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Improving Access to Teacher Mentors for Black Students: The Mediating Role of School Safety

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IMPROVING ACCESS TO TEACHER MENTORS FOR BLACK STUDENTS: THE
MEDIATING ROLE OF SCHOOL SAFETY

by

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ABSTRACT

Having a teacher mentor is associated with several positive outcomes, yet teacher mentors are not distributed evenly among youth, and children who are Black are substantially less likely to form mentoring relationships with teachers. In this study I tested a putative explanatory hypothesis for differences between Black and White children's access to teacher mentors. Data from Waves I and III from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health were used. Linear regression models were used to predict the access to teacher mentors and a mediational analysis was conducted to determine the effect of school safety on the relationship between race and teacher mentor access. Results indicate that students from higher SES backgrounds and those with parents who have greater educational attainment are more likely to have a teacher mentor. Furthermore, Black students are less likely than White students to have a mentor, and school safety mediates that relationship. The results suggest that increasing school safety in schools, especially predominately Black schools, may improve access to teacher mentors.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Youth mentoring refers to a relationship between a nonparental adult and a younger person (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b). These relationships are generally thought to foster development through several avenues including role modeling, social support, new opportunities or experiences, and advocacy (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b). Mentoring relationships may be formal (program-initiated) or informal. Formal mentoring relationships are arranged and supported through an outside agency (e.g. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America) or school, while natural mentoring relationships develop without the assistance of an outside agency or school (Black et al., 2010). These two types of mentor relationships may result in distinct outcomes for youth due to the differences in how the relationship begins, the context of the relationship, and how the relationship ends. However, despite the benefits of natural mentoring that will be described below, access to these relationships may be unevenly distributed, which could exacerbate current social and economic inequalities for minoritized youth. Therefore, the purpose of the current paper is to test putative causal and maintaining factors of disparities in natural mentoring.

Although there may be disparities in natural mentoring relationships (NMRs), they have several advantages over program-initiated mentoring relationships in terms of accessibility and the capacity to promote positive development among minoritized youth.

Specifically, these advantages include greater reach, more cultural congruence, and longer-term benefits. Researchers estimate that 70% of all mentoring relationships are naturally occurring and close to 75% of children have an identified natural mentor (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b, 2005b). Natural mentors include teachers, nonparental family members, coaches, community members, and counselors. In contrast to program-initiated relationships, NMRs also tend to occur in a young person's existing social network and typically last longer than formal mentoring relationships (Black et al., 2010; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b). The longer-lasting relationships associated with natural mentoring is a distinct advantage over program-initiated relationships, wherein roughly one-third of formal mentoring programs have difficulty in meeting their expected match duration (Garringer et al., 2017), and relationships that end prematurely have been found to produce negative effects on a mentee's perceived self-worth and competence, psychological well-being, and their future mentoring relationships (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Spencer et al., 2017). Mentors in NMRs are more similar in race and ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, and are more likely to share common interests when compared to formal mentoring programs (Black et al., 2010). These commonalities perhaps make the cultural milieu of the relationship feel more familiar and authentic. The cultural congruity between mentors and mentees might also offer a distinct advantage over program-sponsored relationships. Previous research on the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) mentoring indicates that one of the most common reasons for relationships ending prematurely in the program is the mentors' inability to bridge cultural differences (Spencer, 2007). Moreover, certain groups of youth, such as sexual minority adolescents, may also feel that formal mentoring programs are too hostile and consequently avoid

participating in such programs (Gastic & Johnson, 2009). Therefore, formal mentoring programs may not be inviting or suitable for some youth. Finally, some research indicates that the benefits of formal mentoring programs often dissipate when the relationship ends, whereas the effects of NMRs on some outcomes persist into adulthood (Timpe & Lunkenheimer, 2015). Taken together, NMRs might have the potential to help a greater number of youth than formal mentoring relationships, and avoid several problems associated with formal mentoring programs.

Yet, like many factors that influence positive youth development, NMRs are not evenly distributed among youth. I aim to identify factors that drive disparities among traditionally minoritized communities using data from the longitudinal Add Health study. Overall, I hypothesize that Black children will be less likely to have a teacher as a mentor than White children. Furthermore, due to the current inequalities in school districts and the discriminatory discipline policies, I expect that young people's perceptions of how safe their schools are will differ, and reduced school safety will minimize the opportunity to develop mentoring relationships.

Benefits of Natural Mentoring

Existing research indicates that NMRs are important experiences that positively influence young peoples' development. Much of this research was framed and guided by resiliency theory. This theory focuses on understanding why some youth develop into healthy adults despite exposure to various types of risk, and how this knowledge might improve our understanding of human development and inform policy and practice (Zimmerman, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2002). It considers how positive social, contextual, and individual variables disrupt trajectories to negative outcomes related to

mental distress, problem behaviors, and health (Zimmerman, 2013). Fergus & Zimmerman (2005) posit that these variables, promotive factors, may either be assets housed within an individual (i.e. coping skills and self-esteem) or resources that are external to the individual (i.e. parents and mentors). Within this theoretical frame, NRMs have been investigated as a potential buffer for the predicted negative impacts of living in low resource environments or experiencing adverse childhood experiences (Zimmerman et al., 2002). Research supports this hypothesis. Putnam (2016) suggests that having a relationship with a caring, responsive, and consistent adult is crucial for healthy development and can minimize the effects of significant stress for children and adolescents. Earlier research by Werner and Smith (1982) indicated that children could mature into healthy adults despite being exposed to family instability and poverty when they had emotional support from at least one adult outside the family structure. In their longitudinal study following individuals from the prenatal period to the age of 40-years old, at least one-third of this population was considered at-risk during the prenatal period while two-thirds had experienced two or more risk factors by the age of two (Werner, 1997). However, despite these risk factors, one-third of the group who had experienced four or more risk factors turned into healthy adults (Werner, 1997). These children who were identified as resilient all had one competent and stable adult in their life and a favorite teacher who listened to, challenged, and believed in them (Werner, 1997). Furthermore, recent research has begun to focus on positive childhood experiences, and how these experiences can mitigate the effects of adverse childhood experiences and promote healing and recovery (Crandall et al., 2019). Nurturing, safe, and stable relationships with a caring adult are an influential positive childhood experience that

reduces the impact of adverse childhood experiences (Bethell et al., 2019; Cavell et al., accepted; Crandall et al., 2019). Taken together, research regarding NMRs builds upon these previous findings to determine how NMRs can promote resiliency in youth.

Academics and Employment

Positive mentoring relationships predict young peoples' academic performance, post-secondary education, and future employment opportunities (Erickson et al., 2009; N. M. Hurd et al., 2012; Sánchez et al., 2008; Timpe & Lunkenheimer, 2015). For example, in a longitudinal study, students with mentors earned higher grade point averages, reported greater academic engagement, and completed more post-secondary education when compared to their non-mentored counterparts (Erickson et al., 2009; Hurd et al., 2012). In a separate study, children who reported feeling "more connected" to their natural mentors showed higher levels of student and teacher-reported academic engagement (Hurd & Sellers, 2013). These findings also appear to extend to children who are minoritized, or those who live in low resource environments. Latinx adolescents who had natural mentors reported higher expectations for success and a greater sense of belonging in school and were absent less frequently (Sánchez et al., 2008). When students achieve more in secondary school, they expand their opportunities after high school, often leading to increased salary and job satisfaction later in life. In a study by Timpe and Lunkenheimer (2015), fatherless African-American youth who had a male mentor during adolescence made approximately 214% more in earnings (\$458,000 more in a lifetime) than those without a male mentor. Adults who reported having natural mentors during childhood were also more likely to be oriented to intrinsically rewarding work which impacts long-term earnings, job satisfaction, and advancement opportunities

(McDonald & Lambert, 2014). If these predictions are causal, mentoring relationships play an important role in improving economic mobility and quality of life, which, beyond the immediate benefits, would also impact future generations. However, more research is needed to determine the causal factors for individual and societal outcomes and benefits.

Risk Behavior

Youth who reported NMRs in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health were less likely to engage in drug use and risky sexual behavior (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a). Furthermore, they were less likely to participate in problem behavior including fighting and gang membership (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b). Black et al. (2010) indicated that natural mentoring relationships within a school context were inversely related to reduced substance abuse and violence. Specifically, they found reduced use of cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, and hard drugs, and reduced violence perpetration and victimization. The correlation remained after one year.

Physical and Mental Health

In terms of psychological well-being, adolescents with NMRs reported heightened self-esteem and greater life satisfaction (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b). Another study suggested that African American females with a natural mentor had less steep increases in depressive symptoms in comparison to those without natural mentors (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Males in this same study who had natural mentors had steeper declines in depressive symptoms than those without a mentor supporting the hypothesis that NMR can contribute to resilience in at-risk youth (N. Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Adolescent mothers with natural mentors also experienced fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms. Hurd et al. (2014) posited that the relationship between having a natural

mentor and emerging adult mental health, specifically related to internalizing symptoms, was in part due to the development of coping skills and increased life purpose.

Adolescents in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health study also reported more physical activity (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b). Individuals with natural mentors also report a greater social support network and civic engagement, which can boost mental health and resilience (Fink, 2014; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018).

Mentoring for “At-Risk” Youth

Barriers for Children Labeled “At-Risk”

In addition to the common challenges that all adolescents face, children and adolescents growing up in low socioeconomic status (SES) families and children from traditionally minoritized backgrounds face several barriers that their same-aged peers do not encounter. First, these students often attend overcrowded schools with fewer resources and may not have access to extracurricular activities, advanced classes, college/career counseling, tutoring, and sometimes textbooks (Hagler, 2018; Putnam, 2016). High poverty schools, which are often located within poor communities, have higher rates of truancy, delinquency, disorder, and lower rates of English proficiency (Putnam, 2016). Furthermore, stressors outside of schools may impact the learning environment. For example, Rogers and Mirra (2014) found that economic and social stressors (i.e. hunger, unstable housing, lack of medical care, and community violence) were two to three times more prevalent in high poverty schools than in low poverty schools. Further, due to systemic racism and gerrymandering, race and class are often connected with 90% of “minority segregated” schools having high concentrations of poverty (Siegel-Hawley, 2013). The aforementioned challenges can make working in

these school districts difficult and exhausting, leading to high teacher turnover in high poverty schools, which negatively impacts student achievement, especially in schools with “low performing” and Black students (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). School and community violence, minimal resources, and teacher turnover may lead students to feel unsafe and unsupported in school environments reducing their capacity to form strong relationships with adults in that setting. Students may also be unable to form relationships with teachers due to higher turnover and eventually refrain from trying to form relationships with teachers if they assume teachers will not be staying at their school long-term.

Schools are not the only location in which students from under-resourced backgrounds have difficulty finding and maintaining social supports. Indeed, these students are less likely to interact with adults from outside of their close-knit circles, and much less likely to socialize with adults from outside of their SES, which has profound implications for social mobility. Many of these disparities are compounded by students’ experiences at schools where poorer children are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities, wherein many informal mentoring relationships are forged (Putnam, 2016). Because many parents from lower SES backgrounds are forced to work long hours, they face tremendous challenges supporting their children’s engagement in extracurricular activities, supplemental educational opportunities, and community (e.g. church, sports, music), when compared to their higher SES counterparts (Hagler, 2018; White & Gager, 2007). Children from families of low SES also may not be able to take risks and pursue opportunities that lead to social mobility (Putnam, 2016). For example, a student from an affluent family is supported financially by his or her parents and can be selective about choosing a job while an individual from a less affluent family may be forced to accept the

first job that is offered (Putnam, 2016). Furthermore, due to societal stratification, in which neighborhoods are less diverse, families are often surrounded by solely middle-class/wealthy families or solely poor families (Putnam, 2016). Cumulatively, these conditions result in an increasingly isolated population of youth who lack the financial, social, and educational resources that are necessary for thriving in modern society.

A lack of access to the aforementioned resources may also limit adolescents' opportunities for post-secondary education. Putnam (2016) points out that roughly 90% of rich children apply to college in comparison to 60% of poor children. What is more striking is that 89% of rich children enroll in college compared to 46% of poor children within two years of high school graduation, while college graduation rates are 58% and 12% respectively (Putnam, 2016). Putnam (2016) remarked that it was "as if the poor kids had weights attached to their feet that grew heavier and heavier with each step up the ladder" (p.187). This may be due to the disconnect from academic institutions that students and their parents may feel due to cultural differences (Hagler, 2018).

Educational institutions usually embody upper- and middle-class White values which may hinder other students' sense of belonging and achievement (Hagler, 2018). Due to the unwritten rules and expectations, higher education may be particularly difficult to navigate for these students, many of whom may be first-generation college students (Hagler, 2018). By promoting mentoring relationships, students may be able to access the multiple forms of capital required to navigate systems that may have previously appeared impenetrable,

Additional Benefits of Mentoring for “At-Risk” Students

Researchers find that naturally occurring mentors are particularly important for youth who come from low resource backgrounds or traditionally minoritized backgrounds. These relationships expand access to social capital and knowledge that these students might not otherwise access. Natural mentors increase opportunities in education and careers that may not otherwise be possible due to structural barriers. Erickson et al. (2009) found that disadvantaged youth who had a teacher mentor benefited more in terms of educational attainment than their advantaged peers. They also determined that these students had reduced psychological distress and better vocational outcomes.

Mentors also serve important roles in supporting youth identity development, and this is particularly important for young people who identify as ethnic minorities. Young people whose mentors affirm and support their identity exploration show stronger appraisals of their identity along with other educational benefits. Hurd and colleagues (2012), for example, found that adolescents with NMRs had stronger appraisals of their identity which were subsequently related to long-term educational gains indicating a possible relationship between cognitive and identity development (Hurd et al., 2012). Sánchez and colleagues (2018) also examined the relationships between minority girls and their mentors in the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program. They found that higher mentor support of ethnic-racial identity was positively associated with ethnic identity exploration (Sánchez et al., 2018).

Access to Mentors for Minoritized Youth

Although minoritized youth may benefit more from mentoring than their more advantaged peers, these youth often have less access to mentors (Erickson et al., 2009; Putnam, 2016; Raposa et al., 2018). This gap is apparent in elementary school and increases throughout middle and high school (Putnam, 2016). Reduced and disproportionate access to mentors can exacerbate socioeconomic disadvantage and the opportunity gap (Putnam, 2016; Raposa et al., 2018). Parental wealth and education level both influence the likelihood of having a mentor (Erickson et al., 2009; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Putnam (2016) points out that parents in the top fifth of the socioeconomic hierarchy have more diverse connections and networks as well as 20-25% more close friends than those in the bottom fifth. These affluent parents are able to ensure extracurricular opportunities for their children and introduce them to other adults which can lead to the development of mentoring relationships. Therefore, mentoring relationships are common for children who already have ample resources, and this mentoring relationship is often considered a complimentary resource for middle-class children and adolescents (Erickson et al., 2009). Putnam (2016) describes these familial and community resources as “airbags” that are activated to minimize stress and negative consequences of events and behaviors. Children from poor backgrounds do not have these “airbags” to reduce the negative effects of stress and behavior.

Mentoring access also differs qualitatively between low- and high-income students, with low-income students being more likely to identify family members as natural mentors rather than other nonfamilial adults (Erickson et al., 2009; Raposa et al., 2018). Privileged children are two to three times more likely to have a natural mentor in a

professional role (Putnam, 2016). This gap remains even though poor children are twice as likely than privileged children to report wanting a mentor (Putnam, 2016). Family member mentors do not have the same effects on children and adolescents as nonfamilial adults, and although family members are more likely to provide practical advice, they are less likely to provide academic or career support (Erickson et al., 2009; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018; Raposa et al., 2018).

These familial relationships are often classified as “strong-ties” while other adults such as teachers, professionals, coaches are considered “weak-ties” (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Neighborhood poverty is associated with having “strong-tie” mentors versus “weak-tie” mentors, and lower family income also has been associated with a decreased likelihood of identifying a mentor as a role model (Raposa et al., 2018). Having a “weak-tie” mentor is associated with a range of positive outcomes including higher educational attainment, household income, and civic engagement (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Erickson et al. (2009) found that the teacher mentors’ influence on mentees was the greatest for “disadvantaged youth”, although these youth were less likely to identify teachers as mentors. Teachers are educated and knowledgeable about the education system, enabling them to assist with skill building and encouragement in academic areas (Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013).

In comparison to “strong-tie” mentors, “weak-tie” mentors are also associated with better physical health and less risky behavior including increased physical activity level and birth control use and less cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Hurd et al., 2014). “Weak-tie” mentors may be more likely to expand children and adolescents’ social capital, opportunities, and resources that can promote

social mobility (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). In addition, they may be able to teach and promote coping strategies and a greater sense of life purpose (Hurd et al., 2014). Overall, “weak-tie” mentors can provide social and cultural capital, assist with accessing resources, and create opportunities in education and careers that “strong-tie” mentors may be unable to provide (Raposa et al., 2018). Furthermore, without access to “weak-ties”, Raposa and colleagues (2018) state that “the social capital essential to socioeconomic success tends to cluster for adolescents who are already in a more socioeconomically privileged position” which perpetuates existing inequalities (p. 199). Although it is clear that “weak-tie” mentors can lead to several positive outcomes, it is less clear why children from poor or minoritized backgrounds are less likely to develop these relationships, beyond reduced interpersonal contacts with professionals. While not all children are able to interact with doctors, lawyers, religious leaders, or employers, all children have access to teachers. Therefore, additional research is needed to address this disparity. For example, school factors such as teacher turnover, school violence, and overall school safety may be contributing to reduced access to “weak-tie” mentors for Black students or students from a low SES background.

Hagler’s Model for Natural Mentoring

Considering the benefits discussed in previous literature for disadvantaged youth, Hagler (2018) proposed a theoretical model of natural mentoring that promotes underrepresented students’ academic achievement. Hagler (2018) posits that having a natural mentor, specifically with an adult with social and cultural capital, can influence socioemotional, identity, and cognitive development, which in turn leads to further mentoring and support and success in higher education. In terms of socioeconomic

development, having a mentor may increase trust in nonparental adults, improve sense of self-worth and entitlement to receive help, and promote help-seeking behavior skills. This is critical because children from minoritized backgrounds may feel that they are unable to trust nonfamilial adults due to historical trauma and discrimination (Hagler, 2018).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Calarco (2011) determined that children from working-class families are less likely to request help in the classroom than their middle-class peers, which contributes to classroom inequality. Having a natural mentor has the potential to reverse some of these effects.

To enhance cognitive development, mentors can serve as an important resource in providing the knowledge and skills needed to navigate White, middle-class institutions including higher education (Hagler, 2018). In a study by (Miranda-Chan et al., 2016), mentees reported that their mentors often served as professional or academic sponsors, helping with applications and schoolwork and writing letters of recommendation. Mentors may also provide mentees with access to new experiences and opportunities such as job shadowing, involvement in extracurriculars, or internships. Mentees have also reported being more inspired to try new things and believe in themselves to a higher extent due to their mentors (Miranda-Chan et al., 2016). Lastly, mentors also have the opportunity to discuss privilege and power along with “strategies to decode the system while affirming youth’s cultures of origins” (Hagler, 2018).

Due to the lack of opportunities that students from minoritized backgrounds may have, many of these children may not consider continuing their education. However, mentors can foster identity development by cultivating a “school-relevant self” that enables students to see a future in higher education (Hagler, 2018). Mentors can also

support mentees in staying motivated to reach their academic goals which also predicts school retention (Miranda-Chan et al., 2016). Mentors can support mentees in developing an identity related to school while also fostering their continued development related to family values and culture (M. Hagler, 2018). Overall, these three areas of development in Hagler's (2018) model enable students to develop several natural mentoring relationships that will improve educational outcomes for individuals from traditionally minoritized backgrounds.

Schools as a Context for Mentoring Relationships

Youth spend a majority of their daily life in schools, totaling over 8,000 hours during adolescence (Black et al., 2010). During this time, students interact with several non-parental adults who often serve as natural mentors (Black et al., 2010). These adults, including teachers, counselors, and school administrators, may be especially equipped to assume the role of a mentor due to their background and training (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). In fact, a background in helping professions like teaching and psychology is one of the most consistent moderators of mentoring effectiveness (Raposa et al., 2019). Thus, schools might be a critical component of nurturing positive relationships between young people and adults to promote positive youth development. Yet, these opportunities and experiences are not accessible to everyone, as many children who live in under-resourced communities or who come from minoritized backgrounds often have less positive experiences in school.

One key aspect of these less-than-positive school experiences is how safe children feel in school. School safety is associated with overcrowded schools, larger class sizes, and subsequently fewer individual interactions between adults and children (Perumean-

Chaney & Sutton, 2013). These likely influence the opportunities children have to develop close positive relationships with helpers at the school. Moreover, when schools feel unsafe to children, children are less engaged in academic pursuits and perform worse on academic tasks (Milam et al., 2010). Students' preoccupation with their own safety may perhaps further reduce their chances of having a natural mentor. Importantly, children's access to schools that feel safe is unequal. For example, Perumean-Chaney and Sutton (2013) found that students who were White reported feeling safer at school than those who were Black; moreover, students who felt unsafe were also more likely to attend schools with much larger class sizes. These students, who may benefit from mentoring the most, may be least likely to obtain a mentor due to their background, which in turn, affects perceived school safety.

The Current Study

Currently, there is research suggesting that the effects of mentors differ depending on mentor type (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). However, little research has been done to determine what factors influence access to certain types of mentoring relationships. Therefore, the current study aims to answer the following questions: 1) What factors drive disparities between Black and White students in natural mentoring relationships, specifically for teacher mentors; 2) Are the effects of these factors greater for Black children than White children; and 3) How do perceptions of school safety influence access to natural mentoring relationships? The hypotheses for these research questions are as follows:

Hypothesis 1:

H_0 : Neighborhood safety, SES, and parent education will not predict access to mentors

($\beta_0 = 0$).

H_a : Neighborhood safety, SES, and parent education will predict access to mentors ($\beta_0 \neq$

0). I predict that as SES and parent education increase, access to teacher mentors will also increase. As neighborhood safety decreases, I predict that youth will be less likely to report having a mentor.

Hypothesis 2:

H_0 : Neighborhood safety, SES, and parent education will equally predict access to mentors for Black and White children (no moderation).

H_a : The effects of neighborhood safety, SES, and parent education will be larger for Black children than White children regarding access to mentors (moderation).

Hypothesis 3:

H_0 : School safety will not be correlated with access to mentoring relationships.

H_a : School safety will be correlated with access to mentoring relationships, such that as schools become safer, children will have greater access to mentors.

Hypothesis 4:

H_0 : The impact of race on access to mentors will be unaffected by school safety.

H_a : Black children will report less school safety which will mediate the effects of accessing teacher mentors.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Data for the present study was taken from Wave I and Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). This included a large, nationally representative sample that followed individuals from adolescence to adulthood. Data was collected from 80 U.S. high schools and 52 middle/junior high schools. In 1994-1995, Wave I was collected and included 20,475 participants who were interviewed about various topics including demographics, peer and familial relationships, education, and health status. The second follow-up interview, Wave III, was conducted in 2002. This wave included 15,197 participants who were asked about the presence and features of a naturally occurring mentor since the age of 14. Interviews were administered using a computer-assisted in-person personal interview. For the current study, only participants who completed Wave I and III were included resulting in a final sample of 15,197 participants. Descriptive statistics and other study variables are summarized in Table 2.1.

Measures

Mentoring. To determine whether a participant in the Add Health study had a mentor, the responses for the following question were examined: “Other than your parents or step-parents, has an adult made an important difference in your life at any point since you were 14 years old?” Participants were also asked other questions about

the mentor and their relationship with their mentor. For example, respondents were asked to identify what role the mentor had (i.e. teacher, coach, family member). For the purpose of this study, teacher mentors and all other mentors were used to distinguish between mentor type.

School Safety. Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “You feel safe in your school. Last year, you felt safe in your school.” On a scale from 1-5, higher scores indicated greater disagreement while lower scores indicated strong agreement.

Parent education. Parent education was obtained by a parent survey in which respondents were asked how far they went in school. Participants were able to choose from 10 education options from never attending school to obtaining professional training beyond a 4-year college or university. Higher numbers indicate greater educational attainment.

Neighborhood Safety. To determine neighborhood safety, participants responded yes or no to the following question: “Do you usually feel safe in your neighborhood?”

SES. In the parent survey, respondents were asked how much total income, before taxes, that their family received in 1994. They were asked to include their own income, the income of everyone else in the household, income from welfare benefits, dividends, and all other sources. Income is represented as a numeric value (in thousands).

Table 2.1. Means and Standard Deviations for demographics and study variables

Variables	White		Black	
	With Mentor	Without Mentor	With Mentor	Without Mentor
SES	64.7(57)	50.7(48.4)	29.6(35.9)	34.7(34.5)
Parent Education	5.97(2.3)	5.38(2.4)	5.82(2.33)	5.52(2.36)
School Safety	2.13(0.97)	2.25(1.03)	2.39(1.08)	2.36(1.09)
Neighborhood Safety	0.91(0.23)	0.9(0.3)	0.82(0.37)	0.84(0.36)

Note: Standard deviations are listed in parentheses.

Data Analytic Plan

Each research question was answered using a linear model. The first hypothesis was tested using the following formulae:

$$\hat{y} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ParentEducation} + \beta_2 \text{NeighborhoodSafe} + \beta_3 \text{SES}$$

Wherein \hat{y} represents the predicted log likelihood of having a teacher mentor, β_0 represents the log-likelihood of having a mentor with children from the arithmetic mean (i.e. 0) of parent education and SES, and who rate their neighborhood as unsafe (i.e. 0 on NeighborhoodSafe). β_1 - β_3 represent the predicted net increase on the log likelihood of having a mentor for each unit increase of the predictor.

Similarly, hypothesis 2 is tested using the same model modified to include a moderator in the form of an interaction. Specifically, the model includes a lower order term for Black, and interactions between Black and the three predictors. These interaction parameters represent the extent to which the influence of the parameter on the log-likelihood of having a mentor *depends* on whether or not a child is Black. A significant parameter suggests that the influence of predictors is not equal across racial groups.

$$\hat{y} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ParentEducation} + \beta_2 \text{NeighborhoodSafe} + \beta_3 \text{SES} + \beta_4 \text{Black}$$

$$+ \beta_5 \text{ParentEducation} * \text{Black} + \beta_1 \text{NeighborhoodSafe} * \text{Black} + \beta_7 \text{SES} * \text{Black}$$

The third hypothesis is tested with a statistical mediation model, which is tested using two separate formulae. In formula 1, \hat{y} represents the predicted school-safety of children, and β_1 represents the difference in perceived school safety between Black and White children. This path is considered the “a” path in statistical mediation notation. In formula 2, the \hat{y} represents the log-likelihood of having a teacher mentor, and β_1 represents the difference between races controlling for school safety appraisals, and β_2 represents the influence of school-safety appraisals on the log-likelihood of having a teacher mentor. In this formula, β_2 is considered the “b” path in statistical mediation. I tested the statistical significance of the school-safety using the product of coefficients methods (i.e. a*b) and estimated the standard error of this term using PRODCLIN, which provides asymmetric confidence intervals around the product of coefficients.

$$\hat{y}_{\text{SchoolSafe}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Black} \text{ (a path)}$$

$$\hat{y}_{\text{TeacherMentor}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Black} + \beta_2 \text{SchoolSafe} \text{ (b path)}$$

$$A*b/SE$$

It was also predicted that the effects of these factors would be larger for Black children than for White children. In order to test this, a moderation model was used. Lastly, the potential mediating role of school safety on access to mentoring was tested. It is predicted that being Black leads to lower levels of perceived school safety, which in turn, leads to the inability to develop stable relationships with others, including teachers.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

A breakdown of descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2.1. Based upon this sample, roughly 76% of White children reported having a mentor and 73% of Black children identified a mentor in their life. However, when looking at access to a teacher mentor, 16% of White children identified a mentor in comparison to 11% of Black children, consistent with previous findings related to disparities in access to “weak-tie” mentors. Generally, White youth had higher parental education levels and family income in comparison to Black youth. Specifically, the family income for White youth with a mentor was \$64,700 (SD=\$57,000) while the family income for Black students with a mentor was \$29,600 (SD=\$35,900). Furthermore, on a scale from 1-10 of increasing educational levels, the mean educational level for parents of White youth with mentors was 5.97 (SD=2.3) while the mean for parents of Black youth with mentors was 5.82 (SD=2.33). Importantly, on the school safety questionnaire, White youth reported feeling safer (M = 2.13, SD = .97) in their schools compared to Black youth (M= 2.39, SD = 1.08). Lastly, although not a significant predictor of access to a mentoring relationship, Black youth (M=0.91, SD=.23) reported lower levels of neighborhood safety than White children (M= 0.82, SD= 0.37).

To determine whether SES, parent education, and Neighborhood safety were related to teacher mentor access, a linear model was used. As predicted, results suggest

parent education ($\beta = 0.08(0.01)$, $t= 6.4$, $p<0.001$) and SES ($\beta =0.001(0.004)$, $t=3.4$, $p=0.006$) were both significant predictors of having a teacher mentor. These results suggest access to teacher mentorship was associated with higher parental education and SES. In contrast to our hypothesis, Neighborhood safety was not a significant predictor of access to teacher mentorship. Possible explanations for this result and future studies are discussed below.

To test the impact of race on access to teacher mentorship, a moderation analysis was performed. Contrary to hypothesized, race did not significantly moderate access to mentorship (Table 3.1). The influence of parent income ($\beta = -0.001(0.002)$, $t= -0.65$, $p=0.51$) and parent education ($\beta = -0.04(0.03)$, $t= -1.33$, $p=0.18$) did not differentially impact White and Black youth. However, it should still be noted that there was some variance explained by Blackness that was not explained by SES and parent education.

Lastly, a mediation analysis was used to determine the extent to which school safety mediated the disadvantage of access to a teacher mentor for Black students (Figure 3.1). Being White was positively associated with school safety and access to a teacher mentor and as schools became less safe, youth had less access to a teacher mentor, $\beta= -.06(0.02)$, $t=2.4$, $p=0.01$. The effect being Black on access to a teacher mentor was mediated by school safety, suggesting Black students' lower perception of school safety partially explained decreased access to teacher mentors, $a= 0.13$, $b=-0.08$ and $SEa=0.02$ and $SEb=0.02$. Confidence intervals ranged from -0.02 to -0.004 with a point estimate of -0.01 ($SE=0.003$).

Table 3.1. Results of the linear regression examining the effects of variables on teacher mentor access

Variables	B	SE	t	p-value
SES	0.001	0.0004	3.435	0.0006
Parent Education	0.076	0.012	6.355	<0.001
Race	-0.411	0.07	-5.836	<0.001
Neighborhood Safety	-0.084	0.088	-0.964	0.335

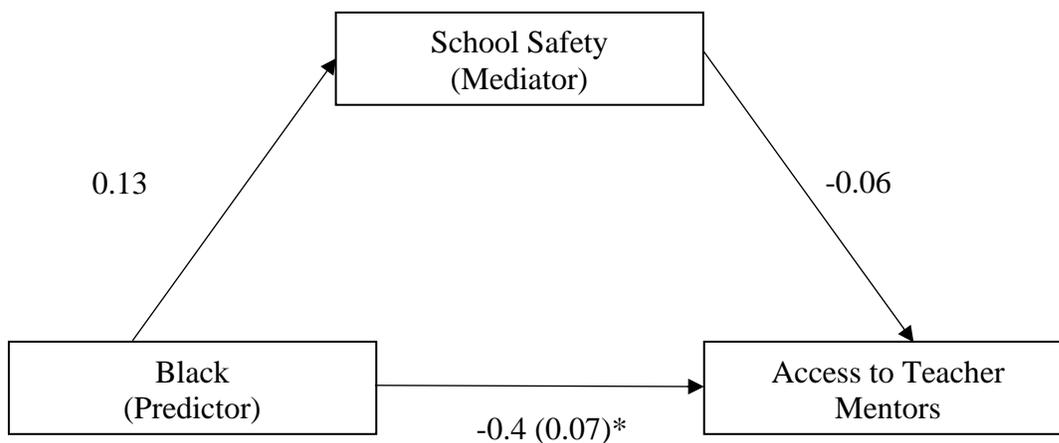


Figure 3.1 The mediating role of school safety on access to teacher mentors. School safety partially mediated the relationship between being Black and access to teacher mentors. Path values are the coefficients (standard errors).

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

In this study, I hypothesized that there would be disparities present between Black and White children related to access to a teacher mentor. I used the national Add Health dataset to determine if and why these disparities exist. The current analysis yielded two important findings. First, White children are more likely to report having a teacher mentor than Black children. This is an important finding because children with access to a teacher mentor generally have higher educational attainment, income, and civic engagement (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Putnam (2016) argues that the disparity in access to mentors leads to a “savvy gap” in which more privileged children have access to dense networks of informal mentors such as teachers that enable them to understand broader institutions and opportunities. Less privileged children are left feeling confused about school practices, unaware of financial opportunities (i.e. scholarships and loans) and occupational opportunities and are often “less savvy” about how to climb the ladder of opportunity (Putnam, 2016). To illustrate this point, Putnam (2016) states:

For virtually all the categories of informal mentors outside the family—teachers, family friends, religious and youth leaders, coaches—kids from affluent families are two to three times more likely to have such a mentor. Privileged children and their less privileged peers are equally likely to report mentoring by a member of their extended family, but family members of privileged kids tend to have more

valuable expertise, so family mentors tend to have more impact on the educational achievements of the privileged kids. All told, the informal mentoring received by privileged kids lasts longer and is more helpful (in the eyes of the kids themselves) than the informal mentoring that poor kids get. In short, affluent kids get substantially more and better informal mentoring. (p. 214)

Although Putnam is largely discussing privilege in terms of SES, his argument applies to other aspects of privilege as well, including race.

The second important finding of the current study is that being Black predicts having less safe schools, which in turn leads to less access to teacher mentors. The statistical mediation analysis indicates that part of the variance explained between being Black and lack of access to mentors is partially accounted for by being educated in less safe schools. Several factors contribute to diminished school safety and perceived school safety. Figure 4.1 displays a theoretical developed by Lacoë (2015) hypothesizing how some factors may interact to influence perceptions of school safety. Students' intersecting identities, including race and gender, as well as neighborhoods, influence their perspectives of their own safety (Shedd, 2015). In her book *Unequal City*, Shedd (2015) determined that students consider their sense of safety in the various places they visit during the day, and there are prominent differences in the experiences across racial and ethnic groups, specifically with Black children reporting the greatest sense of danger. Black students are often more likely to be bullied than children of other races and when bullied about their race and/or ethnicity, they are more likely to have lower grade point averages and miss more school than their peers (Goldweber et al., 2013; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Currently, schools are often considered safe spaces within communities and in

society. However, some research indicates that only 25% of Black youth feel safe in their classrooms (Lacoe, 2015; Shedd, 2015).

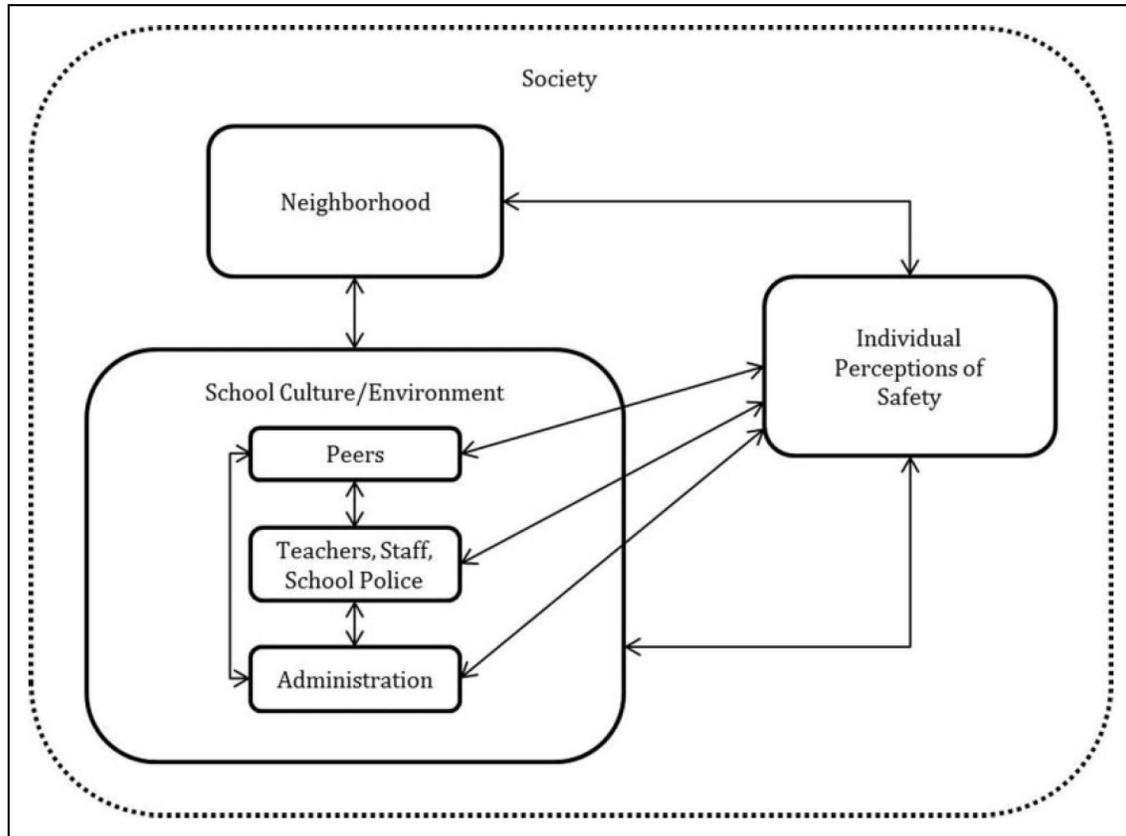


Figure 4.1 Adapted sociological framework of school safety. From “Unequally Safe: The Race Gap in School Safety.” By J. R. Lacoe, 2015. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 13, p. 145.

These findings have several practical implications that diverge from historical approaches to increasing school safety. Specifically, in an attempt to counteract concerns regarding school safety, many schools have increased security through the use of video surveillance, metal detectors, an increased police presence, and have enacted zero-tolerance policies (Lacoe, 2015; Shedd, 2015). However, these practices and policies disproportionately and negatively affect children of color. For example, Lacoe (2015) determined that greater rule enforcement at school decreased White students’ fear but did

not impact Black students' perceptions. Further, Lacoé reported that students who perceived the discipline policies to be fair were more likely to feel safe which was one of the promotive factors for reducing middle school dropout. However, Black youth are more likely to view discipline practices as unfair, and the current literature validates these perceptions of discriminatory discipline and zero-tolerance policies (Education Week Research Center, 2017; Lacoé, 2015; Shedd, 2015). Zero-tolerance policies result in the increased referral of Black students for expulsion and suspension and are nearly five times as likely than their White peers to be disciplined for similar infractions, exacerbating preexisting racial disparities in schools (Brown & Di Tillio, 2013; Girvan et al., 2017; Hoffman, 2014). Further, many schools have begun to resemble correctional facilities with youth being exposed to police at younger ages than in the past, and although Black youth account for 15.5% of the student population in the U.S., 33.4% of those arrested in schools are Black (Education Week Research Center, 2017; Shedd, 2015). Given these statistics, a reasonable question to ask is "Who are these policies designed to serve and protect?"

In addition to school discipline practices, broader neighborhood and societal contexts, including community and school policies, also impact school safety (Lacoé, 2015). Several cities and urban areas across the U.S. have racial stratifications, described as "the geography of inequality" (Shedd, 2015). For example, in Chicago, 52% of the Black population lives in 20 of 77 neighborhoods, each of which is over 90% Black (Shedd, 2015). Because schools are often organized around geographical locations, they often perpetuate racial segregation and social isolation, leading to drastically different educational experiences (Shedd, 2015). As schools continue to grow and expand, districts

are tasked with redistricting which can lead to educational gerrymandering, or redrawing boundaries to exaggerate racial segregation (Siegel-Hawley, 2013). These “minority segregated schools” are more likely to have high concentrations of poverty, decreased school safety, and diminished access to outside networks (Shedd, 2015; Siegel-Hawley, 2013).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, there are several measurement related issues that could compromise the validity of the conclusions. The Add Health questionnaire asked participants to identify the most important mentor in their lives rather than all the mentors in their lives (i.e. “Other than your parents or step-parents, has an adult made an important positive difference in your life at any time since you were 14 years old?”). Then, participants are asked further questions about that individual and the mentoring relationship. Therefore, it is possible that the percentages of students with teacher mentors would have been different if the individuals in the study had been asked about multiple mentors. Secondly, this study is a correlational study and the constructs are not modifiable. Therefore, causation cannot be determined.

Furthermore, although neighborhood safety was examined as a predictor to access to teacher mentors, it did not test the relationship between neighborhood and school safety. Future studies may investigate neighborhood safety and other factors that influence school safety as it partially explains the lack of teacher mentors for Black students.

Implications

Limitations notwithstanding, the findings of this study offer promising implications for schools, their students, and future research. Currently, there are disparities in access to teacher mentors that can be partially explained by race, class, and parent education. Further, Black individuals attend less safe schools and have lower perceived school safety which would suggest that improving the safety of predominately Black schools might be one important factor in improving access to natural mentoring relationships, and is consistent with the broader literature on improving the safety and connectedness in schools to promote child wellbeing. Although schools have often been described as an equalizer in society, they are often instead perpetuating structures of power (Shedd, 2015). In order to remedy this problem, prior literature has suggested school reform and careful consideration of redistricting in order to increase diversity in schools (Siegel-Hawley, 2013); however, quickly changing the demographics of schools may have negative effects for Black students specifically (Seaton & Yip, 2008). Schools with higher diversity have been associated with increased perceptions of cultural discrimination, which in turn negatively impacts self-esteem and life satisfaction (Seaton & Yip, 2008). Seaton and Yip (2008) posit that this could be due to Black children perceiving unfair treatment (in comparison to their White peers) from adults such as teachers and police. Therefore, school districts should consider how to increase diversity within their schools in a way that is not harmful to Black students.

While considering how to safely increase diversity, schools also should reconsider discipline policies and procedures that may differentially affect Black youth and other students of color. Policies should focus on promoting nurturing environments that feel

safe rather than solely reducing violence through the use of policing and zero-tolerance policies (Lacoe, 2015). Future research is needed to determine the specific factors that promote nurturing environments while considering a “deeper theoretical understanding of history, oppression, social hierarchy, and prejudice as variables connected with school safety...” (Astor et al., 2010 p. 70). Student voices also need to be highlighted in this research. In her book *Unequal City*, Shedd (2015) states:

Although as educators and researchers, as politicians and cultural critics, we routinely lament the problems of youth today, we spend precious little time seriously trying to understand their motivations and their experiences. Teenagers have remarkable vantage points on the cities they live in—not only on how their city functions but also on how it does not. They are a walking experiment in the effects that city agencies—in this case, the board of education and the city policing apparatus—can have on a generation of people who are especially vulnerable and may even be harmed by the policies and procedures that seek to ensure their safety. It is long past time to let their voices be heard. (p. xv)

Lastly, teachers should understand the importance of their relationships with students and receive training in mentoring and cultural humility. Teachers have the potential not only to be a positive influence through mentoring, but they can also increase overall access to mentoring by fostering feelings of safety in schools. Lenzi et al. (2017) determined that students who perceived higher levels of teacher support and a greater sense of community were less likely to feel unsafe in schools. As mentioned previously, children who are bullied due to their race often miss more school than other students, so teachers should be cognizant of forming connections and promoting safe environments to

encourage attendance and fostering mentoring relationships for Black students and other minoritized students. Schools may also incorporate school-based mentoring using teachers as mentors or other individuals in professional roles.

In conclusion, mentoring relationships, both natural and formal, can promote positive outcomes for children labeled as “at-risk.” The current research sets the stage to address the disparities in access to mentoring by addressing, promoting, and researching school safety, systemic issues, and overall inequality within schools and communities.

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