

Contextual Barriers to Preschool Classroom Quality Experienced by African American Teachers: A Call for Social Action

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The current study¹ explored contextual variables differentially affecting African American teachers and the quality of their classroom environments. The study included 1687 classrooms (802 with African American teachers and 885 with European American teachers) from the **North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project**. Initial analyses revealed significant differences by race in global classroom quality, as well as in factors of language/interactions and materials/activities of the ECERS-R². However, when an Analysis of Covariance was conducted controlling for many contextual variables, the differences disappeared. The contextual variables included: level of teacher education, years of experience in early childhood, total number of teachers in the classroom, teacher-child ratios, proportion of children on subsidy, proportion of African American children in the class, and race of the observer. Findings are discussed with regard to the contextual constraints experienced by African American teachers working in preschool settings. Policy implications of classroom inequities by race are examined.

Within early childhood education, accountability through classroom assessment is increasing. The intention of accountability is worthy, to provide high quality care and education to all young children while best preparing them for academic success. However, there is concern about the extent to which high quality classrooms are available to all children and equitable resources to all teachers. The current study explored contextual variables differentially affecting African American teachers and the quality of their classroom environments.

Preliminary analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in the global quality of classrooms with African American teachers and classrooms with European American teachers. Specifically, ECERS-R scores for the classrooms with African American teachers (M = 4.84) were lower than the scores of classrooms with European American teachers (M = 5.12).

However, when contextual variables were included in the equation — such as level of teacher education, years of experience in early childhood, total number of teachers in the classroom, teacher-child ratios, proportion of children on subsidy, proportion of African American children in the class, and race of the observer — the differences in classroom quality scores disappeared. All of the contextual variables that were added to the equation were significantly different for the two groups of teachers *except* teacher-child ratio and race of the observer. What was accounting for the original difference found in quality was not the race of the teachers, but was related to the context in which they worked.

African American teachers had less education, averaging between “some college coursework: < 30 credit hours” and “1-year community college diploma,” while European American teachers had between 1 and 2 years of college.

African American teachers worked with larger group sizes and fewer teachers in the classroom. They also worked with far more children who were on subsidy, an indicator that these children may be at greatest risk and in the greatest need of high quality school readiness activities. Sixty-three percent of children in classrooms taught by African American teachers were on some type of subsidy while European American teachers had only 39% of children with whom they worked receiving subsidy.

Improving conditions in classrooms with African American teachers is a commitment that requires increasing funding for programs where teachers of color are employed. Such efforts should include scholarships to finance education for teachers of color, subsidizing programs to improve teacher-child ratios and decrease group sizes, and offering substantial supports to teachers working with children facing economic adversity. Equalizing supports to teachers across the field creates a foundation for children to experience the best quality care and education regardless of the context in which they live and learn.

Working conditions are notably different for African American and European American teachers.

Averages of Contextual Variables Related to Classroom Quality

| | African American Teachers | European American Teachers |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Teacher Education Level | 4.50 | 5.21 |
| Years Experience | 8.72 | 8.16 |
| Teacher-Child Ratio | 7.99 | 7.55 |
| Number of Teachers in Classroom | 1.82 | 1.97 |
| Proportion of Children on Subsidy | 0.63 | 0.39 |
| Proportion of African American Children | 0.73 | 0.12 |
| Proportion of European American Children | 0.17 | 0.78 |

Policy Directions

- *Increase funding for teachers of color for educational advancement.*
- *Subsidize programs where teachers of color are employed to decrease group sizes and improve teacher-child ratios.*
- *Offer substantial supports to teachers working with children facing economic adversity.*
- *Ensure that children receiving subsidy have a variety of choices for high quality child care.*

¹Cassidy, D. J., Lower, J. K., Kintner, V. L., & Hestenes, L. L. (in press). Teacher ethnicity and contextual factors: The implications for classroom quality. *Early Education and Development*.

²Harms, T., Clifford, R. M., & Cryer, D. (2005). *Early childhood environment rating scale – revised edition*. New York: Teachers College Press.