Humanizing Student–Teacher Relationships for Black Children: Implications for Teachers’ Social–Emotional Training

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Abstract
A growing number of scholars in the field of urban education compellingly demonstrate the myriad ways U.S. schooling for Black youth is dehumanizing. Social and emotional learning (SEL), particularly, transformative social emotional learning (TSEL) has come to the fore as a promising intervention to promote positive inclusive school cultures and relationships while recognizing and accounting for the realities of racial oppression. Here, we discuss teachers’ capacity to develop and negotiate student–teacher relationships that acknowledge and actively confront the dehumanization of Black youth in schools. We provide recommendations for teachers’ social emotional training that can effectively humanize learning environments for Black youth.

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A growing number of scholars in the field of urban education compellingly argue the myriad ways U.S. schooling for Black youth is dehumanizing. A significant portion of this scholarship has been published in *Urban Education* (Coles, 2020; Dancy et al., 2018; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Lindsey, 2015; McArthur & Muhammad, 2020). Dehumanization deprives human beings of the very qualities, attributes, or necessities that make them human beings—the capacity to feel, to dream, to think or act autonomously, and to express their desires without fear of judgment or punishment. Dehumanization is both a structure and a process. Chattel slavery, for instance, is a major dehumanizing structure in U.S. history. Anti-Black racism, interwoven in every U.S. social institution, is a process that sustains the conditions of Black people’s dehumanization from 1619 to the present. If Black folks are widely imagined as disposable in a country founded at a time when Black bodies were considered property (read: not humans), then their schooling—urban or otherwise—is likely an exercise in Black youth’s ongoing pain and suffering (Du Bois, 1935; Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Any question or concern about how to best educate Black students, then, must be predicated first on the need to name and intentionally disrupt culturally ingrained dehumanizing schooling conditions.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has come to the fore on the national stage as a promising intervention to promote positive, inclusive school cultures, and relationships. SEL is premised on building five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (These are substantively defined throughout this special issue.). Still, without necessary attention to racism and the structural factors that retain Black people as a permanent underclass, SEL, like any well-intentioned program or project, falls woefully short of addressing the ongoing dehumanization of Black students. Robert Jagers and colleagues have taken the lead to elaborate SEL in what they propose as transformative social emotional learning (TSEL) (Jagers et al., 2018, 2019). TSEL invites educators, scholars and practitioners to recognize and account for the realities of racial oppression when considering how to model and encourage the core SEL competencies.

Here, we spotlight student–teacher relationships as a key site for rehumanizing Black students—a lion’s share of whom are educated in the southern United States and urban schooling contexts. We start from the assumption
that the effectiveness of SEL requires humanization—a recognition of the fullness of one’s own humanity as well as the humanity of others (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Freire, 1970). It is only from a space of humanization that one can cultivate genuine relationships, which both: (a) prepares the way for demonstrating TSEL competencies and (b) enables the trust necessary for students to want to model their teacher’s example. Our focus on relationship skills within the student–teacher relationship is not meant to minimize the importance of the other four SEL competencies. However, student–teacher relationships stand out in the education literature as a proximal and powerful lever for improving Black students’ academic and social outcomes in school.

Naming the Significance of Student–Teacher Relationships

Decades of research underscore the importance of the student–teacher relationship for all facets of student learning development (McHugh et al., 2013; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Student–teacher relationships can be positive or negative. Positive student–teacher relationships might be marked by warm interactions and open communication between youth and their teachers. These are regular interactions that confirm for students that their teachers care about them, are invested in their overall well-being, and their future success (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015). Positive student–teacher relationship experiences profoundly shape students’ sense of belonging, which can lead to evidence of SEL skill development, greater participation in classroom lessons, and overall improvement in students’ academic performance (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In contrast, negative student–teacher relationships can be characterized by a lack of rapport between adult and child, as well as ongoing friction or conflict, and the student’s perception that their interactions with teacher(s) lack warmth (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Students who experience more negative relationships with teachers usually feel excluded from their school community, have negative attitudes about school itself, become disengaged in the classroom, and do not perform well academically (Rucinski et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2005).

Black youth too often have more negative relationships with teachers than positive ones, a pattern that systematically differs from their White peers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This is not because Black students do not possess the capacity or desire for authentic human connections with the adults in charge of educating them. Research suggests that racial discrimination plays a tremendous role in Black students’ negative student–teacher relationships. A recent study found that Black students, on average, report experiencing five discriminatory events each day (English et al., 2020). Teachers’ racially
discriminatory actions may be manifested through biases in grading practices, discipline decisions, differential perceptions, and academic placement evaluations and expectations (Fisher et al., 2000). Black boys, for example, describe how teachers interact with them out of fear, and that too often teachers are shocked by their communication and academic skills (Allen, 2012). Black girls perceive that they wear similar outfits as White and Asian girls, but they are the only ones that are disciplined (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). The perception of racial discrimination that these experiences conjure contributes to a lack of trust between Black youth and their teachers. A lack of trust makes it exceptionally difficult for teachers to foster a positive rapport with their Black students, and reduces the likelihood they will have positive student–teacher relationships with Black youth.

A teachers’ capacity to develop and negotiate relationship skills that acknowledge and actively confronts Black youth’s dehumanization in schools is necessary for a transformative SEL approach to improve Black students’ schooling outcomes. In a racially oppressive society, such skill development requires racial literacy, or a growing understanding of the meanings accorded to race and racism for shaping everyday life (Stevenson, 2014). To this end, teachers’ own social–emotional competencies are implicated, such that their effectiveness in implementing TSEL requires that they have developed awareness of how race operates in their own lives, and the ways that they may participate in racially oppressive systems. Thus, the training that teachers receive for SEL (i.e., teacher preparation programs or professional development) is key to effectively building a humanizing learning environment that counters the reproduction of anti-Black racist social relations.

Casting Vision for Teachers’ Social and Emotional Training that Centers Student–Teacher Relationship Building

Currently, teachers’ social and emotional training (SET) experiences vary considerably. The components of SET, while debatable, too frequently tend to be framed using colorblind perspectives that ignore how school policies and classroom practices maintain and reproduce students’ racial discriminatory experiences (Gray et al., 2018). In 1935, scholar and activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, penned a manuscript positing a critical question: Does the Negro need separate schools? Du Bois’ answer in the affirmative was clear and compelling though unpopular, and his reasoning remains relevant today as racism continues to pervade our education system:
A separate Negro school, where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be Black in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers whose sole claim is to superiority is ability to kick “niggers” when they are down (Du Bois, 1935, p. 335; emphasis added).

The context of Du Bois’ political argument centers on why Black people ought to support and invest in segregated schooling for Black children. The heart of the argument, however, is that educating Black children must first privilege the humanity of Black children—ensuring they are seen and known and “treated like human beings.” Such humanization can be bolstered by other factors and forces such as curriculum choices and school culture, certainly, but arguably cannot be achieved without the student–teacher relationship. “The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 328). We imagine that use of the word “touch” in the preceding quote is not physical but social and emotional, Du Bois is pointing out that human nurturing, genuine care, and enduring concern by a teacher for a young person’s wholistic well-being—emotional, physical, psychological, and intellectual—is critical to the education process.

Du Bois’ perspective, and accurate foretelling of the current realities of Black children in U.S. schools, urges us to do more than acknowledge the racism and dehumanization that Black children face. It calls us to move beyond critique to imagination and possibility. Naming the problem is necessary but insufficient for advancing practice (Warren et al., 2020). The contribution of science is in discovery—in asking new questions, developing new methods, creating new realities, and offering new paradigms. Rather than starting from the existing list of SEL competencies, perhaps we start from humanization and ask how to reimagine teacher SET to ensure teachers are humanizing Black students. TSEL’s equity elaborations offer important guidance to improve SET across the five core competencies. The remainder of this commentary aims to answer one central question: How should SEL competencies be leveraged in teachers’ social and emotional training to sharpen their capacity to nurture humanizing relationships with Black students?

**Recommendations**

*Social awareness.* Without an explicit focus on racism and oppression, training in the social awareness competency can perpetuate cultural deficit perceptions about individual students rather than an awareness of systemic
racism that affects the behavior of both Black and White students (Garner et al., 2014; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Without this knowledge, teachers run the risk of inadvertently engaging in racially discriminatory practices, and thus reify inequality and oppressive racial hierarchies. Black students need their teachers to possess a social awareness that accounts for the sociohistorical and political realities that shape their daily lives outside of school, to ensure teachers are equipped to meaningfully support students in school. Teachers must engage and commit to dismantle toxic notions of privilege and white supremacy.

**Self-awareness.** Teachers’ understanding of self-awareness must include learning the self in relation to structural racism—acknowledging one’s racial biases, and understanding how racial biases shape emotions and behaviors toward Black students in the classroom. Within this competency teachers need to recognize that being colorblind is ineffective for reducing racial inequity and increasing Black youth positive schooling experiences. These trainings should also encourage positive racial identity development—a clear and critical understanding of Whiteness and what it means to occupy a position of Whiteness (even when you do not identify or identified as White) in a racially oppressive society.

**Self-management.** The self-management competency should include training that focuses on teachers learning to attend to and regulate their emotional reactions and perceptions in the classroom, which have been shown to be racially motivated. This means that when White teachers observe the same behavior exhibited by both Black and White students, they are more likely to interpret the Black student’s behavior negatively (aggressive, disruptive, inappropriate; Okonofua et al., 2016). Without attention to racial perception and self-management, teachers fail to notice the deficit perspectives they are using to evaluate students or judge student behavior. SET should provide teachers with effective strategies to regulate their racialized emotions such that they are prepared to improve how they negotiate interactions with Black students, over time, and thus building more positive relationships.

**Responsible decision-making.** From a transformative perspective, this SEL competency should include training that focuses on teachers learning to recognize how their racialized perceptions and emotions can shape their pedagogy and discipline decisions, as well as their academic evaluations of students. Black students’ odds of receiving suspension range from 2 to 6 times higher than White children (Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011), and their referrals significantly differ on subjective and objective offenses (Heilbrun et al., 2015). For example, teachers tend to anticipate more problem behaviors from Black
students and assign more negative intent to Black students’ behaviors (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). If teachers recognize how their racial biases shape their perceptions and emotions, they might be less likely to implement unfair discipline practices, and more likely to recommend Black students more rigorous academic coursework (e.g., honors/Advanced Placement [AP]/International Baccalaureate [IB] courses).

**Relationship skills.** Black students need their teachers to receive SET that includes how to build genuine, caring connections as well as how to demonstrate such care through advocacy for Black students—standing up for racial justice inside and outside of school. Teachers must learn and practice providing safe/affinity spaces for Black students to talk through, heal from, and strategize resistance to their racialized experiences (Warren & Coles, in press). In building these relationships, it is also important for teachers to express true empathic concern about the social implications of race in the lives of Black youth, families, and communities.

**Conclusion**

In alliance with many educators and psychologists, we see the potential of SEL to improve the schooling experiences of Black students in urban settings. Such potential can only be realized with an explicit attention to the role of racial oppression in the development of these social and emotional competencies, and the interaction of race with issues of class, ability, and gender. We suggest that teachers, with a proximal and powerful role in the daily lives of Black students, and the relationships they build, are a necessary lever in this process. However, for teachers to nurture these competencies within their students, they must first understand the nature of dehumanization (i.e., the role of White supremacy and anti-Black racism to strip Black people of human virtue and desire), and confront this phenomenon head on. Doing so facilitates a learning environment that recognizes and honors students’ humanity. SEL competencies will flourish in the context of humanizing student–teacher relationships, relationships that are marked by the “sympathetic touch” and genuine love.

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