

# Research finds teachers perceive more conflict with Black boys and the least with white girls

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A team of researchers led by a Virginia Commonwealth University professor found that teachers, regardless of race, perceived the most

conflict with Black boys and the least conflict with white girls in their classrooms. Teachers also perceived their relationships with Black boys as increasing in conflict at higher rates than with white and female children across kindergarten through second grade, according to findings published in the *Journal of School Psychology*.

The study analyzed nationally representative survey data from 9,190 participants—teachers who evaluated relationships with their students in terms of perceived closeness and perceived [conflict](#) toward the end of the school year in the spring semester—in the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics' Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011.

The findings indicated that teachers rated their level of perceived conflict with Black boys as nearly 40% higher in kindergarten than their level of perceived conflict with white girls. The gap increased from kindergarten to second grade: Teachers' perceptions of conflict with white girls, white boys and Black girls stayed nearly flat, but their perceptions of conflict with Black boys increased by 8%.

Kathleen Rudasill, Ph.D., interim dean of VCU's School of Education and a professor in its Department of Foundations of Education, led the study, serving as first and corresponding author on the paper.

"We were surprised at the disparities in [teacher](#) perceptions of their relationships with Black and white boys and girls at the start of formal school," Rudasill said. "This is the point in the school experience where teacher-child relationships are typically at their most positive, so the fact that Black students, Black boys in particular, are starting off at such a disadvantage in terms of teacher perceptions was discouraging."

Rudasill said the study isn't about individual teachers' bias; it instead uncovers how systemic racism and white privilege in society unfold in

the U.S. educational system.

"Although some studies have examined child and teacher race as variables in teachers' perceptions of teacher-child relationship quality, there has not been a focus on systemic racism as potentially impacting teacher perceptions," Rudasill said.

"Given the historic and current educational disparities between Black and white students' opportunities and outcomes—and the critical role that teacher-child relationships have in predicting students' academic and social success in school—it is important to examine the extent to which teachers' perceptions of their [relationship](#) with students differ according to child race."

While teachers' ratings of closeness with all students decreased from kindergarten to second grade, their level of closeness with white girls remained highest, followed by Black girls, white boys and finally Black boys.

Based on previous studies, the research team expected that white teachers would perceive their relationships with white children more positively than with Black children. However, when they controlled for teacher race, Rudasill said, the research team did not find evidence that teacher-child relationships differed based on teacher-child racial match.

"We found evidence that teacher perceptions of their relationships with Black and white children in early elementary U.S. classrooms systematically advantaged white children and demonstrated an anti-Black racial bias representative of the structural and systemic racism endemic to the U.S.," Rudasill and her co-authors wrote in the paper.

Rudasill and her team have identified pathways for professional learning for current and future teachers to address the effects of systemic racism

and white privilege in the U.S.

"Teachers are a mostly white—approximately 80%—workforce. As such, they have lived and been educated in primarily segregated environments, with very little exposure to individuals or cultures beyond that of the dominant, European American culture," Rudasill said. "If pre-service and in-service teachers are aware of the potential biases they have owing to systemic racism and if they are provided with opportunities to learn how to check their potential biases, racial disparities can be reduced."

Opportunities include educating teachers in anti-racism, with attention to the current and historical forces that situate institutions, policies, practices and beliefs in white supremacy; implementing cultural competency interventions, including "self-checks" for bias; and cultural competency skill-building for teachers that "place an emphasis on diversity, tolerance and respect for others, knowledge of cultural perceptions, examination of personal suppositions and biases, and the development of strategies for removing racial barriers," Rudasill and her co-authors wrote.

The study also looked at teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students based on their families' socioeconomic status. Higher socioeconomic status was related to "more positive teacher perceptions of relationships, with the exception of how teachers perceived conflict with Black boys in kindergarten," Rudasill said. "Teachers' perceptions of higher rates of conflict decreased for Black boys from families with higher socioeconomic status from kindergarten through [second grade](#), but their perceptions of conflict did not decrease for Black boys from families with lower socioeconomic status."

"Because we used a large, nationally representative dataset and controlled for the effects of family socioeconomic status, we were able

to isolate the role of racism and sexism in [teachers'](#) perceptions of their relationships with students in the early elementary grades," Rudasill said.

**More information:** Kathleen Moritz Rudasill et al, White privilege and teacher perceptions of teacher-child relationship quality, *Journal of School Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jsp.2023.04.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2023.04.002)

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