TEACHER ROLE IN ABSENTEEISM: DISCRIMINATION, IDENTITY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY – A PERSON-IN-ENVIRONMENT ANALYSIS

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AS PARENTS PLAY an integral role in students' absenteeism, so do teachers. A large part of the day, for students, is spent in schools and with teachers. In this chapter, the focus is on discrimination in teacher-student interactions and its direct influence on minority students regarding their school attendance problems. The data used, literature findings, results, and recommendations are shared from a person-in-environment perspective. The authors recommend exploring discrimination in teacher-student interactions as one mechanism to respond to absenteeism.

Person-in-Environment Perspective

The Person-in-Environment (PIE) perspective examines the relationship between the individual and multiple systems (Kondrat, 2013). Using psychodynamic approaches which expand the scope of PIE, researchers have explored power differentials, race, and other aspects of oppression

(Lee & Rasmussen, 2019). School is one of the most influential systems within which students interact. It provides a context for their physical and their developmental growth (i.e. their maturity and their identity, respectively), their peer interactions, their intelligence, and their abilities. The school context is where students receive substantive experience of socialization, learning to become productive members of society. It is also where they solidify their identity and frame their self-worth. This identity, from a PIE perspective, may directly influence a student's decision to attend school or not. School attendance infers the internalized capacity to perform in a student role, while agency – individual meaning-making and norms for interaction – influence implicit motivations for school attendance (Nasir, 2011). Therefore, students' appraisal of their interactions may increase school bonds and encourage decisions to attend. If the appraisal fails to verify internalized self-meanings and instead engender negative emotions, it can lead to lower school bonds, and impede decisions to attend school (Stets, Burke & Savage, 2018).

Absenteeism is an umbrella term for broad school attendance problems. Absenteeism, a student goal-directed action, exposes interruptions in development and meaning-making, where students determine whether they are perceived as capable learners (identities) within their immediate learning ecology (e.g., in teacher-student or student-to-student interactions). Defining absenteeism in this way recognizes the intersectionality of the problem, and that one cannot exist without the other. This, just as one cannot separate who one is from being black or white, while being boy or girl. Grounded in identity theories, this chapter draws on two current studies (Kyere, Karikari, & Teegen, 2020; Kyere, Hong, & Gentle-Genitty, forthcoming) and underscores the critical role the teacher-student interactions play in the decision to attend school.

Study Data

Study #1. In Kyere, Karikari, & Teegen (2020) a sample was drawn from the National Survey of American Life, Adolescent Supplement

(NASL-A) 2001–2004, African American only (n=810, mean age=13). Using cross-sectional, nationally representative data, relating to black youth, and applying hierarchical regression modelling, the associations among teacher discrimination, parental and peer emotional support, and youth school bonding regarding absenteeism were examined. An integrated theoretical framework – the ecological perspective, an integrative model for developmental competencies in minority children, social support, and critical race theory – guided the study. The goal was to examine the independent effects of teacher discrimination, parental (mother and father) support, and peer supports, on youth's school bonding. Given knowledge about teacher discrimination and associated psychosocial and academic effects on students, an objective was to study whether parental and peer supports mediate the effect of teacher discrimination on black students' school bonding. This study was driven by a limited focus, as it is evidenced in current and past studies, on discrimination and student-teacher interactions around school disengagement and absenteeism. The hypothetical question was "Would the supports offered to students at home and from peers – without direct school intervention with regards to teacher discrimination – be enough to respond to the negative impacts of teacher discrimination? In the model building, school bonding was regressed due to teacher discrimination at the baseline. Next, mother's and father's emotional support, and peer emotional supports, were added to the model, to estimate the unique effects of these constructs on school bonding, absent of the covariates. Finally, family income, neighborhood safety, Grade Point Average (GPA), and gender were added, as control variables within the full model, to examine the simultaneous effects of all predictors on school bonding.

The findings suggest that 33 percent of the sampled population reported experiencing teacher discrimination. The regression analyses revealed – independent of the covariates and the various predictors – that teacher discrimination was negatively associated with students' school bonding. In contrast, parental and peer supports were positively associated with school bonding. In the final model, although the effects of parental and peer support significantly reduced the influence of

teacher discrimination, when controlling for family income, GPA, and neighborhood safety, these supports did little to mediate or eliminate the impacts of teacher discrimination. The conclusion was that support from parents and peers confer positive effects on black students' school bonding, and may mitigate some negative influences of teacher discrimination. However, these supports, even if always present, were not enough to foster a higher level of school bonding in black students, in the presence of teacher discrimination. Offering multilevel student interventions, inclusive of teacher-student relationships, may increase black students' school bonding and school attendance.

Study #2. The current study (Kyere, Hong, & Gentle-Genitty, forthcoming) draws on prior research associated with race, gender, and class, in teacher discrimination and students' psychosocial and academic outcomes. It applies an intersectional lens to absenteeism, with an aim to investigate its influences on students' academic performance. Structural equation modelling, using a cross-sectional sample from Maryland and the Adolescent Development in Context Study (MADICS, N=704, mean age=14.30, 65 % black; 35% white), formed the analysis. Forty-seven percent of the participants were male, and the majority had family incomes below $49,999 (49%), followed by those with income levels of $50,000 to $74,999 (33.9%), and levels that were higher than $75,000 (17%). Despite MADICS being a longitudinal dataset, collected during 1991–2000, only one wave was used in this study. The hypotheses were (a) that race, gender, and income have independent, collective, and direct associations to discrimination in teacher-student interactions, academic self-efficacy, absenteeism, and performance, and (b) that race, gender, and income have indirect associations to absenteeism and performance, via teacher discrimination and academic self-efficacy. The analysis revealed that race and gender negatively affected GPA. Findings showed that black and male students were more likely to have lower GPA scores. Additionally, income, inversely related to race, was directly associated with absences. Students with higher-income levels were less likely to display absenteeism problems as compared to lower-income level students.

Findings suggest discrimination in teacher-student interactions may respond to racial economic equality, which might aid in mitigating contributing factors to absenteeism and academic performance problems.

Synthesizing Findings and Existing Literature

The extant literature and current findings confirm absenteeism as a multi-dimensional problem requiring a multi-dimensional solution. The influence of parents, their income level, the school, environment, and other factors have been examined in the literature, but have looked at the intersection of these variables, with a focus on teachers and their perceptions. As shown in this chapter, the use of the person-in-environment perspective, and theories of identity, provide us with evidence that practitioners, researchers, as well as policymakers must consider what happens in the learning environment. Teacher-student interactions are critical intervention points for preventing absenteeism and increasing attendance. The various forms of capital at play in school – economic, social, and cultural capital – implicitly and explicitly communicate competence, exposure, and legitimacy (Diamond & Lewis, 2019). These forms of capital, and the way in which they are activated in school, establish students' social position as well as that of their families (Marks & Garcia Coll, 2018). These social positions are structural constructions and function through social relationships. Many give access to educational resources in ways that produce unequal experiences, thereby directly influencing school bonding and subsequent premature or permanent exits from school (Superville, 2019), suggesting that learning is a socio-cultural and psychological process, and one that is intimately linked to identity (Nasir, 2011). Identity entails a process of exposing a set of system controls intended to manage meanings attributed to the self in social roles and contexts. Anytime an identity is activated, a feedback loop linking identity (*any of four components: self-meanings, reflected appraisal, comparison of environment and standard, and output vs. outcome of meaningful behavior*) is established (Burke, 1991).

These loops are evident in deficit narratives. Deficit-oriented narra-

tives are rooted in the social identities created by society. Many operate in schools – a microcosm of the larger society – and serve to undermine educators' ability to look deeper into students for their internalized standard about themselves as educable (Diamond & Lewis, 2019; Superville, 2019). Deficit narratives show up through lower teacher expectations in students of color and in those from lower-income backgrounds (Diamond & Lewis, 2019), as well as in those with disability and various other statuses. Indeed, there is a culturally accepted narrative about females in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) (McGuire et al., 2020). Further, African Americans and students with disabilities are stereotyped as intellectually inferior, violent, and emotionally disordered (Theoharis, & Causton, 2016). Children who are less economically privileged – the majority of whom are often racial-ethnic minorities – are perceived as rude, disruptive, and as having parents who are less interested in their education (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Additionally, exclusionary discipline practices – expulsion and suspension in school segregation (Theoharis & Causton, 2016) and harsh grading are other ways deficit narratives rooted in that initiate discrimination occur in proximal learning contexts. These practices contradict internalized meanings of students as capable learners. They generate distressful emotions and influence responses, like school avoidance (Lindström et al., 2014), resulting in absenteeism.

Future Studies

While acknowledging a multi-dimensional context to absenteeism, students' reasons for absence are goal-directed and fueled by a perceived threat to identity. When the person-in-environment construct and identity theories are injected, with particular attention to the proximal learning context, teacher-student interactions are shown to be critical points for intervention. Such contexts are influenced by intersecting social identity markers (e.g., *race, gender, class, immigration, disability*, and *sexual orientation*) which organize students' experiences differently. Such differing experiences can threaten identities and influence levels

of absenteeism and school engagement. In sum, teacher-student interactional contexts and discrimination, based on intersecting social identities, contribute to absenteeism and school attendance problems and must be researched further.

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School Attendance Problems

A Research Update and Where to Go

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2021