

# Teacher Expectations and Culturally Responsive Practices: Examining Influences on the Achievement Gap

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## Abstract

*Despite decades of efforts to close persistent academic achievement gaps, minority students, particularly those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, continue to lag behind their White and Asian peers. This qualitative multi-case study explored K-5 teachers' perceptions about factors influencing the achievement of low-income minority students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 elementary teachers in six high-poverty schools. Findings revealed teachers unanimously believed all students can learn, regardless of background. However, they recognized systemic barriers like insufficient resources, lack of teacher preparedness for diverse classrooms, and students facing poverty-related challenges that hinder academic success. Teachers emphasized implementing culturally relevant practices such as fostering caring relationships, communicating high expectations, providing hands-on learning experiences, and differentiating instruction to improve outcomes for disadvantaged minorities. Yet obstacles like funding disparities, struggling to engage families, and inadequate training in critical areas impeded effective strategy implementation. This study underscores the need for comprehensive efforts by educators, communities, and policymakers to equitably support minority students facing socioeconomic disadvantages. Promising approaches include bolstering teacher training, guaranteeing equitable school resources and staffing, reinforcing culturally responsive pedagogy, and leveraging social-emotional practices to holistically nurture students' academic potential.*

## 1. Introduction

The academic achievement gap between minority and non-minority students has been a persistent issue in the U.S. education system for decades [26]. Despite federal mandates like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that aimed to eradicate these disparities, the gap continues to widen, with African American and Hispanic students lagging behind their White and Asian peers [26]. Researchers have devoted significant attention to investigating the causes and potential solutions to this problem.

Many studies point to factors outside the scope of schools, such as family dynamics, community surroundings, socioeconomic status (SES), and inadequate academic preparation, as major contributors to the achievement gap [1], [12], [45], [52], [57]. For example, Condrón found that students' environments outside of school significantly influence class inequalities in learning [9]. Grogan-Kaylor and Woolley also noted that SES and certain family, neighborhood, and school characteristics contribute to academic success, with SES factors largely explaining race/ethnicity-based educational outcome inequalities [19]. However, relatively few studies have examined how teachers' perceptions and expectations may influence the achievement of minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds, even though most of these students are taught by teachers with very different cultural and socioeconomic experiences [15], [28], [44], [51], [60], [64]. Research indicates that teachers' perceptions shape their approaches and actions, impacting instructional procedures and goals, especially for novice teachers [10]. Teachers' philosophies about learning are influenced by their school environment, with those in high-poverty, large minority populations, low-performing schools more likely to underestimate their students' academic and social achievement [26].

## 2. Teacher Expectations and Perceptions

Studies have shown that race and SES influence teachers' expectations for student learning, with higher expectations for White versus African American and Hispanic students [22], [60]. This can lead to minority students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, being overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in gifted programs [7], [10], [14], [15]. On the other hand, some research suggests teachers may hold more positive views and higher standards for Asians compared to White students [22].

Teachers' perceptions are often formulated before entering the profession and can be difficult to change, especially since many are hesitant to work in culturally diverse settings [3], [13], [27], [38], [43], [47], [51], [55]. Preservice teachers tend to have

negative perceptions of urban minority students, viewing them as behaviorally challenging and less academically capable [20,50]. Deficit thinking, where culturally different students are seen as inferior to White students, and color-blindness are other problematic mindsets that some teachers bring into diverse classrooms [2], [8], [14], [48].

Research has suggested that teacher preparation programs are largely inadequate in readying educators to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse environments [6], [17], [23], [29], [35], [46], [59]. Opportunities for field experiences in high-needs settings with diverse students during teacher training are often lacking [54], [55]. Promising practices include providing preservice teachers with opportunities to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies, analyze their application, and work with effective mentor teachers in diverse classrooms [56].

### 3. Achievement Gaps and Socioeconomic Status

The achievement gap between minority and non-minority students has been a persistent issue in the U.S. education system, with researchers devoting significant attention to investigating its causes and potential solutions [26]. Many studies have identified factors beyond the scope of schools, such as family dynamics, community surroundings, and socioeconomic status (SES), as major contributors to the achievement gap [9], [19], [34], [53].

Socioeconomic status has been consistently identified as a strong predictor of academic achievement, with students from low-income backgrounds facing significant challenges. Yeung and Pfeiffer [62] analyzed data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and found substantial differences in test scores between Black and White children at every age group, with gaps widening as children progressed through school. The researchers concluded that racial achievement score differences could be attributed to factors such as the child's attributes, family SES, and the mother's cognitive proficiencies [69].

Condron examined data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort and found that while factors outside of school significantly influence class inequalities in learning, school factors play an even greater role in creating Black-White achievement differences [9]. The author noted that school racial segregation may contribute to the portion of the achievement gap that persists even when social class is controlled for [9].

Hanushek and Rivkin also investigated school factors influencing the achievement gap, using data from the Texas Schools Project [21]. They found that the achievement gap increases more for high-performing Black students, largely due to their

attendance at schools with a higher proportion of Black students. The researchers also noted that schools with larger minority populations tend to employ less experienced teachers, further exacerbating the achievement gap [21].

Pringle et al. highlighted that achievement disparities exist even between African American students from middle to upper-class backgrounds and their White peers in non-impovertised districts. Factors such as school race relations, internalized White beliefs, and peer pressure can contribute to these gaps [49].

Research has also examined the role of teacher quality and instructional practices in the achievement gap. Desimone and Long found that teacher quality and time spent on instruction significantly influence mathematics achievement growth for Black and low-SES students. The authors noted that low-performing students are often assigned to teachers who emphasize basic rather than advanced instruction, potentially widening the achievement gap [11].

Overall, the literature suggests that both school and non-school factors contribute to the achievement gap, with SES playing a particularly significant role. Students from low-income backgrounds face a range of challenges that can hinder their academic progress, from limited access to resources and experienced teachers to the effects of school segregation and peer influences. Addressing these complex and interrelated issues will be critical to narrowing the persistent achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students.

### 4. Teacher-Student Rapport

Teacher-student relationships play a crucial role in students' academic and social-emotional development, particularly for minority students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who may face additional challenges in their educational pursuits [26]. Positive teacher-student relationships have been linked to increased academic achievement, better classroom behavior, and improved social-emotional well-being [25], [30], [31], [33], [42], [61].

Research has shown that minority students from low-income backgrounds often experience negative teacher-student relationships compared to their White, more affluent peers [25], [33], [36], [41], [42], [61]. Murray and Zvoch [41] found that African American students with behavioral challenges reported lower levels of trust in their relationships with teachers compared to their non-behaviorally challenged peers. Teachers also reported less closeness and more conflict with these students, suggesting that those with behavioral issues are at greater risk for poor teacher-student relationships regardless of race or SES [42]. However, when positive teacher-student relationships are established, they can serve as a protective factor for minority students from

disadvantaged backgrounds. Liew et al. found that supportive teacher-student relationships, combined with students' effortful control, contributed to future academic achievement, particularly for students with self-regulatory challenges [31]. McCormick et al. also noted that high-quality teacher-student relationships in kindergarten had significant positive effects on math achievement for low-SES African American and Hispanic students [36].

The quality of teacher-student relationships is influenced by various factors, including teachers' perceptions and biases. McGrath and Van Bergen noted that teachers' perceptions of students' academic abilities and behaviors can shape the level of closeness and conflict in their relationships [37]. Developing culturally responsive classroom management strategies and an understanding of students' diverse backgrounds can help foster more positive teacher-student relationships [40].

Jennings et al. explored the impact of a professional development program designed to improve teachers' social-emotional skills and well-being on their ability to create supportive learning environments [24]. The researchers found that teachers in urban, high-poverty schools benefited more from the program than those in suburban, more affluent districts. Participants reported increased self-awareness, better relationships with students and colleagues, and improved ability to handle challenging classroom situations [24].

Ultimately, teacher-student relationships play a significant role in the academic and social-emotional outcomes of minority students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. While these students may be more likely to experience negative relationships with teachers, positive connections can serve as a protective factor and contribute to improved achievement. Addressing teachers' perceptions and biases, developing culturally responsive practices, and providing professional development opportunities can help strengthen teacher-student relationships and ultimately support the success of disadvantaged minority students.

## 5. Methods

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to investigate teachers' perceptions and their impact on the academic achievement of minority students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. The multiple-case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions within the real-world context of their classrooms and schools [63]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 elementary school teachers from six Title I schools participating in a Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant in the southeastern United States. The interview questions, adapted from a study by Brown and Medway focused on teachers' expectations,

perceptions, and instructional strategies used with low-SES minority students [4].

### 5.1. Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of approximately 270 K-5 teachers from eight Title I elementary and middle schools participating in the TIF grant. Purposeful sampling was used to select 12 participants from six of the eight schools, with two participants from each school. The sample size was determined based on Yin's replication logic, which suggests that 6-10 case studies within a multiple-case study design can provide compelling evidence for literal and theoretical replication [63]. Participants were recruited via email invitation and selected based on their willingness to participate and their status as K-5 classroom teachers in the targeted schools [26].

### 5.2. Analysis of Data

Data analysis began with the transcription of the recorded interviews. The researcher then conducted within-case and cross-case analyses of the transcripts to identify emerging themes related to teachers' perceptions, expectations, and instructional strategies [26]. The constant comparative method [18] was used to code the data and identify patterns and themes. The researcher also employed member checking, asking participants to review their interview transcripts for accuracy and completeness, to ensure the credibility of the findings [32].

Participants represented a range of backgrounds and years of experience. To validate content, transcriptions were emailed to participants for member checking - no changes or objections to direct quotes were noted. Data analysis incorporated within-case and cross-case coding to identify themes in teacher perceptions, expectations, and biases related to minority students from low-income backgrounds. Themes were identified to address the research questions focusing on student backgrounds, instructional strategies, and perceived barriers impacting achievement gaps. Though saturation was reached with 12 participants, 4 of the original 16 volunteers did not participate due to unforeseen circumstances. Still, the sample size aligns with past research indicating 12 interviews provide comprehensive data. Member checking and themes emerging across cases supported dependability of findings.

### 5.3. Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness in this qualitative study, the researcher employed several strategies, including triangulation, member checking, and thick description [32]. Triangulation was achieved by

comparing the interview data with demographic information provided by the participants. Member checking involved asking participants to review their interview transcripts and confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Thick description was used to provide detailed accounts of the research context, participants, and findings, allowing readers to assess the transferability of the results to other settings [26,63].

## 6. Findings

### *Research Question 1*

*What are K-5 teachers' perceptions of the cultural and economic background of their students in the U.S. southern region?*

Two themes emerged from the analysis of interview responses related to Research Question 1:

*Theme 1:1* - All students can learn regardless of their backgrounds. Participants expressed the belief that all children are capable of learning, regardless of race or economic status and must be provided with numerous opportunities to experience achievement. They indicated that it is the teacher's responsibility to figure out how students learn best and create an environment that promotes academic success. Participant 2 stated, "I must give all children a chance to learn, that's a must. No matter where they are from or what they are currently doing in the class, they have the right to learn and they can learn."

*Theme 1:2* - Economically disadvantaged minority students encounter many challenges in their educational experience. Participants believed minority students from low-income backgrounds face numerous barriers that impact their schooling, including lack of parental involvement, limited access to resources and technology, poor condition of school facilities, minimal exposure and experiences outside school, and difficult home environments. These were cited as negatively affecting their learning and achievement versus more advantaged peers. Participant 1 noted, "They [economically disadvantaged students] don't get opportunities to get out of the projects, [housing development] unless the school takes them out and now we don't have as many field trips [due to funding], so they are losing that experience now."

The findings showed teachers strongly believe in every student's capacity for academic success yet recognize systemic barriers severely limit disadvantaged minorities' achievement. Additional obstacles like deficient parental support, scarce resources, underfunded facilities, few enrichment opportunities, and challenging home lives constrain teachers seeking to nurture students facing institutional inequities. Despite commitments to upholding high expectations, teachers grappled with

societal barriers that constrain their ability to enable equitable access to education and opportunities for academic success.

### *Research Question 2*

*What are K-5 teachers' perceptions of research-based instructional strategies that may improve academic achievement of minority students from challenging backgrounds?*

Four themes emerged for this research question:

*Theme 2:1* - Communicate success and high expectations daily. Participants felt consistently communicating high expectations and celebrating small successes boosted student self-esteem and motivation. As Participant 11 stated, "Setting high expectations and demonstrating your belief in your students through your words and actions pushes them to want to achieve more."

*Theme 2:2* - Hands-on approach to the curriculum makes learning meaningful and relevant. Participants believed hands-on activities engage students, help them relate learning to their lives, and build needed background knowledge. As Participant 5 explained, "If there's a book or story about going to the beach, some of them have never been...so I have to show them a picture of the beach or a video of the beach or bring in some sand." Participant 7 further expounded on this, stating "I incorporate a lot of hands-on activities to help the students make sense of what they are learning, you need the concrete items to help build and strengthen their abstract thinking."

*Theme 2:3* - Build on students' current performance level. Participants indicated identifying students' present levels and setting attainable goals tailored to individuals boosted growth and achievement. As Participant 2 explained, "You communicate with each child and set obtainable goals...They will reach or exceed that goal because it was realistic to them." Participant 10 shared, "I do the work, I gather data on each of my students. Designing a personalized instructional plan for all my students helps to keep me accountable and it ensures that each student will experience some level of academic achievement."

*Theme 2:4* - Build positive student-teacher relationships. Participants cited relationship building as key to improving engagement, behavior, and learning. As Participant 11 stated, "Some of our kids have encountered things that most adults would not know how to handle." They further shared that, "I have worked in this environment for the past 20 years and I believe that I have been successful with my students because I take the time to get to know each one of them."

Teachers perceived personalized, culturally connected instruction as key to furthering minority student achievement. Strategies include

communicating unwavering belief in students' potential through high expectations and celebrating successes, utilizing hands-on activities relating to cultural backgrounds, scaffolding instruction based on skill levels, and building caring teacher-student relationships to increase engagement and motivation. By acknowledging systemic barriers while implementing targeted academic and socioemotional supports, teachers can mitigate obstacles to help disadvantaged students thrive.

Overall, strategies such as communicating high expectations, hands-on learning, differentiating instruction, and relationship building were perceived as effective ways to improve minority student achievement.

### *Research Question 3*

*What are K-5 teachers' perceptions of cultural, racial, and/or economic barriers that may hinder delivery of effective instructional strategies to meet students' educational needs?*

The three themes that emerged are as follows:

*Theme 3:1 – Deficiency in parental involvement.* All participants believed greater parental involvement would improve minority student outcomes, but that involvement was currently lacking. Participant 5 noted, "I think parents play a huge role, minority or majority regardless in any student's education." They further shared that "if the parents weren't valuing education, then the kids weren't valuing as much."

*Theme 3:2 – Disparity in monetary funding and resources.* Participants cited funding and resource gaps between schools as barriers to providing effective instruction, with affluent schools having more technology and updated materials. Participant 11 expressed, "The match between available resources and the curriculum I am required to teach are not aligned and the technology is lacking too."

*Theme 3:3 – Unprepared to work diverse student populations.* Half of participants said they learned "on the job" versus through training. All agreed teacher preparation needed more time in diverse, challenging settings. As Participant 2 explained, "No book that I ever read in college prepared me to work in a Title I school." Participant 4 stated, "It was kind of a culture shock for me because the kids [students] were exposed to a lot more than I thought they were exposed to...a lot more than I'm exposed to [laughter]."

Teachers cited deficient parental support for education, funding gaps limiting resources and technology compared to affluent schools, and inadequate formal preparation for diverse learners as key barriers obstructing effective instruction for disadvantaged minority students. These systemic deficiencies surrounding external involvement, materials access, and teacher readiness were seen as

severely hindering implementation of impactful instructional strategies targeted for these students' unique needs and critical for enabling their academic success.

## **7. Discussion**

The findings of this study underscore the complex interplay of factors influencing the academic achievement of minority students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants' perceptions aligned with existing literature, highlighting the importance of teacher expectations, culturally responsive instruction, and the challenges posed by systemic inequities.

Participants unanimously believed that all students have the capacity to learn, regardless of their cultural or economic background. This stance challenges the deficit thinking model, which attributes academic disparities to students' perceived deficiencies [16]. Instead, participants emphasized the crucial role of teachers in creating an environment that nurtures academic success, echoing research on the impact of teacher expectations on student achievement [5].

However, participants also acknowledged the numerous obstacles minority students from low-SES backgrounds face in their educational journey. Lack of parental involvement, limited access to resources, and inadequate exposure to enriching experiences were identified as significant barriers, aligning with studies that underscore the influence of family SES and social capital on academic outcomes [9], [19], [45].

To address these challenges, participants emphasized the importance of communicating high expectations, providing hands-on learning experiences, and tailoring instruction to students' current performance levels. These strategies reflect the principles of culturally responsive teaching, which seeks to make learning more relevant and effective for diverse students [8], [54]. By building on students' strengths and experiences, teachers can foster academic engagement and achievement.

Participants also stressed the critical role of positive student-teacher relationships in promoting academic success, particularly for disadvantaged minority students. This finding aligns with research demonstrating the protective influence of supportive teacher-student relationships on academic and social-emotional outcomes [25], [31], [36].

However, participants identified several barriers hindering their ability to deliver effective instruction, including the lack of parental involvement, disparities in funding and resources, and inadequate preparation to work with diverse student populations. These systemic inequities, which are well-documented in the literature [9], [21], [54], underscore the need for comprehensive reforms and targeted support for teachers serving disadvantaged communities.

In conclusion, this study's findings highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing the academic achievement of minority students from low-SES backgrounds. By shedding light on teachers' perceptions and experiences, the study underscores the importance of fostering high expectations, implementing culturally responsive practices, and addressing systemic inequities. Ultimately, closing the achievement gap will require a concerted effort by educators, policymakers, and communities to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have access to the resources and support they need to thrive.

## 8. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for future research can be made. First, future studies should consider expanding the sample to include teachers from middle and high school grades. While this study focused on the perceptions of K-5 teachers, exploring the perspectives of educators working with older students could provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities at different developmental stages.

Second, researchers should consider conducting similar studies in diverse geographical locations and school settings. This study was limited to Title I schools participating in a specific grant program within a single school district. Replicating the study in other contexts, such as suburban or rural districts, could help determine the transferability of the findings and identify potential variations in teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Third, future research could benefit from employing a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys or assessments. This could help triangulate the findings, provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing minority student achievement, and allow for a larger sample size.

Finally, longitudinal studies following teachers and students over an extended period could shed light on the long-term impact of teacher perceptions and practices on student outcomes. Such research could also help identify critical junctures and interventions that promote academic success and resilience among disadvantaged minority students.

## 9. Conclusion

This study sought to explore K-5 teachers' perceptions regarding the academic achievement of minority students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings underscore the complex interplay of factors influencing student outcomes, including teacher expectations, culturally responsive practices, and systemic inequities.

Participants unanimously believed in the inherent capacity of all students to learn, regardless of their background. However, they also acknowledged the significant challenges minority students from low-SES backgrounds face in their educational journey, including lack of parental involvement, limited access to resources, and inadequate exposure to enriching experiences.

To address these challenges, participants emphasized the importance of communicating high expectations, providing hands-on learning experiences, tailoring instruction to students' needs, and fostering positive teacher-student relationships. These strategies align with the principles of culturally responsive teaching and highlight the crucial role of educators in creating an environment that nurtures academic success.

However, participants also identified systemic barriers hindering their ability to deliver effective instruction, such as disparities in funding and resources and inadequate preparation to work with diverse student populations. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive reforms and targeted support for teachers serving disadvantaged communities.

In conclusion, closing the achievement gap requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both individual and structural factors. By fostering high expectations, implementing culturally responsive practices, and providing equitable resources and support, educators and policymakers can create the conditions necessary for all students to thrive, regardless of their background. Future research should continue to explore the complex dynamics influencing minority student achievement and identify evidence-based strategies for promoting educational equity and excellence.

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