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For Youth of Color, Losing Trust in Middle School May Mean Losing the Chance to Make it to College

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PRESS RELEASE

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Loss of Institutional Trust Among Racial and Ethnic Minority Adolescents: A Consequence of Procedural Injustice and a Cause of Life□ Span Outcomes

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In a time of increased concern about how minorities are treated by police, teachers, and other authorities, it is critical to examine whether students of color have experiences in school that lead to mistrust of authorities and what the long-term implications are for young people. In a new set of longitudinal studies, minority youth perceived and experienced more biased treatment and lost more trust over the middle school years than their White peers. Minority students' growing lack of trust in turn predicted whether they acted out in school and even whether they made it to college years later.

The research, which appears in the journal *Child Development*, was conducted at the University of Texas at Austin, Columbia University, and Stanford University.

"The end of seventh grade seems to be a period for developing trust in institutions like school," explains David S. Yeager, assistant professor of developmental psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, who led the study. "When adolescents see that school rules aren't fair to people who look like them, they lose trust and then disengage. But it doesn't have to be this way; teachers have an opportunity to earn minority students' trust, and this helps students do better in middle school and beyond."

Researchers examined students' perceptions of the fairness of their teachers in middle school and how these perceptions related to whether they were disciplined in school and whether they eventually attended a four-year college. Data were drawn from an eight-year study, conducted two years in a row at the same school, that tracked students in the northeast region of the United States from sixth grade until college entry. In one part of the study, researchers surveyed 277 White and African American students twice yearly; about a fifth of the students were eligible for free or reducedprice lunch, an indicator of poverty. In a followup part of the study, they surveyed 206 White and Latino students from Colorado twice yearly; most of the students were

from working-class families and these students have not been followed through college entry.

Researchers assessed trust by asking the students to complete surveys that featured questions such as “I am treated fairly by teachers and other adults at my school” and “Students in my racial group are treated fairly by teachers and other adults at [my] middle school.” Students were also asked questions that examined their perceptions of how minority students were treated, such as “If a Black or White student is alone in the hallway during class time, which one would a teacher ask for a hall pass?” Academic achievement was assessed from school records (including grade point averages in core classes); disciplinary incidents were also determined from school records.

In the first study, researchers found that African American students reported more racial disparities than White students in decisions involving school discipline. School records confirmed this: Only minorities were disciplined for defiance and disobedience, not White students. This suggests the possibility of bias: When teachers have to make a judgment call, minority students may be more likely to be disciplined than their White peers. Minority students notice this, Yeager says, and it undermines their trust in school.

Every semester in middle school, African American students became more aware of this bias and lost trust. By seventh grade, this loss of trust made African American students more likely to get in trouble in school and defy school rules, even if before losing trust, they had never been in trouble and had made good grades. African American students who lost trust in school in seventh grade were then less likely to make it to a four-year college six years later.

A similar pattern was found among Latino students in the second study. The more semesters students spent in middle school, the more they came to distrust that their teachers were fair.

But this pattern doesn’t have to be inevitable, the authors point out. The research also featured a pilot randomized experiment, which was built into the study and designed to serve as an antidote to students’ mistrust of staff in school settings. Building on pioneering research by Geoffrey Cohen at Stanford University on “wise” critical feedback, researchers randomly assigned a group of 88 seventh grade social studies students (White and African American) to receive a single display of respect from their teachers (who were White): a hand-written note on a first-draft essay encouraging them to meet a higher standard and implying that the teacher believed in them as they tried to do so. African American students who received these notes had fewer disciplinary incidents over the entire next year and were more likely to be enrolled in college six

years later.

“Youth of color enter middle school aware that majority groups could view them stereotypically,” notes Valerie Purdie-Vaughns, associate professor of psychology at Columbia University, who coauthored the study. “But when teachers surprise them with an early experience that conveys that they are not being seen in terms of stereotypes, but rather respected, it creates trust and may set in motion a positive cycle of expectations.”

In this study, neither trust nor receiving the intervention predicted subsequent college entrance for White students as it did for minority students. The authors suggest that for students with group-based advantages, such as majority-group students who are more positively stereotyped and overrepresented, a loss of trust or a poor relationship with a teacher might be only a temporary setback.

The study can inform educational policy and practice. The researchers caution that the one-time note is not an intervention that is ready for wide-scale use. Instead, they say, it highlights that teachers can work more systematically to create a classroom climate that boosts the trust of students who may have to contend with discrimination.

The research was funded by the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the W. T. Grant Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and was supported by the Mindset Scholars Network (www.mindsetscholarsnetwork.org).

The Society for Research in Child Development will hold its Biennial Meeting in Austin, Texas, April 6-8, 2017. Members of the media are encouraged to attend to hear presentations on the latest research. Those journalists interested in learning more about this year's conference, or obtaining a press pass, should contact hklein@srcd.org. Conference attendance is free for qualified press with advanced registration.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Loss of Institutional Trust Among Racial and Ethnic Minority Adolescents: A Consequence of Procedural Injustice and a Cause of Life-Span Outcomes by Yeager, DS (University of Texas at Austin), Purdie-Vaughns, V (Columbia University), Hooper, SY (University of Texas at Austin), and Cohen, GL (Stanford University). Copyright 2017 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.