

FEATURED ARTICLE

Adolescent Trust in Teachers: Implications for Behavior in the High School Classroom

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Abstract. Cooperative behavior is important for well-functioning high school classrooms in which students trust their teachers and actively engage in academic tasks. Yet, discipline referrals for disruption and defiance are all too common and can result in lost instructional time and increased teacher stress. As such, more needs to be understood about trusting and cooperative interactions in classrooms. This study examined teachers' relational approach to discipline as a predictor of high school students' behavior and their trust in teacher authority. Findings from interviews and surveys with 32 teachers and 32 discipline-referred students supported a mediational model; the association between a relational approach to discipline and cooperative or defiant behavior was mediated by adolescents' perceptions of their teachers as trustworthy authority figures. Teachers may earn the trust and cooperation of students if they use relationship building to prevent discipline problems. Implications for school psychologists' consultation with teachers and the racial discipline gap are discussed.

A majority of referrals for disciplinary problems originate in the classroom (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) and are issued for defiance and disruption (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Yet, high school teachers vary significantly in the number of referrals they give for discipline problems (Gregory, Nygreen, & Moran, 2006), which suggests that referrals for defiance are

more likely to occur in some classrooms than in others. Little is understood about the processes between teachers and students that helps explain these trends in high school discipline. The current study identified teachers' approach to discipline in high school classrooms and how such an approach relates to the behavior of adolescents who have been issued referrals for defiance.

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The Importance of Reducing Discipline Referrals

Suspended students are more likely to have low achievement (Arcia, 2006), be retained (Civil Rights Project, 2000), receive future suspensions (Skiba & Noam, 2002), and experience dissatisfaction and alienation (Lovey, Docking, & Evans, 1994). Moreover, suspended students are at risk for long-term negative outcomes. They are more likely to drop out of school, become involved in the juvenile justice system, and later be incarcerated (Baker et al., 2001; Civil Rights Project, 2000). Given these negative consequences of school suspension, it is important to identify teacher approaches that are linked with students' cooperative behavior.

Suspended students are an opportune group to understand why cooperation and defiance occur in high school classrooms. The tendency for students to receive repeated suspensions suggests that they are at risk for negative interactions with school staff (Atkins, McKay, & Frazier, 2002). In fact, in-school and out-of-school suspensions are commonly used for offenses such as disrespect, disobedience, and lack of cooperation (Diem, 1988; Morrison & Skiba, 2001). Given the challenges suspended students bring to classrooms, identifying factors linked with their cooperation provides a stringent test for promising classroom practices. If teachers are able to elicit the cooperation of students with past suspensions, then they will likely be skilled at eliciting cooperation with their more typically developing students.

The importance of teachers eliciting cooperation with students is underscored by a persistent trend in disciplinary referrals: Black students receive a disproportionate number of discipline referrals compared to their enrollment (APA [American Psychological Association] Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Skiba & Rausch, 2006), a trend that has been documented since the 1970s (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Black children and adolescents are more likely than other racial groups to be perceived as defiant (Ferguson, 2000; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) and rule breaking (Wentzel, 2002). Thus,

teacher and student relationships may be a particularly problematic area for Black adolescents. Given these trends, understanding how teachers successfully exercise their authority and elicit cooperation in their classrooms becomes paramount to reduce the racial discipline gap.

Authority in the Classroom

Teachers were once thought of as moral authorities who upheld cultural standards and societal norms (Durkheim, 1956). In the past 25 years, however, blanket assumptions that students perceive all teachers as legitimate authority figures have been challenged (Arum, 2003; Hurn, 1985; Pace & Hemmings, 2007). Hurn (1985) writes, "Schools attempt to convince students, though not always successfully, that the rules and controls to which they are subjected and the often tedious or onerous assignments that they are given represent the legitimate exercise of their authority rather than the arbitrary use of power" (p. 36). Sociologists have long asserted that authority is negotiated in social relationships and within the context of legitimacy (Weber, 1947). Legitimate authority figures are seen as having the *right* to exercise their power and authority; they are also more likely to elicit cooperation from subordinates. Social psychological research provides evidence that adults who see police and judges as legitimate authority figures are more likely to voluntarily comply with them (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & DeGoey, 1995). Although not yet applied to adolescents, adult research on perceptions of legitimacy and authority holds promise for understanding cooperation with or resistance to teachers in the high school classroom.

Educational research on student resistance sheds light on how some students may actively decide to resist or cooperate with school rules (e.g., Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Willis's (1981) classic study examined the aggressive and defiant behavior of a group of working-class English "lads." According to Willis, the lads recognized that the school system was not in place for their success and thus they disre-

garded its rules. In a more recent interview study of 16 suspended adolescents, Sheets (1996) found that students were not passive in response to teachers, but reported conscious decisions to ignore or resist teachers' directives. Smetana and Bitz (1996) found a trend that belief in the legitimacy of teachers' authority over conventional rules was associated with lower rates of misbehavior. Taken together, these studies suggest that adolescent perceptions of teachers' use of authority may offer a much needed lens through which to examine students' contingent cooperation with teacher authority.

Teacher Approaches to Discipline

Studies have documented a range of strategies teachers use to elicit cooperation and diffuse conflict with students. In her ethnography of a ninth-grade English class, Pace (2006) observed the teacher struggling between the need to engage students in their learning and the need to maintain order. Pace concludes that the teacher practiced a variety of strategies to reduce disciplinary problems, including alternating between pressure and politeness and maintaining boundaries. Identifying isolated disciplinary practices may miss patterns of behavior and a more general emotional climate between teachers and their students (Pianta, 1999). More important for cooperation than the actual disciplinary practice in the classroom (e.g., time-out, notes home, referral to the office) may be whether the teacher prevents violations of classroom rules via establishing a strong relationship. A discipline encounter represents only one socializing moment between an adult and a student (Baumrind, 1997). How the event unfolds may reflect the embeddedness of the event in a relationship between the student and the teacher (Pianta, 2006). As Laupa, Turiel, and Cowan (1995) have suggested, adolescents' rationale for consciously deciding whether to obey commands may be dependent on the quality of the relationship with that authority figure.

Teachers vary in their philosophies about the best way to exercise authority and

maintain order in the classroom (for a review, see Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). A traditional or custodial approach relies on the belief in teachers as "in loco parentis" (Hoy & Jalovick, 1979; Metz, 1978). Teachers act as parents in their absence and thus expect de facto compliance. In contrast, a behavioral approach emphasizes the use of positive reinforcement to strengthen cooperative behavior (Lewis, Newcomer, Trussell, & Richter, 2006). This approach is widely used in the School-wide Positive Behavioral Support program. Although the School-wide Positive Behavioral Support has been found to reduce office referrals in elementary schools (e.g., Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998) and has shown some initial promise in an urban high school (Bohanon et al., 2006), rigorous research comparing the developmental appropriateness of the approach for young children versus adolescents has not been conducted. At the high school level, a focus on contingencies for behavior may not address adolescents' affiliative needs for connection with adults (Darling, Hamilton, & Hames Shaver, 2003). It may be the case that a behavioral approach is enhanced by teachers' demonstration of care and attention to students' individual needs (Noddings, 1992). Such an approach can be considered a "relational approach." Similar to a humanistic perspective (Hoy & Jalovick, 1979), a relational approach to behavior management includes connecting with students about their lives and being available to their emotional needs (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). That said, empirical research on the association between a relational approach and student behavior in the high school classroom is lacking.

The Need for Earned Trust

A relational approach may earn student cooperation via students' impressions of their teachers as trustworthy and legitimate authority figures. Student trust in teacher authority has received little attention, notwithstanding the theoretical and empirical focus on trust between school staff and school administration (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) and teachers and parents (Adams & Christenson,

2000). Bryk and Schneider (2002) recently examined what they call “relational trust” among teachers and their principals, colleagues, and parents at the elementary school level. They argue that schools are comprised of a complex web of social exchanges with mutual dependencies among school constituencies. They operationalized relational trust through a scale tapping into respect, personal regard, and trust among teachers, parents, and administrators. They found that elementary schools with higher relational trust were more likely to achieve successful organizational reform as measured through gains in math and reading achievement. Their findings are similar to another study that took into account demographic differences between schools and found that elementary schools with higher faculty trust had higher student achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Although scholars have discussed the importance of trust between teachers and students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), empirical examinations are lacking.

Tyler and DeGoey’s (1995) research on adults’ views towards authority provides direction for operationalizing teacher–student trust in the domain of authority. Tyler and DeGoey (1995) argue legitimate authority is made up of perceptions of fairness, a willingness to accept an authority’s decision, and an obligation to follow the authority’s rules. A more recent study found that in a random sample of over 1,500 adults who had recent experiences with legal authority, those who trusted the authority and felt treated fairly were more likely to say they voluntarily complied (De Cremer & Tyler, 2007). Trust in the domain of discipline, as it is conceptualized for this study, is comprised of students’ perceptions of teachers’ fair application of power and their beliefs that they should follow and respect teachers’ requests.

Current Study

The current study addresses several gaps in our understanding about how teachers successfully elicit cooperation with students who have received disciplinary referrals. Research

with adult samples suggests that trust in authority is related to cooperation (Tyler & DeGoey, 1995) and more well-functioning teacher–principal relations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). However, no research has explored whether trust in teacher authority is associated with defiance and cooperation in the high school classroom. Moreover, research has yet to identify the disciplinary approach that is associated with student trust. A promising disciplinary strategy is one that focuses on building relationships with students to prevent and diffuse disciplinary interactions (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). In the current study, we asked the following: Is a relational approach to discipline associated with students’ impressions of teachers as trustworthy in their use of authority? Does trust in teachers mediate the association between the relational approach to discipline and student behavior? It was expected that teachers who emphasize getting to know students as their primary approach to classroom management will be experienced by students as trustworthy in their use of authority. Students’ perceptions of trust will then help explain why students are less defiant and more cooperative with teachers who have a relational approach to discipline as compared to teachers who do not have this approach.

Method

Participants and Setting

Student participants. The study involved 32 high school students who were referred to an in-school suspension program for offenses related to defiance of teacher authority. On-campus suspension was for students with less severe offenses than off-campus suspension. The student sample consisted of 91% Black students ($n = 29$) and 9% from other racial and ethnic groups ($n = 3$). Males made up 60% ($n = 19$) of the sample. Ninth- ($n = 12$) and 10th-graders ($n = 10$) were 69% of the sample, with 11th- ($n = 6$) and 12th- ($n = 4$) graders comprising the rest of the sample. The students were drawn from a large urban high school with a diverse student enrollment of 2,882 students. During March and April of

2003, researchers visited an on-campus suspension program and described the study to students who were issued a defiance referral from at least one teacher. Overall, 53 students were asked to participate. Given the high truancy rates and low parental supervision of suspended students (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003), the return rate of parent-signed consent forms (62%) was about what might be expected with this at-risk group. The sample was not significantly different from the racial composition, gender, or grade level of the population of 442 students who received at least one defiance-related referral in the 2002–2003 school year.

Teacher participants. Thirty-two high school teachers were included in the analyses. The teacher sample was 63% White ($n = 20$) and 22% Black ($n = 7$); 15% were from other ethnicities ($n = 5$). Fifty-nine percent ($n = 19$) of teachers were female. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 40 years of teaching, with an average of 12 years ($SD = 11$). An innovative sampling procedure was needed to select a diverse range of teachers for the suspended students given that, on average, the high school students had about six teachers each. An interest in identifying the teacher characteristics related to student defiance required the selection of the referring teachers. Thus, for all the students, the teacher who sent the student out of class for the most recent defiance-related referral (herein called the *referring teacher*) was asked to participate. In addition, a comparison group of teachers who had not referred the students was needed. Thus, each student nominated the instructor with whom he or she got along with the best (herein called the *nominated teacher*). A referring and nominated teacher for each student was asked to fill out surveys and complete an interview. Referring and nominated teachers were not aware of the selection criteria for their inclusion in the study.

Because of the overlapping student schedules in high school, it was not surprising that some students nominated the same teachers and some students had the same referring teachers. Thus, complex nesting occurred in

the data. Because nonindependence of the data violates a fundamental assumption needed to conduct regression analyses (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992), to remove the nonindependence of the data, teachers or students with nested data were randomly selected to be included in the regression analyses as follows: First, non-nested data were identified. Twenty-six of the 42 teachers (59%) were rated by only one student. These teachers and students were all included in the regression analyses. Eleven of the remaining teachers were rated by two students, three teachers were rated by four students, and one teacher was rated by five students. A student rater for each teacher was randomly selected until all but one of the students had been selected as a rater. This student rated the same teachers as two other students and was not randomly selected. He was excluded from analyses. Of the 32 teachers included in the analyses, 18 were nominated teachers and 14 were referring teachers.

Teacher Measures

Teachers completed a survey on student behavior and a semistructured 40-min interview. The interviewers asked teachers to describe typical discipline problems and how they addressed rule infractions. Questions included the following: “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?” “What are some typical discipline problems that arise in your classroom, and what are some reasons why such discipline problems come up?” “What do you do to address a challenge to your authority?” All interviews were transcribed.

Disciplinary approach. The two authors used the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach to qualitative data analysis to identify patterns in the teachers’ interviews through an interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. For data reduction, the authors each read all the teacher transcripts and independently noted the theme of a relational approach to discipline. Then, each author displayed se-

lected passages from transcripts to illustrate a relational approach. Using the display, the authors developed a definition of a relational approach to discipline as a teacher's emphasis on connection and personal relationships with students, which the teacher views as a means to student cooperation. Generally, these teachers approach students as individuals and attempt to learn something about them that is nonacademic in nature. They report that such an approach is useful in eliciting cooperation and diffusing conflict. For example, a teacher coded as having a relationship-building approach might report that she or he recognizes the importance of a particular family member to a student and deliberately asks about that family member's welfare in an effort to connect to the student. Such connection would be seen by the teacher as a way to build a relationship with the student, and, in turn, would result in the student's cooperation with the classroom rules, norms, and tasks. Using the agreed-upon definition of a relational approach to discipline, the authors developed a manual to facilitate reliable coding of the transcripts.

Blinded to the selection criteria of the teachers for inclusion in the study (nominated and referring criteria discussed earlier), three graduate student coders were trained using the coding manual. The manual included teacher quotes to illustrate examples and nonexamples of a relational approach to discipline. Coders were given four sample quotes to practice coding and their responses were discussed to ensure they were accurately interpreting teacher responses. Consensus was reached on all practice quotes. Then, the graduate students individually coded each transcript and sought any evidence that a teacher held a relational approach to discipline. Each teacher was given a "1" or "0" for the presence or absence of such an approach. All transcripts were coded three times. For most teachers, all three coders agreed on their designation of the presence or absence of a relational approach. The interrater reliability was measured by Cohen's kappa coefficients, which ranged from .40 to .50, with a mean of .46 (Cicchetti & Sparrow, 1981; Landis & Koch, 1977). Pairs of coders agreed between 66% and 71% of the time, with a mean agreement of 71%. When dis-

agreements arose, codes were discussed until consensus was achieved. Although the kappa coefficients generally were in the marginal range, they indicated a level of agreement that was clearly above chance levels.

Teacher ratings of student behavior.

Teachers rated the behavior of the defiance-referred students on a defiance subscale of the Swanson, Nolan, and Pelham measure (SNAP-IV), which has 8 items (Swanson, 1992). The teachers rated the frequency with which a student, for instance, "defies adult request" and "does things deliberately that annoy other people" (study's $\alpha = .93$). In previous research, the SNAP-IV differentiated symptoms of oppositionality from behaviors related to inattention and impulsivity (Swanson, Kraemer, & Hinshaw, 2001).

Teachers also completed a measure of student cooperation on a 4-point scale (Wellborn, 1991), in which they rated 10 items such as "This student works only as hard as necessary to get by" and "This student concentrates on doing his/her work in my class" (study's $\alpha = .88$). In past research, the scale has been found to have good split-half reliability (.82) and has been significantly associated with student-reported teacher characteristics (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

Student Measures

Student survey scales are described in the following paragraphs along with the internal consistency of the scale items as found in this study.

Student trust in teacher authority.

Items from Tyler and Degoey's (1995) scale measuring beliefs in government authority were adapted to reference teacher authority. In their study of legitimacy of authority, Tyler and Degoey (1995) found that their scale of trust in authority was related to higher self-restraint during a shortage of resources. In this manner, trust was related to collective cooperation. Another study used the adapted trust scale on surveys with over 6,000 ninth-graders and found that students in smaller schools had greater trust in their teachers' authority (Cor-

nell, Gregory, Fan, & Sheras, 2007). Cornell and colleagues (2007) also found that the scale had an adequate Cronbach's alpha of .75. Two of the eight items on the scale were "I can trust the way this teacher uses his or her power and authority" and "My classmates and I should obey this teacher even if it goes against what we want to do." The scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) and had a high level of internal consistency (study's $\alpha = .91$).

Student ratings of their own behavior. Students rated their own defiance and cooperation in the nominated and referring classrooms. The Defiance Scale has 5 items and has been found to have a high Cronbach's alpha (Midgley et al., 2000). Ryan and Patrick (2000) found that eighth-graders' social environment in the classroom was related to this measure of disruptive behavior. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .91. Students rated items such as "I sometimes don't follow my teacher's directions during class" and "I sometimes annoy my teacher during class" from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).

Students reported their cooperation on a 10-item scale, which has been found to have good internal consistency with an alpha of .81 and to be related to the quality of teacher-student interactions (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The 4-point scale ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*very true*) and included items such as "When I'm in this class, I listen very carefully" and "I work as hard as I can" (study's $\alpha = .84$).

Data Analytic Plan

As set forth by Baron and Kenny (1986), a four-step data analytic procedure with multiple regression was used to test for mediation. The first step was to test for a direct effect between a relational approach to discipline and positive student behavior (e.g., low defiance and high cooperation). The second step was to seek support for a significant relationship between a relational approach and trust in teacher authority (the hypothesized mediating variable). The third step was to test for trust in teacher authority as a predictor of positive

student behavior. Finally, after these relationships had been established, the fourth step was to test for full mediation with both trust and relational approach as predictors of positive student behavior. For mediation to be found, the effect of a relational approach on behavior, when the mediator of trust was also in the model, would no longer be a significant predictor of positive student behavior. These four steps were repeated for student-reported and teacher-reported defiance and cooperation as dependent variables.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Seventeen of the teachers (53%) were coded as using a relational approach to discipline and 15 teachers (47%) were coded as not using this approach to discipline. Fifteen of the 17 teachers (88%) with a relational approach had been selected for the study as nominated teachers, teachers with whom the student felt he or she got along with the most. Only 2 of the 17 teachers (12%) with a relational approach had been selected for the study as referring teachers, teachers who had issued a referral to a participating student.

A series of sample quotes from teachers was illustrative of the quality of a relational approach to discipline. A teacher commented on the need for a relational approach to discipline: "... I have a hard time thinking ... so specifically in terms of classroom management just because I feel so much of it is based on the effect of the relationship of teacher and student and just kind of seeing them as human beings." Two teachers spoke about their success at eliciting cooperation from two of their Black students who were perceived by other teachers as defiant. One teacher said, "If he feels like a teacher cares about him and wants the best for him, then he's going to respond to them," and another teacher said, "The one thing that seems to mean the most to her is my affection and my caring about her as a person."

Teachers also talked about efforts they made to connect with their students. One teacher said, "I chat with her about her friends. ... She is transgendered ... so we

Table 1
Descriptive Analysis

Variable	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	α
Student defiant behavior					
Student report	2.20	1.17	1.10	4.80	.91
Teacher report	2.10	0.91	1.00	4.00	.93
Student cooperation					
Student report	3.16	0.58	2.10	4.00	.84
Teacher report	2.10	0.76	1.10	3.70	.88
Student trust in teacher authority	2.86	0.71	1.50	3.88	.91

have a lot of talks about that—around her gender identity—so . . . I try to let her know that I appreciate where she is coming from.” Another teacher commented about reaching out to students and being responsive to their emotional needs as a way of diffusing conflict. To one student, he said, “Hey, what’s up? You know, I noticed you haven’t been yourself lately.” The teacher talked about how this allowed the student to open up and tell him about her distress over her parents’ divorce. The teacher further remarked on how this event helped explain this student’s misbehavior: “You know it’s something else completely—it has nothing to do with the class at the moment.”

The means, standard deviations, and ranges of teacher- and student-reported behavior are presented in Table 1. All of these variables were normally distributed. Pearson’s correlations among all scales are shown in Table 2. Teacher and student reports of defiance were significantly correlated ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), as were their reports of cooperation ($r = .52$, $p < .01$). As might be expected, higher cooperation was associated with lower defiance in both teacher reports ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$) and student self-reports ($r = -.71$, $p < .001$).

Regression Analyses

Tests for mediation were conducted using multiple regression. Standardized betas are reported to allow for comparison across variables (Figures 1–3). Following the first step to

test for mediation, it was found that a relational approach to discipline was significantly related to student-reported defiance ($\beta = -.45$, $p = .01$, $R^2 = .20$) and cooperation ($\beta = .48$, $p = .005$, $R^2 = .23$). Similarly, such an approach was significantly related to teacher-reported defiance ($\beta = -.40$, $p = .02$, $R^2 = .16$). However, this approach was not significantly related to teacher-reported cooperation ($\beta = .17$, $p = \text{ns}$, $R^2 = .03$), and therefore no further analyses with this dependent variable were conducted.

Analyses predicting students’ reports of their defiant and cooperative behavior supported the mediational hypotheses. Figure 1 shows that a relational approach to discipline was significantly predictive of student trust in teacher authority (Pathway A), and student trust was significantly predictive of student-reported defiance (Pathway B). When relational approach and student trust were entered together in a model, relational approach was no longer a significant predictor of student-reported defiant behavior (Pathway C). Figure 2 shows a similar pattern of results. These analyses provide support for trust as a mediator, helping to explain how a relational approach to discipline is linked to low student-reported defiant behavior and high cooperative behavior.

Regression analyses of teachers’ perceptions of student defiant behavior corroborated findings based on student-reported defiant behavior. Figure 3 depicts mediational analyses using teacher-reported defiant behavior as the

Table 2
Intercorrelations Among Student and Teacher Factors

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Relational approach to discipline	—	.49**	-.40*	.17	-.45*	.48**
2. Trust in teacher authority		—	-.59**	.39*	-.58**	.62***
3. Teacher-reported defiance			—	-.47**	.46**	-.43*
4. Teacher-reported cooperation				—	-.42*	.52**
5. Student-reported defiance					—	-.71***
6. Student-reported cooperation						—

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

outcome. When trust and relational approach were entered together in a model predicting defiance, the relational approach was no longer significant (Pathway C).

Discussion

Results showed that the association between teachers' relational approach to discipline and low student defiance was mediated by students' perceptions of teacher trustworthiness. In other words, teachers who reported that they used a relational approach were more likely to have students who exhibited lower defiant behavior than those teachers who did not report using such an approach. This significant association between a relational ap-

proach and low defiant behavior was explained by student trust in teacher authority. The results are particularly striking, as they were found with a group of suspended students and were replicated when using both student and teacher reports of defiant behavior. In addition, the study found that students saw themselves as cooperative—engaged with the course material and activities—in classes with teachers who focused on building relationships to reduce discipline problems. Again, the link between the discipline approach and student-reported cooperation with the classroom tasks was mediated through their trust in the teacher authority. Although causation is impossible to claim given the

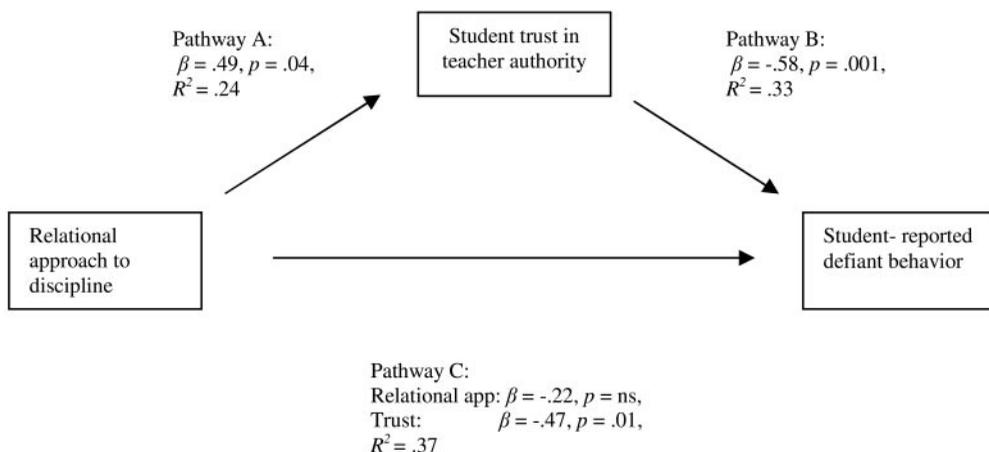


Figure 1. Mediational model of student-reported defiant behavior.

correlational nature of the data, these findings suggest that students may be sensing their teachers' relational approach and experiencing their use of authority as trustworthy and legitimate, which may be linked to their receptiveness to teacher rules and requests.

Teacher Self-Reported Approaches to Discipline

The study showed that a relational approach to discipline can be identified in teachers' discussions of discipline in their classrooms. Teachers discussed attempts to connect with students and get to know them personally. These relationship-oriented teachers were intentional about building emotional connections with students. By doing so, they hoped to elicit cooperative behavior from their students and reduce conflict with them. Teacher-purported beliefs have not always been found to link with their actual practices in the classroom (Fang, 1996). Thus, it is striking that we were able to find a significant association between a discipline approach, derived from a transcribed teacher interview, and student behavior as reported by both students and teachers. This suggests that teacher beliefs about discipline may be detectable in how they interact with students.

Relationship Building in the Classroom

Teachers who described the importance of relationship building for eliciting student

cooperation were more likely to have students who reported trust in their use of authority. Having trust in a teacher may be particularly important when students interpret ambiguous teacher cues. It is well established that when adolescents read hostile intent into another's actions, they are more likely to react aggressively (e.g., Dodge, Laird, Lochman, & Zelli, 2002). Cautiously speculating on a chain of events between teachers and students, it may be the case that with a trusting relationship, students may give teachers the benefit of the doubt when interpreting a teacher's behavior and offer the teacher a blanket respect, which then bolsters the students' commitment to the rules, norms, and tasks of the classroom.

Additional explanations about why a relational approach to discipline was associated with low defiant behavior may be related to teachers having the socioemotional capital to both successfully prevent conflict and intervene when rule infractions occur. In other words, as prevention, teachers may use their knowledge of students' emotional cues to reengage students and keep them on track. Early detection of student disengagement with minimal disruption to the instruction is considered one of the hallmarks of good classroom management (Jones & Jones, 2007). Moreover, when conflict occurs, knowing what causes individual students to become more reactive may help teachers individually tailor strate-

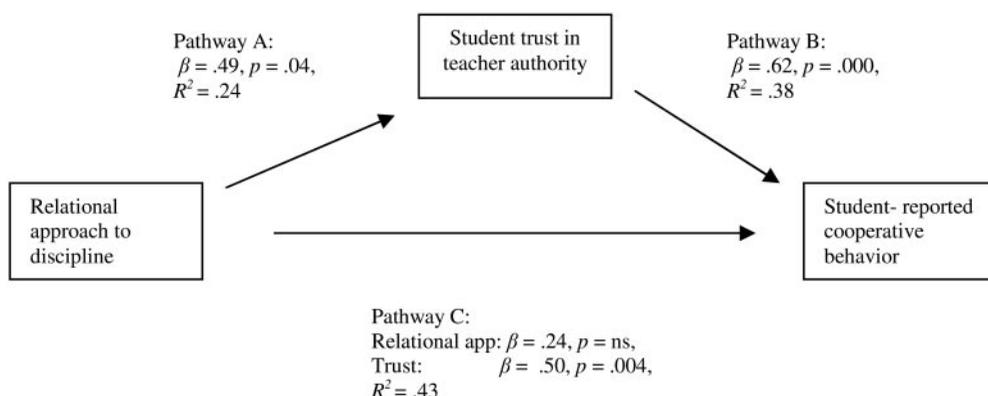


Figure 2. Mediation model of student-reported cooperative behavior.

gies that help students become emotionally regulated and constructively solve the conflict.

Increasingly, there is recognition that student cooperation and acceptance of teacher authority is a bidirectional negotiation set within the context of a relationship (Bingham, 2004). The relational aspect of cooperation deserves greater attention. That said, the relational approach does not preclude teachers' use of positive reinforcement, differentiated instruction, or engaging academic material, which were disciplinary approaches discussed by some of the teachers in this study. For example, one teacher, who did not talk about using a relational approach, commented, "I have a little system telling the student, [behavior] does affect your grade. So they can bring their grade up or down based on their behavior." Other teachers who did not discuss using a relational approach emphasized classroom organizational strategies to maintain discipline. These teachers placed an importance on implementing routines, effective transitions, and clear agendas to elicit cooperation from students. Classroom management research, mostly conducted at the elementary level, has established that on-task classrooms are led by teachers who consistently reinforce positive behavior (Landrum & Kauffman, 2006) and have minimal disruptions in their instruction (Kounin, 1970). Future research might identify the added value of a relational approach

when teachers also use pedagogical techniques and behavioral principles to strengthen positive behavior with adolescents.

Narrowing the Discipline Gap

This study's finding has implications for the promise of a relational approach in narrowing the racial discipline gap. Such promise will need to be tested in future research that compares the effects of a relational approach across racial groups. That said, it may be the case that for Black students, particularly those with histories of disciplinary referrals, a connected relationship with a teacher is especially important in reducing negative disciplinary encounters, compared to White and Asian students, many of whom may assume the best intentions of their teachers (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Some evidence points to the protective role of strong teacher–student relationships for Black students. Meehan, Hughes, and Cavell (2003) found that positive teacher–student relationships measured during second grade served a compensatory role for Black children already at risk for later aggressive behavior. More specifically, they found that for Black children, the strength of positive relationships had a stronger effect in predicting lower aggressive behavior a year later compared to White children. A similar protective effect may occur during adolescence, but additional research is needed to compare multiple racial

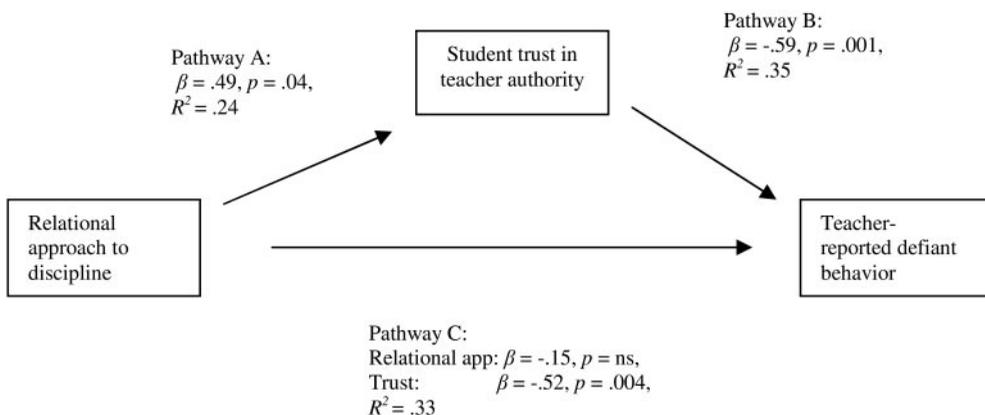


Figure 3. Mediation model of teacher-reported defiant behavior.

groups with a range of economic backgrounds, achievement levels, and disciplinary records.

Getting to know individual students as an approach to discipline may also be part of what has been called “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2006), which is theorized to lower cultural discontinuity between teachers and students. More specifically, relationship building may earn the trust of students, who are socially distanced from their teachers in terms of race and social class. A relational approach may also facilitate culturally relevant discipline (Gregory & Mosely, 2004), in which teachers use an ecological lens to understand why an individual student is reacting against the norms and rules in the classroom. Getting to know students better may help teachers understand the range of reasons why a Black student may break the rules, including his or her reactions to perceived unfairness and discrimination. This understanding is particularly important given that scholars hypothesize that those who have experienced exclusion and greater restrictions on their freedom are particularly sensitive to concerns about fairness (Killen & Stangor, 2001; Turiel, 2005).

Limitations

This study has some noteworthy limitations that offer directions for future research on teachers’ disciplinary approaches in the classroom. Teacher behavior was not measured by classroom observations. Teachers’ own perspectives about how they approached their students and addressed misbehavior were coded on interview transcripts. That said, findings were in the expected direction. Confirmed by both teacher and student reports, student behavior differed in classrooms with teachers who either did or did not mention a relational approach to discipline. As such, the study’s inclusion of multiple informants is a noteworthy strength; however, future research should include observational methodology. Observations of high school teachers could differentiate teachers’ general style of interaction, their specific discipline practices, and students’ reactions to such practices. This type of research

would inform classroom management and consultation practice in high schools.

Next, the sample is relatively small and may not adequately reflect the effects of a relational approach on behavior in the classroom. We found that the mediational model did not hold for teachers’ reports of cooperation. On the one hand, it may be the case that a relational approach is more predictive of general compliance with teachers’ authority as opposed to active engagement in academic tasks, as was measured by the teacher-reported cooperation scale used in this study. Active engagement in academic tasks may be more related to other factors such as quality of instruction. On the other hand, with a larger sample, the relationship between a relational approach and teacher-reported cooperation may have been detected. Moreover, a larger sample may have allowed for an investigation into the benefits of match or mismatch of teachers and students along racial and ethnic characteristics. It has been theorized that match on teacher and student race and ethnicity may strengthen student and teacher relationships through shared knowledge of cultural and family background, enhanced communication, accurate appraisals of behavior, and provision of role models (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 1995; Saft & Pianta, 2001). Given the mixed findings related to the benefits of racial and ethnic matching (Bahr, Fuchs, Stecker, & Fuchs, 1991; Zimmerman, Khoury, Vega, Gil, & Warheit, 1995), future research should investigate whether such matching may facilitate stronger teacher–student relationships, enhance student trust and cooperation, and lower discipline referrals.

The study had a relatively homogenous sample of Black students who had been issued disciplinary referrals for defiance. The degree to which these findings are specific to Black students, in general, or referred Black students, in particular, cannot be ascertained given the composition of the sample. It may be the case that trust in teacher authority has heightened importance for students who have had negative experiences of being disciplined in school. Given that disciplined-referred students, overall, have lower grades than nonre-

ferred students (Arcia, 2006), referred students may place less emphasis on achievement-oriented reasons to cooperate in the classroom (e.g., concerns for grades, desire to learn) and instead place more emphasis on the relational climate. Testing this speculation in future research would require comparison groups across referred and nonreferred students.

The study's implications for the racial discipline gap are limited by the lack of racial comparison groups. Whether trust is especially salient for Black students compared to other racial groups would need to be tested across different racial groups. It may be the case that trust in teacher authority is important for the cooperation of all adolescents, reflecting the developmental needs of adolescents for shared authority and greater autonomy in decision making (Deutsch, 2005; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Finally, given the correlational nature of the data, it is impossible to determine the directionality of the relationships between a relational approach, trust, and student behavior. Negative behavior might drive how the teacher approaches the student. This may be the case for a subgroup of children who exhibit persistently oppositional behavior. Across multiple studies, the prevalence estimates of children with oppositional defiant disorder has a median of 3.2% (Lahey, Miller, Gordon, & Riley, 1999). For this small subgroup of students, defiance of teacher authority may be demonstrated across classrooms and not dependent on the teachers' relational approach to discipline or their trust in the teachers' authority. Future research should statistically control for a student's general defiant behavioral patterns. A prospective study might also examine the sequence of how a relational approach is demonstrated, trust is established, and behavior is exhibited within the first weeks of a high school class (Evertson & Emmer, 1982).

Implications for School Psychologists

The results suggest that teachers who consider relationships with students important for their classroom discipline are more likely to have greater trust and cooperation from

students who have a history of disciplinary infractions. As school psychologists increase their consultative role in schools (Reschly, 2000), they will be called on to enhance teachers' capacity to build positive and supportive relationships with students. They might consider that teachers' relational skills with students may serve, ultimately, a preventive function in terms of classroom management. As such, consultation with teachers should target increasing teachers' attunement to students so that students feel understood and establish greater trust in their teachers. Such a consultative approach is consistent with current ecological models of school consultation (Zins & Erchul, 2002). These models call on consultants to assist teachers in conceptualizing a wide range of factors that may be contributing to students' behaviors. As teachers develop greater connection with students, they are likely to better perceive the ecology of the classroom and larger environment that may be contributing to an adolescent's difficulties. Moreover, these supportive relationships are likely to prove beneficial to the student. Even one supportive relationship with an adult at school can have significant positive effects on a student's school functioning (Murray & Malmgren, 2005), and teachers who show sensitivity, empathy, and praise are most likely to establish strong relationships with students (Rey, Smith, Yoon, Somers, & Barnett, 2007).

The findings offer a new understanding of the importance of teacher-reported disciplinary approaches for teacher trust held by adolescents who are at risk for negative disciplinary trajectories. Teachers' emphasis on relationship building to prevent or diffuse disciplinary problems appears to be well received by students. With the teachers who used a relational approach, students perceived trustworthy use of teacher authority. In this study, this approach appeared to pay off for teachers when they were met with low defiance and high cooperation. The findings suggest a promising direction for intervention to reduce the racial gap in disciplinary referrals. Strengthening teacher relationships with their Black adolescents may set the stage for trust in their authority, and as a consequence lower

negative interactions and exclusion from classrooms because of disciplinary referrals.

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APPENDIX

Scales

Relational Trust

Four-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4).

1. It is sometimes justified to disobey this teacher.^a
2. It is important for my classmates and me to learn when to question this teacher's authority.^a
3. My classmates and I should obey this teacher even if it goes against what we want to do.
4. Respect for this teacher's authority is important for me and my classmates to have.
5. This teacher can be trusted to make good decisions for everyone in class.
6. The teacher's classroom rules work well for everyone.
7. I can trust the way this teacher uses his or her power and authority.
8. I do what this teacher asks me to do, even if I don't want to do it.

Student-Reported Defiance

Five-point scale from *not at all true* (1) to *very true* (5).

1. I sometimes annoy my teacher during class.
2. I sometimes get into trouble with my teacher during class.
3. I sometimes behave in a way during class that annoys my teacher.
4. I sometimes don't follow my teacher's directions during class.
5. I sometimes disturb the lesson that is going on in class.

Student-Reported Cooperation

Four-point scale from *not at all true* (1) to *very true* (4).

1. I try hard to do well in this class.
2. In this class, I work as hard as I can.
3. When I'm in this class, I participate in class discussions.
4. I pay attention in this class.
5. When I'm in this class, I listen very carefully.
6. When I'm in this class, I just *act* like I'm working.^a

7. I don't try very hard in this class.^a
8. In this class, I do just enough to get by.^a
9. When I'm in this class, I think about other things.^a
10. When I'm in this class, my mind wanders.^a

Teacher-Reported Defiance

Four-point scale from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (4).

1. Loses temper?
2. Argues with adults?
3. Actively defies or refuses adult requests or rules?
4. Does things deliberately that annoy other people?
5. Blames others for his or her mistakes or misbehavior?
6. Is touchy or easily annoyed by others?
7. Is angry and resentful?
8. Is spiteful and vindictive?

Teacher-Reported Cooperation

Four-point scale from *not very characteristic of this student* (1) to *very characteristic of this student* (4).

1. In my class, this student fights me at every turn.^a
2. In my class, this student pays attention.
3. This student doesn't try very hard.^a
4. In my class, this student pays attention only to topics or activities that interest him/her.^a
5. This student works only as hard as necessary to get by.^a
6. This student concentrates on doing his/her work in my class.
7. This student does the best s/he can in my class.
8. This student only pays attention to subjects that interest him/her.^a
9. This student does more than is required of him/her.
10. This student works hard in my class.

Note: The superscript "a" denotes that the item was reverse scored.