

Teachers report weaker relationships with students of color, children of immigrants

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The relationship between teachers and students is a critical factor for academic success. However, a new study by NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development finds that teachers report weaker relationships with children of immigrants and adolescents of color.

"Teachers' relationships are hugely important for all students, but particularly so for groups that are marginalized. Yet, the students who could most benefit from relationships with their teachers are the ones that have the least access to strong [teacher-student](#) relationships," said Hua-Yu Sebastian Cherng, assistant professor of international education at NYU Steinhardt and author of the study, published online in the *American Journal of Education*.

Since 2014, public school classrooms have reflected a demographic shift in the United States, with the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students surpassing the number of White students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Students of color now make up the majority of students, but inequities between students of different backgrounds have continued to plague the education system.

Existing research highlights the importance of teacher-student relationships on academic indicators such as test scores, classroom engagement, and interest in learning. Teachers not only play a pivotal role in developing students' knowledge and skills, but can also serve as role models.

But research also presents a mixed view of student-teacher relationships with students of color and immigrant youth. Though these groups of youth may be especially reliant upon their teachers, many also report discriminatory experiences or few interactions with staff.

In the current study, Cherng studied two aspects of teacher-student relationships: whether teachers form equally strong relationships with students from different backgrounds and whether these relationships shape students' academic expectations for themselves.

Using the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, a nationally

representative sample of [high school students](#) and their teachers, Cherng analyzed teacher surveys for English and math high school teachers. Relationships were measured three ways: how familiar a teacher reported being with a student, whether the teacher perceived a student to be passive or withdrawn, and engagement in conversation with students outside the classroom. These surveys were linked with academic and demographic data for their students.

For the analysis examining teacher-student personal relationships and later academic outcomes, a measure of student academic expectations was used, which gauged whether a student expected to go to and complete college.

Cherng found that not all groups of students enjoy strong teacher-student relationships; patterns of relationships varied by subject taught, race/ethnicity, and whether students were immigrants, children of immigrants, or third-generation and beyond. For instance, English teachers reported weaker relationships with Asian American students and math teachers with their Latino students compared to third-generation White students.

"Different patterns in student-teacher relationships among English and math teachers suggest that distinct stereotypes may shape relationships," Cherng said.

In contrast to these patterns of disadvantage, English teachers reported stronger relationships with third-generation Black students compared to third-generation White students. This may reflect teachers' concerted efforts to close the achievement gap between White and Black students.

The study also highlights the important role of strong teacher-student relationships in fostering student academic expectations: early teacher-student relationships impact later student academic expectations. In

other words, teacher-student relationships can inspire students to have high academic ambitions.

"This study demonstrates that teacher-student relationships are a valuable source of social capital in that they help shape students' academic expectations. However, these relationships are not a resource that is equally available to all students," Cherng said. "In contrast to the idea that racial discrimination is an intentional disparagement, the findings may reflect a subtler form of racial discrimination: teachers may be unfamiliar with the lives of all of their students, and this lack of knowledge may hinder relationships."

Cherng notes that the study supports the necessity of rigorous teacher training in cultural awareness in order to overcome biases and improve relationships between teachers and students.

Provided by New York University

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