A Look at "Lookism"

A Critical Analysis of Teachers' Expectations Based on Students Appearance

Debra DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Grace Cho

Introduction

As educators in the United States, we have been socialized to believe that our mission in teaching is to play nice and treat all of our students the same, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or gender. What is often missing in this teaching-all-equally approach is a counter-narrative that questions whether teachers can in fact successfully act as the gate keepers of equal educational opportunities.

The concept of educational inequality has been the focus for many researchers, each trying to arrive at the root of the problem in order to offer possible solutions. These different perspectives and possible answers have ranged from a focus on IQ as in Jensen's deficit of Blacks theory (Jensen, 1969), to IQ deficit as it relates to the lower social classes (Eysenck, 1971; Herrnstein, 1973), and continuing with the cultural deficit theory which relates familial, linguistic, cognitive, and attitudinal backgrounds to lower academic achievement (Valentine, 1968).

What each of these theories has in common is that they position students within structures of dominance that are indicated by race or class and more indirectly by appearance and/or language. The problem with this is that such structures of dominance implicate teachers and place blame on students as victims rather than holding responsible the larger frameworks or institutions that imposed these societal constraints. Further, these structures of dominance negatively influence teachers' expectations for students.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is another

Debra DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Grace Cho are professors in the College of Education at California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton, California.

theory that analyzes racial inequity and the social construction of race and discrimination. These concepts are present in the work of many notable scholars, including Gloria Ladson-Billings whose writings on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995) has been a major contribution to the understanding of educational equity. Further, distinctions have surfaced within CRT which seek to account for such factors as gender, language, and oppression.

Persell (1977) has offered four possible reasons why teachers may hold lower expectations for certain students. The first reason is tied to the distinct personality of the teachers themselves. The second suggests that teachers are exposed to certain socializing experiences in addition to their own prejudices. The third considers how teachers are influenced by research and ideas such as the IQ deficit and cultural deficit theories. Finally, Persell suggests that certain educational structures, for instance tracking, influence teachers' expectations of students.

Considering Physical Appearance

Another influencing factor that may contribute to teachers' expectations for their students can be linked to the students' physical appearance. The concept of physical appearance influencing a teacher's expectation of specific students was first noted by Clifford and Walster (1973). Their study found that the physical attractiveness of a student was directly related to the teacher's expectations of the student's intelligence, popularity, and educational motivation.

Adams and LaVoie's (1974) study looked at the effect that physical attractiveness had on teachers' expectations of students. They examined the responses of

350 elementary teachers in a large, urban district. Each teachers was given a color photo of each student along with the students' progress reports. The participants were asked to predict, based upon the documents they were given, how a student would fare in terms of attitude, work habits, parental interest, and peer relations. They found that attractiveness may have influenced the teachers' perceptions of students initially, but that the student's record was the most influential factor.

While this early research, now several decades old, is of interest and potential importance, the critical question currently is whether similar issues of student appearance play a gate-keeping role in teaching today. Whether photos or written records are influencing teachers' expectations of students, both must be considered short-sighted and inappropriate ways to make judgments and are an invitation to exercise underlying and possibly even unconscious prejudices on the part of teachers.

Studying Teacher Expectations

To gain further insight on these issues, our study focused on the teacher and on the expectations he or she may hold for students based on their physical characteristics. We anticipated that the responses would be complex. Initially, however, we were guided by one simple question: What do teachers think of their students based on the students' physical characteristics? These characteristics were assumed to include race, gender, and, to some extent, social class.

In addition to this initial question, we asked ourselves what perceptions, racist or otherwise, might teachers have about their students? Are teachers, as they have positioned themselves within classroom discussions and debates, neutral and color

blind, treating all of their students the same way? Or do they base their assumptions on a lifetime lived in a greater society in which racism and stereotypes exist?

Historically the teachers' role has been to evaluate their students from the earliest years of schooling, beginning with screening for kindergarten. In performing these responsibilities, do teachers approach their students with ingrained beliefs which influence their perception of students?

To illuminate these possibilities our aim was to examine a specific form of prejudice known as *lookism*, which Ayto (1999) defines as "prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of appearance" (p. 485). How do such prejudices impact whether students will be treated equally?

Methodology

The participants for our study were 226 secondary education teacher candidates enrolled in professional education classes in a suburban university in Southern California. To attain a representative sampling of teacher candidates in each level of our program in secondary education the participants—students in nine education classes—completed an anonymous, attitudinal survey.

An attitudinal survey was chosen as the primary research instrument in order to solicit teacher candidates' perceptions about adolescents based on the adolescents' physical characteristics. The survey consisted of a series of eight photos of adolescents from four major racial groups (Black, White, Asian, and Hispanic) and 10 statements formulated to elicit deep-seated perceptions.

Each racial group photo included both male and female members of that group. For example, some of the photos depicted both male and female African-American adolescents. All photos used in the study were obtained through public access using the internet. In doing this, we hoped to ensure anonymity and to minimize the chance that some of the adolescents in the photos would be recognized.

Following the suggestions of Adams and LaVoie (1974), who criticized their own study for *not* including a wide range of personal appearance and dress, we purposely chose photographs that depicted students dressed differently from one another. The search process for the photos was extensive in order to identify photos that depicted adolescents of approximately the same age and physical appearance with the only notable difference being the adolescent's race and gender. The adolescents in the photos were all in the 15-to-17 years-of-age range and were shown in typical school attire and settings. The photos showed their faces and upper torsos only. They all appeared well groomed. All of the adolescents were dressed casually. None were in dress clothes. Their attire consisted of stylish tee shirts, sweaters, polo shirts, etc.

Below the photos were a series of selected, intentionally inflammatory statements specifically written to elicit each participant's perception of specific racial group members. Participants were then asked to link each statement to a photo which portrayed a specific racial group. For instance, one statement asked the participants to identify which student would be most likely to commit a crime before graduating high school.

Based upon their own experiences, students were asked to pair the photo which *best* represented the statement. By asking the participants to choose the photos which best represented the statements we hoped to uncover their individual underlying perceptions, or hidden prejudices. By including 226 participants in the study, we intended to highlight 226 individual perceptions that teacher candidates have about adolescents. From these perceptions we then hoped to identify a pattern of thought illuminating how teacher candidates perceive adolescents based upon their physical characteristics, recognizing that such characteristics are by nature tied to racial groups.

Findings

The participants' responses were categorized into five major themes: *academic success*, *athletic success*, *perceived as outsiders*, *academic adversity,* and *challenging classroom authority*. In this report our findings will focus on the two photographs that had the highest frequency of responses.

The first category, *academic success,* was drawn from the responses to the statement "identify which student is most likely to excel in academics." Seventy percent of the respondents designated Asians, both male and female, as the group most likely to fulfill this prediction. The respondents were also asked to "identify which student is most likely to attend an Ivy League college such as Yale or Harvard." Again, the majority of participants (55%) stated that Asians were the group most likely to attend an Ivy League school. Clearly, the respondents associated *academic success* with students of Asian heritage.

In response to the statement "identify which student is most likely to excel in athletics," the participants identified Hispanic and Black males as the most likely destined for athletic success, at 66% and 17% respectively. Since we purposely chose photos of well groomed adolescents of different races and gender in neutral attire, with none of the subjects shown in athletic attire, it seems clear that our respondents perceive athletic success to be associated with the Hispanic and Black racial groups.

We felt that responses to the statement "identify which student is most likely to: join a gang, get involved in drugs, and, finally, commit a crime before graduating" reflected the *perceived as outsiders* category. We chose this label to indicate the students who were, for whatever reason, perceived as marginalized from the larger society. Notably, *perceived as outsiders* was a male dominated category. For example, 39% of the respondents identified the Black male and 24% of the respondents selected the Asian male as most likely to have gang affiliations. The photos that were used to represent both the Asian and Black males again aimed at neutrality and depicted these students in academic attire—not identifiable gang-wear.

In response to the question about which student would be "involved in drugs," 39% of the respondents identified the White male and 21% chose the Black male. Females of all four racial groups scored very low compared to the males. In addition, 48% of Black males and 17% of White males were identified as "most likely to commit a crime before graduating from high school." Interestingly, this category was also gender driven, with 78% of the responses consisted of males from the four racial groupings.

The theme *academic adversity* focused on students who are on the outskirts of the high school social network. The student who drops out of school is no longer privy to many of the social opportunities afforded to high school students. They are now marginalized and become a group unto themselves, set apart from the daily routines of high school life. The majority of responses in this area, 51% of the total, identified the Black male (26%) or the Hispanic female (25%) as most likely to drop out of high school.

Additionally, the student who becomes a parent is also marginalized and placed in a position where academic success is in jeopardy due to the added responsibility of

caring for a baby and the time constraints of being a parent and providing for the child. The respondents identified the Hispanic female (53%) and Black female (25%) as most likely to become a parent before high school graduation.

The final category is termed *challenging classroom authority*. When asked to address the statement related to this theme, 32% identified White males as most likely to cause trouble in the classroom. Black males were second in this category, with a response rate of 29%. Conversely, both Asian males (0.4%) and females (3.5%) were rated as the least likely to cause trouble in the classroom. This corresponds to, or is the reverse side of their high scores in the area of *academic success*.

Discussion

The participants' responses to the photos reflected perceptions of adolescents that were clearly related to race and gender and, as such, revealed their own personal stereotypes and prejudices. We felt this finding was reinforced by the fact that the photos used intentionally presented adolescents dressed in similar attire in order to neutralize the effect that dress may have.

According to data from the study, our participants rated Asian adolescents as most likely to achieve academic success. This concurs with the notion that Asians are the "model minority" (Takaki, 1998) and traditionally achieve academic success. The Asian male and female were also rated as the least likely to cause trouble in the classroom, contributing further to this overall stereotype.

Additionally, the majority of the participants identified either the Black female or the Hispanic female as most likely to become a parent before graduating from high school. It is interesting to note that the participants chose minority *females* even though the statement specifically asked about becoming a *parent*, not who would *become pregnant*. As such, their views illustrated both racial and gender stereotyping.

Our findings demonstrated that the teacher candidates' carried preconceived notions about the adolescents they were shown in the photos and that these notions were stratified clearly along gender and racial lines. In all probability, these stereotyped ideas will at the very least have the potential to translate into the teaching approaches of these future teachers,

potentially creating caste-like situations in their classrooms.

By positioning minority adolescents in the categories with the least desirable attributes, these teacher candidates' perceptions as revealed in our study support Ogbu's (1978) earlier research that focused on the stratification of ethnic and racial minority groups within the larger framework of society. Significantly, he found that within society certain groups hold higher status, and that this stratification would necessarily lead to an unequal educational system created not by politicians or the untrained populace, but instead by those to whom we entrust the education of our children—the teachers. Unfortunately, our findings suggest that this likely remains true 40 years after Ogbu first offered this conclusion.

A small number of the teacher candidates were vocal, adamantly stating that they did not possess any prejudices or racial stereotypes. These participants went on to suggest in a very negative tone that they responded to the survey in a way that *they believed* the researchers wanted to hear. In addition to these verbalized remarks from the teacher candidates, a handful of surveys included unsolicited written statements such as,

> These abilities are not determined by how a person looks, but here is a stereotypical answer to this test [referring to the responses the participant gave on the survey]. In reality, all students can excel.

Since only a small number of the respondents refuted the concept of racial profiling, it is our view that the bulk of the completed surveys represent a majority response that is racially motivated and stereotypical. For example, Asians as a group who do well academically and the Black male being seen in a gang clearly fit such stereotypical and racist beliefs.

A small number of the survey results, those from the self-proclaimed "unprejudiced" participants, exhibited a reverse pattern whereby their response was a "mirror image" of existing stereotypes. For example, in response to the statement regarding excelling academically, a few identified the Black male, which runs exactly contrary to typical racial stereotyping. The same effect was apparent when these teacher candidates were asked to identify the adolescent most likely to attend an Ivy League school. Here these "unprejudiced" participants identified Asians as the least likely to do so. All in this group of responses followed this pattern of "mirror imaging" stereotypes.

We believe that this may have been due to an increased number of multicultural education classes being offered and taken by students. It appears, however, that such perceptions about race and gender are too deeply rooted to be eradicated by one or two courses. When presented with the survey's statements, it is possible that the respondents may have experienced some conflict if they consciously knew it was wrong to respond with stereotypical answers.

Conclusion

To formulate an opinion of students based on their racial and ethnic appearance is undeniably a detrimental form of gate-keeping by teachers. Stereotypical perceptions of students can lead to unequal treatment in the classroom, which in turn translates into unequal access to educational opportunities. According to our findings, this predisposition toward stereotyping students based on their appearance went completely unnoticed by most of the participants, many of whom were adamant that they did not hold these attitudes.

It is our assumption that the teacher candidates' lack of awareness of their own deep-seated prejudices will be harmful to the students they will teach and will ultimately perpetuate such gate-keeping practices. Ignorance of the existence of such perceptions and thoughts leaves these teacher candidates unprepared to address them. These perceptions can ultimately manifest in negative interactions with their future students in the classroom.

A crucial step toward any reform is the identification of a problem, but just as important is the acknowledgement that a problem exists in the first place. Possessing a bias toward a student is wrong on any level, but specifically a bias based on a student's physical appearance is even more problematic because it is not something that can be altered, nor is it accurate or reflective of the student in question.

By better understanding the perceptions that teacher candidates hold, we can enact program reform that will provide future teacher candidates with a better understanding of issues and pedagogy relevant to working with culturally diverse student populations.

As evidenced in a previous study (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2006), we found that teacher candidates are being done a disservice if they trust that, by taking a single isolated course in multicultural education, they will overcome their own prejudices and tendencies to stereotype.

Therefore, our standard U.S. teacher education program, predominantly populated by White, middle class students, needs to be revised in order to include an emphasis on CRT, with special attention paid to the understanding of the diverse cultures and families teacher candidates will encounter when they become teachers.

We recommend that teacher preparation programs include instruction about the underpinnings of CRT while also educating candidates on issues of diversity, including gender, racial, and cultural equity. By analyzing racial inequity as the social construction of race and discrimination, we can bring these ideas and stereotypes to the surface and ultimately disarm them. By doing so, we can address the misconceptions held by teacher candidates about the populations they will be serving. This will lay the groundwork necessary to build classrooms that are fair and equitable for all, regardless of race, gender, or culture.

Future researchers may want to consider the issue of a "halo effect" among the research participants. The halo effect was first noted in Thorndike's *Personality Theory* (1920) where he found that his research participants used the first traits they recognized in another person as a foundation for their interpretation and perception of later traits in the same person. He suggests that people seem not to think of others in varied terms. Instead, they think of people as either basically good or bad by relying on their initial judgments of them to influence their later, consequent impressions of them.

As such, it is quite likely that our participants based their perceptions of students in the photos on the ideas they initially held about certain ethnic and racial groups. Certainly they did not approach the study devoid of stereotypes, as they had the accumulation of a lifetime of experiences with and established biases about persons different from themselves, largely based on characteristics of race, ethnicity, and gender. In addition, these were feelings that they generally did not acknowledge.

Therefore, it is our recommendation that future researchers consider expanding this kind of study to include both quantitative and qualitative components. In addition, researchers may want to consider interviewing of future respondents individually as a means of ascertaining a deeper understanding of personal biases.

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