understand their own identity and practice difficult dialogues. Future research needs to be conducted to further guide these trainings so that teachers feel prepared to handle the powerful issue of race.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A**

## Teacher Interview

Thanks for participating in the interview. We want to hear about your experiences working with former academy students. We also want to hear about your general approaches to discipline, family contact, and consulting with other teachers. We have a 40-minute to 1-hour interview. With your permission, this will be audio recorded and kept confidential.

**The Academy**

1. What are your impressions of the former academy?
2. Is there anything that differentiates former academy students from other students in your class?
3. Do you feel like they were placed in the appropriate level of courses this year?
4. In your opinion, what could help ninth graders with the transition into high school? What about the transition into tenth grade?
5. The academy emphasized team meetings among teachers across subject areas. What kind of collaboration with other teachers do you have?
  - a. Do you consult with other teachers about specific students?
  - b. Is this meeting time scheduled? Do you wish you had more scheduled time to talk with other teachers? What would need to change in order to make this possible?
6. If you could choose between teacher grade level meetings or meeting with teachers across grades, but within your subject area, which would you choose and why?

**Parent Communication**

7. Can you describe your contact with students' parents and guardians?
  - a. What are the reasons you contact home?
  - b. What motivates you to do this?
  - c. How does contacting home affect the way students perceive you?
  - d. How might it positively or negatively affect your relationship with students?
  - e. How do you think it might help or hurt when you get in touch with the students' home?
8. This is a list of the former academy students in your classes. Can you describe a particular interaction with one of these students' parents (in person or on the phone) that went well? Can you describe one that went poorly? Please give the student's name. If not, can you describe a particular interaction with some other student's parent?
9. Do you tend to record your parent contact in SASI? If not, do you record it elsewhere?

**Classroom Discipline**

10. What are some typical discipline problems that arise in your classroom? What are some reasons why such discipline problems come up?
  - a. What is the hardest discipline problem for you to deal with?
11. Do students sometimes complain that things are unfair? What do you think about that?
  - a. How do you handle it?
  - b. Are there things you do to show fairness?

**Defiance**

12. From this list of students, are there particular students who you have found to be defiant, disruptive, or uncooperative? Who are these students? Can you use two adjectives to describe each of the students you mentioned?
  - a. Does his/her behavior change from day to day or stay the same? If behavior changes, what do you think accounts for the change?
13. Do you find that students challenge your authority frequently? In your opinion, why does this happen?
  - a. Do you find that students of different genders, race, or achievement level express defiance differently or more than other groups?
  - b. Why might this be?
14. Have you ever been accused of being racist? If so, how do you handle it?
  - a. Why do you think students might say that?

**Cultural Sensitivity**

15. What does the idea of cultural *sensitivity* mean to you?
16. Can you think of a time when your race worked for you and a time when it worked against you?

**Advice**

17. Recently there have been initiatives to create more mixed ability classes and reduce the number of levels (applied vs. advanced etc.). What are your thoughts on this? How will this help or hurt students with a history of low achievement?
18. If you were talking to a brand new teacher about innovative ways to lower discipline problems and to have a productive class, what would you say?
  - a. Do you struggle with the balance of being friendly but firm?
  - b. How would you recommend balancing that?

**Anything Else?**

19. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Teacher Information (if not already discussed)**

20. Finally, some information about yourself:
  - a. How many years have you been teaching?
  - b. What are the courses you teach now?
  - c. What level are your classes? (e.g., applied, general, advanced?)
  - d. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

## Appendix B

Qualitative Coding Manual, Version 5.0: Understanding teacher perceptions of their approach to student relationships, parent contact, and classroom instruction

### Coding Racist Accusations from Students

#### Definition

This code will examine whether or not teachers have been called racist by current or former students.

#### Coding Scheme

0 = Teacher has not been called racist by a student

1 = Teacher does not say he/she was called racist, but brings up student accusations of being unfair due to students' race

2 = Teacher has been called racist by a student

98 = Never asked the question in the interview or discussed this issue

#### Additional Coding Guidelines

- The teacher transcription will receive a single code.
- A teacher may bring up being called racist and being accused of being unfair due to race. A code of 2 will TRUMP a code of 1.
- The accusation does not have to be made by a current student it could have been made by a former student.
- The teachers are answering the question: "Have you ever been accused of being racist?" However, it does not always have to be when they directly answer this question. This issue can come up in other parts of the interview.

#### Examples of 0's

"No."

#### Examples of 1's

"No, no [...] but in seventh period, like the group of guys that are all friends mostly African Americans, but there's one white boy who's like good friends with them so he's one of them. And one time, like, I don't know he had gotten in trouble, or, you know, but I said something about the white kid, and they said, "Why, because he's White?" and I'm like "That's exactly right."

*The teacher states that she has not been accused of being racist but then describes a situation in which a student accused her of being unfair because of his race.*

**Examples of 2's**

"I had one student umm say that one day."

"Yes by the Black kids."

## Appendix C

Qualitative Coding Manual, Version 5.0: Understanding teacher perceptions of their approach to student relationships, parent contact, and classroom instruction

### Coding Response to Racist Accusations

#### Definition

This code will examine how teachers respond to racist accusations made by their students.

#### Coding Scheme

1 = Teacher dismisses accusation

2 = Teacher dismisses accusation but asserts his/her fairness (is defensive)

3 = Teacher engages the student/s in a dialogue regarding the accusation

4 = Teacher received a 0 on the previous code

98 = Never asked the question in the interview or discussed this issue

#### Additional Coding Guidelines

- A teacher transcript will receive a single code.
- The teachers are answering the question: “Have you ever been accused of being racist?” However, it does not always have to be when they directly answer this question. This issue can come up in other parts of the interview.
- A code of 0 is given when the teacher rationalizes why the student may have said what they said, takes the student’s perspective to see how the student could perceive what they did as being racist, talks to the student to understand where they are coming from, etc.

#### Examples of 1’s

“So they say you hate black kids. I say oh your so wrong I hate you all. (Laugh) your mistaken I hate all of you. And that only cause they wanna play that card, but that I don’t pay that no mind.”

*The teacher dismisses the comment by laughing at the student and by not acknowledging the accusation.*

#### Examples of 2’s

“I said well if I’m racist then how come I am teaching at CHS, which is over what 60% African American, 50% I can’t remember the percentage and I say if I’m racist than how come I am not saying the same thing the person sitting next to you and they’re the same race as you.”

*The teacher dismisses the comment (does not engage the student). In addition, she/he states that she/he could never be racist towards them because she/he teaches at a high school with a large percentage of African American students.*

**Examples of 3's**

“How would I handle that if a white kid accused me of being racist what I would probably say to them would be, actually I just want you to be successful in the classroom and I'm gong to give you what you need to be successful in the classroom. And I'm sorry if you feel if the discipline that you've gotten seems to make you feel that you've been singled out or whatever it is, by very nature of being corrected you have been singled out in that manner, but at the same time I want what's best for you as a student.”

*The teacher engages the students by discussing what she/he was doing and acknowledges the student's feelings and thoughts.*

**Examples of 4's**

*The teacher received a 0 on the previous code, indicating he/she had not been accused of being racist. Teachers who have never been accused may have managed their classroom or interacted with their students in a way that prevents accusations.*

### **Appendix D**

This appendix reviews literature relative to racial group membership, specifically, White racial identity and the Black experience. These two areas provide a larger context for the projected research. People view the world through a variety of lenses, one of which is racial group membership. A White person's status of racial consciousness will determine his/her response to Black individuals. Responses will range from color-blindness (ignoring the issue of race) to multiculturalism (understanding the race of others). A Black individual is likely to encounter racial discrimination in his/her life. Discrimination comes in a variety of forms, ranging from avoidance to physical harm. The victim's responses vary, from suppressing the offense to aggression. Regardless of the severity of the discrimination, the impact is most likely detrimental. The following is a more detailed discussion of White racial identity and the Black experience.

#### **White Racial Identity**

White individuals view the world through the lens of their racial group membership. According to Helms, an individual's response is based on his/her own past experiences regarding race (Helms, 1984)<sup>1</sup>. The individual may be unaware of his/her racial identity or he/she may consciously strive to understand more about other racial groups in an effort to improve their interactions with others (Helms, 1997).

Helms (1997) postulates that an individual is faced with the concept of Whiteness when he/she encounters a Black person. Although a White person might try to ignore this experience he/she must process the situation. Helms separates the way in which one

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<sup>1</sup> References can be found on previous list (pp 42-50).

encounters a person of a different race into two groups—direct experiences and vicarious experiences. Direct experiences are the result of a personal interaction between a White individual and a Black individual. Vicarious awareness occurs when someone else (e.g., family, friends, or media) presents information regarding a Black person. These vicarious factors can alter an individual's perspective, positively or negatively. A White individual's direct experiences may be countered through stereotypes or negative beliefs held by other individuals of influence. Likewise, the person's perspective may be strengthened through vicarious experiences of friends and/or family.

Helms categorized White racial identity into six stages (Helms, 1984; Helms, 1997; Tokar & Swanson, 1991). The first stage is “contact,” when an individual is unaware that he/she sees the world only from the perspective of his/her White culture. He/she is ignorant of the impact of race on Black individuals. The second stage is “disintegration,” which occurs when the White individual begins to acknowledge the existence of his/her racist behaviors. Emotions of anxiety and guilt develop as he/she deals with the remorse over his/her past behavior, current actions, and the fear of criticism as he/she breaks from White racial norms. In the third stage called “Reintegration” the White individual views himself/herself and the White race as superior to the Black race. Emotions can extend to the point of anger. In the fourth stage, “pseudo-independence, the White person is cognitively accepting of Black individuals and attempts to understand interactions between people of different racial groups. He/she also reflects positively on being White. “Immersion-emersion” is the fifth stage in Helms' model. At this point the White individual searches for true information on the implications of his/her own White identity. According to Helms, the highest stage of the

White racial identity developmental model is “autonomy.” A White individual is able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his/her group membership, while valuing others from a different racial group. To develop a positive racial identity and reach this last stage, White individuals must understand who they are, what that means in the larger culture, and then abandon racist beliefs (Helms, 1997). The first three stages (i.e., contact, disintegration, and reintegration) have all been identified by Helms as the phase when one abandons racism (Tokar & Swanson, 1991). The last three stages (i.e., pseudo-independence, immersion-emersion, and autonomy) make up a second phase, whereby White individuals create a more positive racial identity.

Based on the White racial identity developmental model, an individual may progress from stage to stage (Helms, 1997; Tokar & Swanson, 1991). Helms argued that movement towards higher stages is indicative of an individual’s ability to navigate relationships with people of other racial groups. This model assumes that higher stages are related to one’s ability to be aware of his/her self and adapt to new situations. Three hundred and eight White college students were administered the *White Racial Identity Attitude Scale* and the *Personal Orientation Inventory* (measuring a person’s level of self-actualization) (Tokar & Swanson, 1991). Results demonstrated that a higher degree of self-actualization was positively related to higher stages of Helm’s theory on White racial identity. Individuals who valued their own race and the race of others (i.e., autonomy status) were not swayed by the social pressures and norms of being White.

### **Color-Blindness and Multiculturalism**

Two frameworks that White individuals utilize in dealing with the issue of race in schools are color-blindness and multiculturalism (Schofield, 2010). Color-blindness

suggests that decisions are made by overlooking the matter of race. This approach is closely aligned with the contact stage (first stage), from Helms's White racial identity theory. Multiculturalism purports that race be acknowledged and considered when making decisions. This perspective is closely related to the autonomy stage (last stage). Therefore, the White racial identity model can be utilized as a framework for understanding the variations of White teachers' interactions with Black students. The National Center for Education Information found that 84% of teachers are White (NCEI, 2011), as such, the majority of Black students are taught by White teachers.

The color-blind perspective originated in 1896 from Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissenting opinion in the *Plessy versus Ferguson* case (Schofield, 2010). He argued the constitution does not distinguish between classes; rather it states equality for all citizens. "Color-blindness" is the belief that race should not be taken into consideration when formulating decisions or taking action (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Schofield, 2010). Individuals who hold this perspective may view color-blindness as a safeguard against racism.

Schofield (2010) conducted a four-year, longitudinal study at a middle school where color-blindness was the main approach to addressing racism. Observations, interviews, and questionnaires were conducted to assess student and teacher relations. Some individuals were conscious of the presence of Black students. However, there were others who denied being aware of race and the existence of any racial issues between teachers and students. The middle school had a disciplinary gap of four Black students to every one White student. The disproportionate number of disciplined Black students was not acknowledged and therefore not seen as a problem. The curriculum also reflected the

color-blind approach, as it did not incorporate diverse perspectives or racial awareness. During one of the interviews, a White student was shocked to find out that Martin Luther King Jr. was Black. Teachers did not seek out ways to connect the curriculum to the experiences of all students. This put both Black and White students at a disadvantage. For example, when lecturing on Roman social classes a teacher chose not to acknowledge the slave class, for fear of bringing up the issue of slavery.

Schofield (2010) found that teachers were urged to emphasize the unity of all students, overlooking the differences of Black students. The theory of color-blindness purports that utilizing a color-blind approach will reduce discrimination, however research has shown the inverse. Color-blindness actually fosters feelings of racism (Schofield, 2010). Stephan and Stephan (1984) examined a similar notion—the impact of overlooking the accomplishments of minorities. By doing so the likelihood of negative thoughts and feelings regarding race increased.

The researcher of another study examining a predominately White elementary school found prejudice to be ignored in race-related incidents (Lewis, 2001). Many school personnel believed it was beneficial that children did not acknowledge racial differences between White and Black students. One new Black student was viewed as validating her adjustment problems because she was Black in a predominately White school. The school responded by instructing one of the only Black teachers to intervene and explain to the new Black student that her race did not play a role in her daily school experiences.

In contrast to the color-blindness approach, multiculturalism suggests that race be recognized and incorporated when making decisions and policies (Schofield, 2010). One

of the ancient Greek philosophers, Aristotle, believed the key to a healthy society was to understand differences and then allow those differences to influence decisions-making (i.e., the law) (Gurin, Peng, Lopez, & Nagda, 1999). Over time many generations have chosen to ignore this perspective. However, research has proven that the multicultural approach is beneficial, especially when working with individuals who are diverse (Gurin et al., 1999).

The multicultural approach to race has been successfully applied in the school setting. Teachers have been encouraged to bring awareness to issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. By doing so the students have been taught to respect each other's differences. Ullucci (2011) conducted a case study of White teachers regarding the issue of race. Some teachers in her study acknowledged that racism was an issue in their school. These teachers incorporated material relevant to the students' race into the curriculum. Unfortunately, this approach to race is often met with resistance in schools (Lewis, 2001). Upon asking about multiculturalism in an elementary school, individuals felt they were adequately addressing this need by hosting Black History Month. Parents made comments suggesting that the topic of race be avoided.

Plaut, Thomas, and Goren (2009) analyzed racial beliefs of individuals who were deemed in the majority and minority groups. Racial viewpoints of white individuals, ranging from color-blindness to multiculturalism, were found to have an impact on minority groups. Over 3,500 individuals were surveyed to assess the impact of their racial viewpoint on co-workers' psychological engagement at work. White individuals' emphasis on multicultural values positively predicted minorities' psychological engagement towards work. White individuals' endorsement of a color-blind approach

negatively predicted minorities' psychological engagement towards work. Individuals in minority groups felt further marginalized when differences were ignored.

Richeson and Nussbaum (2004) conducted a study in which multiculturalism and color-blindness were compared within an educational setting. Fifty-two White college students were randomly assigned to read a one-page document that supported either color-blindness or multiculturalism. The students were then asked to provide statements as to how that approach addressed interethnic issues. Finally, the students completed the *Implicit Association Test*, which examined a person's automatic attitudes about race. Results showed that students who read the color-blind statement demonstrated greater explicit racial bias as opposed to those reading the multicultural statement. This suggests that a multicultural approach to race relations is more likely to reduce racial bias.

The theory of multiculturalism needs to be expanded upon to more effectively address the issue of racism in society. Lewis (2001) pointed out that the term "multiculturalism" could be misunderstood and misused. In some schools students from the majority group have been taught that they need to be sensitive towards others' differences. Another widely utilized strategy has been to teach minority students to integrate into the majority school culture. These actions are insufficient in solving race problems in schools. Lewis (2001) argues for "anti-racist education" or "critical multiculturalism." These concepts strive to hold the institutions accountable for the perpetuation of race problems. Outcomes should be scrutinized to ensure that Black students are able to access the same opportunities available to White students and achieve their full potential.

Wolsko, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2000) also argued for a special kind of multiculturalism. This form focuses on the importance of individuals maintaining healthy ethnic/racial identities. Commonalities should be celebrated between different groups. By approaching the issue of race through this multiculturalism lens, researchers believe that individuals of different races can work together to achieve a common goal.

### **Summary**

White racial identity provides a framework from which responses to race can be understood. At the initial stage (contact) an individual ignores the issue of race. This can be most closely aligned with the color-blind approach. Individuals who view the world through this lens choose not to see color and refuse to recognize racial differences and commonalities when interacting with others. The final stage of the White racial identity spectrum (autonomy) describes individuals who acknowledge and value differences in others. This is similar to the multicultural approach which argues that the issue of race be considered in decision-making. The debate regarding color-blindness and multiculturalism comes to the forefront in the education arena. Teachers may take different approaches to handling the issue of race in their classroom.

### **Black Experiences of Perceived Racism**

Black individuals experience race-based discrimination in society, regardless of age (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Martin et al., 2011). However, the way in which a person is discriminated against may vary (Feagin, 1991; Sue et al., 2007). Black individuals may experience blatant unfairness, such as harassment and physical assaults. Other ways might be more discrete. For example, a Black individual is denied a job position or a student is disciplined more harshly. When faced with racial discrimination a

Black person may choose whether or not to respond. Research has found that type of discrimination can be indicative of the response (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). The impact of racial discrimination is powerful regardless of the form. Black individuals may experience depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and increased anxiety (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Wills, & Brody 2004; Simons et al., 2002). Black students may be negatively affected by racism in the schools, resulting in a lack of engagement and persistence to academic tasks (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006).

### **Forms of Racism**

In the 1950s and 1960s racism was palpable in the everyday culture of America (i.e., Jim Crow laws). Black children were prohibited from attending White schools, Black adults were banned from eating at certain restaurants, and all Black individuals were required to use a separate restroom. Unfortunately, even decades after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act, racism still occurs. Black students may be disciplined more harshly or denied participation in school activities. Black adults may receive poor service at a store or might be ignored when expressing their opinions. Although the form has changed, racism is still present in America.

Feagin (1991) categorized forms of discrimination into five groups. The first is “avoidance actions.” An example is when a White couple chooses to sit on the opposite side of the movie theatre away from a Black couple. The second is “rejection actions.” For example, when a White sales clerk refuses to help a Black woman in a shopping store. Third is “verbal attacks,” which could be in the form of name-calling or other derogatory, racially laden insults. The fourth category is “physical threats and harassment

by police officers.” The fifth category is “physical attacks” from White individuals.

Feagin (1991) places these types along a continuum and notes that the less obvious forms of racism are becoming more prevalent.

Scholars have examined racism further and created a distinction between overt and covert discrimination. One assumption underlies both notions of discrimination—one group of individuals is ‘better’ or ‘more advanced’ than the other. Overt racism can be defined as blatant actions or attitudes directed from one person to another of a different skin color with the intention of harm (Tougas et al., 2004; Ture & Hamilton, 1992). Examples of this could range from destruction of property to ending someone’s life. Covert racism is subtle and usually does not come across as discriminatory from the perspective of bystanders (Coates, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ture & Hamilton, 1992). Coates (2008) identifies covert racism as a social construct that is entrenched in society’s central tenants. This form of racism has always been present, however it has become more acknowledged with the decrease of its counterpart— overt racism. Covert racism might appear less harmful, but it can constrain individuals from achieving their potential or prohibit them from functioning in society (Coates, 2008).

Microaggressions, similar to covert racism, are racist insults directed toward individuals based on differences of skin color (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggressions are brief and occur in the routines of daily life. These racial slights can take the form of verbal comments (e.g., jokes), behaviors (e.g., body language), or environmental stimuli (e.g., commercials, billboards, and movies). Although microaggressions may seem insignificant, the impact can be detrimental (Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Sue (2010) identified three subgroups of microaggressions— microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassault is defined as hidden behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal) carried out with the purpose of harming another individual. An example of this would be a salesperson helping a White individual rather than a Black person who was there first. Microinsult is defined as comments or gestures, which are rude, tactless, and uncaring regarding the individual's race. The perpetrator of this type tends to be unaware of the underlying message. An example of a microinsult would be if a Black adolescent was asked, "How did you make the sports team?" The assumption being that the individual could not make the team based on his/her ability alone. Microinvalidation is defined as any communication that undermines the individual's thoughts and/or feelings. A White individual saying "I don't see color" is an example, as it negates the Black individual's identity.

The media can be a carrier for both covert racism and microaggressions. Racial profiling can occur in the news media as members of minority groups are often portrayed as dangerous (Coates, 2008). Black individuals can be seen as the problem, not the solution. Coates (2008) argues that the messages conveyed through the media preserve stereotypes and racial inequality. The media's portrayal of Black individuals in a negative light has been found to contribute to White people's perceptions of Blacks (Fujioka, 2005).

In sum, racism can occur in a variety of forms, ranging from more blatant, direct attacks to hidden, subliminal messages. Microaggressions occur in the everyday. Although the perpetrator may not intend to be discriminatory, that can very well be the message conveyed. The media also contributes to the sustaining presence of racism in

today's culture. Black individuals may experience one or all of these forms. It is important to understand the conduits of racism to more fully comprehend its' power.

### **Responses to Racism**

In the past, research has focused on racism from the perspective of the perpetrator (Swim et al., 2003). Very little was known about the recipient of discrimination.

However, over the past two decades a shift has occurred. Researchers are examining a variety of areas related to the individual's experiences of racism, one of which is the recipient's response. Black individuals may respond in many different ways or they may not respond at all (Swim et al., 2003).

Feagin (1991) put forth a variety of ways in which Black individuals react. Some might use physical or verbal opposition, while others might avoid or retreat to a safer ground. Along with this may come a certain degree of acceptance. Coping mechanisms may be put to use and even lawsuits may be filed. Socioeconomic status may influence the type of response. Middle-class Black individuals may assess the situation to first determine whether or not it was racially laden. After doing so they may use a variety of resources when reacting (e.g., money for a law suit), some of which are not available to those who are of a lower socio-economic status.

Swim et al. (2003) asked Black students to keep a daily diary regarding any race-related event they experienced over a two-week period. After recording the experience students answered a variety of related questions (i.e., "how they felt during the incident," "how they felt after the incident," and "the likelihood that the person intended to behave in a prejudiced manner"). Results demonstrated that on average, students perceived one discriminatory experience every other week. Many of the incidents were brief and not

blatantly racist. This study supported the notion of microaggressions. Further examination showed that Black students felt more uneasy and vulnerable around a White individual after a racist incident. Feelings of discomfort even lingered after the incident occurred.

Black students responded to the perceived racist event in different ways— 42% did so in a direct manner, 21% in an indirect manner, and 33% did not respond at all (Swim et al., 2003). The target of the racist incident impacted the way in which the student responded. Black students were more likely to react in a direct manner when they perceived that they were the intended targets of the discrimination. Over half of the college students reported telling another individual (i.e., family or friends) about the incident. This provided evidence for ‘support seeking’ as a response.

Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) conducted focus groups with Black students who were attending universities where the majority of the student body was White. Results indicated that students experienced racial discrimination within the classrooms. Black students perceived their professors as treating them differently when compared to White students. They believed they were not encouraged and challenged academically to the same degree. In addition, Black students felt ignored and that their needs or goals were not valued. Students reported racial discrimination at places outside of the classrooms, such as the cafeteria, dorm rooms, or hallways. All of these perceptions and feelings led to Black students doubting their abilities. Some individuals responded by withdrawing from their classes, changing majors, and dropping out of school entirely. “Counter-spaces” was another form of response created by Black student organizations. Counter-spaces, both academic and social in nature, were designed to develop a positive

racial climate for Black students. Black students have the opportunity to express their thoughts and emotions regarding discrimination and receive support from peers.

Literature regarding the way adolescents may respond to racism highlights a construct called “dissembling.” Dissembling is a mechanism utilized by a person when he/she is being treated unjustly due to racial discrimination (Feldman, Devin-Sheehan, & Allen, 1978). The basic idea is that a person suppresses what he/she is feeling and thinking. The individual thereby does not respond, but rather hides his/her emotions. Research is limited regarding how often this concept is used and whether or not it is beneficial (Curtis, 2009). Authors (Curtis, 2009) propose that dissembling incorporates two strategies to coping identified by Nicolas et al. (2008). The first is withdrawal and the second is resistance. Individuals who dissemble and withdraw will hide their feelings and then avoid dealing with the issue. Those who dissemble and resist will hold back their unbridled reaction at first but later respond to the discrimination in an effective manner.

In sum, these studies point out the range of responses that Black individuals may use when perceiving racism. Physical confrontation, verbal remarks, or lawsuits may be utilized (Feagin, 1991). Or, the person may take a very different approach of dissembling and quietly acquiesce (Curtis, 2009; Feldman et al., 1978). The type of response may be dependent on the intended target of the discrimination (Swim et al., 2003). Students may seek some type of support, whether in the form of a formalized group or simply talking to another individual (Solórzano et al., 2000; Swim et al., 2003).

**Impact of Racism**

Black adolescents can be negatively impacted by racial discrimination. Fisher et al. (2000) conducted a study of 177 adolescents with a variety of racial identifications (i.e., African American, Hispanic, and Chinese). Adolescents were administered the *Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index* (ADDI), which assesses an individual's level of distress following racial incidents. Results indicated that perceived discrimination could be a major stressor for minority adolescents. An association was found between higher levels of racial distress due to discrimination and decreased levels of self-esteem. Students reported that they were not invited to participate in peer led activities due to the color of their skin. Distress from peer discrimination was also correlated with lower self-esteem.

Simons et al. (2002) examined data collected in a larger study of Black families to understand the relationship between discrimination and depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were measured using *The Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children*. Most of the children in the study indicated that they had been racially discriminated against—67% stated they had been slighted or disrespected, 46% reported being called a racially derogatory name, and 33% indicated they were prohibited from participating in an event due to their race. A significant positive correlation was found between depressive symptoms and perceived discrimination for children. The risk for developing depressive symptoms increased when the child lived in a highly prejudiced environment. Researchers theorized that a child who lived in this type of environment was more likely to witness other individuals' encounters with discrimination. Children may be vulnerable when merely observing racist acts.

Another study showed that individuals who reported experiencing more instances of discrimination, compared with those who have not, indicated higher levels of depression and anxiety (Gibbons et al., 2004). Researchers also found that parents who saw their child being treated differently due to race experienced more distress. The study went on to examine substance use and found a positive relationship with discrimination in children. The more distress experienced from discrimination the more likely a child was to use substances.

The impact of discrimination has been found to permeate the educational realm as well. A group of Black students enrolled in a ninth grade transition program were surveyed for the first two years of high school (Thompson & Gregory, 2011). Perceived discrimination (during the ninth grade) was related to lower levels of engagement (in tenth grade). Racial discrimination can impact student's academic achievement. Thompson and Gregory (2011) hypothesize that when a student's trust is negatively impacted in ninth grade he/she may not see the importance of working hard on his/her education for future years. Academic identification was found to be a protective factor for the potential impact of racial discrimination. Black students, deemed as low achievers, engaged in their schoolwork more if they valued education, regardless of the potential impact of racism.

The impact of discrimination on academic achievement was examined in the lives of 548 African American students (grades 7-10) (Neblett et al., 2006). Students who reported experiencing racial discrimination were found to be less persistent and curious when it came to academically challenging assignments/material. In addition, students who indicated experiencing more instances of discrimination, along with messages of

racial pride (e.g. “[Parents] Encouraged you to dress in ways that show pride in your Black/African heritage”), reported lower grades, than students who, along with their parents, exhibited more racial socialization behaviors (i.e., engaging in activities related to their African American culture). Researchers hypothesized that messages of racial pride may cause the student to feel stigmatized in the classroom, which can then lead to disengagement.

In light of recent research, it is important to understand the role that perceived discrimination plays in the life of Black adolescents. Distress brought on due to unfair treatment regarding race is related to lower levels of engagement in the classroom, a decrease in grades, and less determination to complete challenging academic tasks (Neblett, et al., 2006; Thompson & Gregory, 2011). Black adolescents may also experience depressive symptomatology and anxiety upon encountering racist incidents (Fisher et al., 2000; Gibbons et al., 2004; Simons et al., 2002).