

## **She Did It on Purpose: Teacher Education Students' Interpersonal Attributions of Black Girls' Behavior and Classroom Disciplinary Decisions**

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### **Abstract**

Black youth overwhelmingly experience excessive discipline and exclusionary practices in schools, which contribute to the growing achievement and opportunity gaps between Black and White students. This study examined 915 teacher education students' (TES') interpersonal attributions of classroom behaviors of elementary age Black and White girls, using sets of vignettes and questionnaires to analyze the impacts of student race on TES' interpersonal attributions and consequent discipline decisions. The findings indicate that TES attribute a more internal locus of control and controllability to the behaviors of Black girls than White girls displaying comparable behaviors. TES' more often refer White girls to school psychologists and more often ignore the classroom misbehavior of White girls than Black girls at statistically significant rates. Incorporating explicit, anti-racism classroom management into teacher education curricula could address TES' racially biased interpersonal attributions of stu-

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dent behaviors, and create more equitable and safe educational spaces for Black students.

*Key Words:* discipline gap, racial bias, attribution theory, interpersonal attributions, teacher education students

### Introduction

Society touts education as the “great equalizer” that opens doors to new opportunities, the key to success. For so many families, education is trusted to be a shot at upward mobility in socioeconomic status, offering a brighter future for their children. Despite such widely advertised assurances from the education system that are meant to bring hope and promise to all, the “achievement gap”, which Ladson-Billings (2006) has pointed out to actually be an opportunity gap between Black students and their White counterparts, prevails and is connected to the discipline gap (Morris & Perry, 2016). This discipline gap sees Black students receiving exclusionary discipline at rates often three times those of their White counterparts (Gregory et al., 2010). Excessive disciplinary policies that overwhelmingly target Black youth create educational spaces that are systematically othering Black students instead of cultivating equality, safety, and learning opportunities, especially in urban landscapes (Skiba et al., 2014). While countless studies have examined the effects of racial bias against Black boys in educational settings (Caldwell et al., 2009; Gregory et al., 2010; Battey & Leyva, 2016), there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to the effects of racial bias against Black girls in educational settings (Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

Research suggests that teachers play a role in the discipline gap (e.g., Gregory et al., 2016). Evidence of teachers’ racial biases has been studied across various grade levels, and biases against Black students are present as early as preschool (Yates & Marcelo, 2014; Gilliam et al., 2016). Disturbingly, research indicates that regardless of their race, gender, or language(s) spoken, teachers possess a racial bias against Black students that is on par with the general public (Starck et al., 2020). Starck et al. (2020) ran two studies comparing implicit and explicit bias, respectively, in teachers compared to the general public. They found that the differences in implicit racial bias measures between teachers and nonteachers were statistically significant but inconsequential (likely due to high statistical power), and no statistically significant differences were found in explicit bias measures between the two samples (Starck et al., 2020). This means that the racialized socialization of teachers’ thinking, attitudes, dispositions, and even be-

haviors occurs long before they become teachers and likely throughout the entire duration of their lives. While teachers cannot eliminate all of their implicit biases just as no other professional can, teachers can and should be trained and held accountable to ensure that their subconscious biases are not harming the students and the communities that they serve through the decisions they make at the classroom level.

As student populations continue to grow and become increasingly racially diverse, student achievement rates are continuing to plummet, and new teachers are entering the field with fewer qualifications than ever before thanks to fast tracked and alternative certification pathways (Wilson, 2015). As a result, less qualified teachers are systematically funneled into school districts within communities of lower socioeconomic status, which are already lacking critical resources (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Wilson, 2015). To compound existing issues in these communities, Black children are more likely than White children to receive inadequate instruction from inexperienced and perfunctorily trained teachers who are predisposed to project their biases surrounding “race, class, gender, and family backgrounds” onto their students (Cooper, 2003, p. 102). Urban schools notoriously have the highest rates of such teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019) and studies have found that “the difference in teacher quality may represent the single most important school resource differential between minority and White children [that] ... explains at least as much of the variance in student achievement as socioeconomic status” (Cooper, 2003, p. 105).

If teachers are under the false impression that hard work is all it takes for anyone to succeed, which is the clarion song of a meritocratic belief system, then they are more likely to make cultural deficit-based attributions rooted in racist and classist stereotypes to the disproportionately low achievement rates of Black students (Cooper, 2003, p. 103). These biases, in turn, are manifested in teachers’ instructional practices such as “unfair judgment and discipline, watered down curriculum, or blatant neglect,” which negatively affect students’ self-efficacy and motivation (Cooper, 2003, p. 103 & p. 113). Furthermore, teachers’ misplaced interpersonal attributions of student behavior can impact how students are labeled and, consequently, determine whether or not they are able to access the appropriate and often necessary educational services and supports (Cooper, 2003). Less qualified teachers are also more likely to blame students for their failures rather than take responsibility and reexamine the effectiveness of their own instruction (Cooper, 2003). Such teachers project their biases onto Black students by making disciplinary decisions that are informed by their

own racially biased interpersonal attributions (Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2022). disciplinary decisions that can negatively alter a Black girl's entire educational trajectory, especially when they are made early on in her academic career.

### ***Behavioral Beliefs about Black Girls in Schools***

From birth, Black girls are subjected to images of their adultification in all forms of media, within their communities, and in major public systems such as the education and juvenile systems (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2016). Adultification is the “assignment of more adultlike characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls,” which is “a form of age compression” that renders them vulnerable to be viewed as hypersexual, disorderly, and conniving (Morris, 2016, p. 34). Data from a report published by the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality in 2017 shows that adults perceive Black girls to be less innocent, more adult-like, and needing less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than their White peers, especially in the age range of 5–14 (Epstein et al., 2017). This poses many issues for Black girls both in and out of school because their behaviors are easily misattributed by those who assume that they are acting with intent even when they are not. Such misattributions lead to increased chances of misunderstanding between teachers and their Black students, which contribute to disproportionate rates of punitive treatment of Black students, specifically Black girls (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017). Schools do not recognize nor honor the adaptive behaviors that Black girls have learned in response to oppressive conditions in their lives that are defined by “race, sexuality, class, and gender” and, instead, schools punish them (Morris, 2016, p. 35). This begins in classrooms with teachers who first make assumptions about the roots and nature of these behaviors, consciously or not, and then follow them up with disciplinary decisions. Attribution theory can be used as a framework that may explain these decisions.

### ***Teachers' Attributions of Student Behaviors***

One avenue of research through which teachers' implicit biases can be addressed is attribution theory. Attribution theory of motivation stemmed from social psychology in the 1950's and has evolved over the last several decades (Weiner, 1979, 1986, 2018). It describes the human tendency to “search for the causes of our successes and failures,” which directly impact self-efficacy and expectations for future circumstances and serve as a motivational stimulus for action or lack thereof

(Hunter & Barker, 1987, p. 51). Perceptions of others' responsibility for their actions are connected to a multitude of interpersonal reactions including negative ones such as hostility, stigmatization, and racial stereotyping (Graham, 2020).

Attribution theory can be used as a lens to examine racial violence, which begins in the school setting – in the classroom, to be exact. As a vastly understudied group (Carter Andrews et al. 2019), Black elementary age girls are the first and the earliest to bear the brunt of the racial biases that they will continue to be subjected to throughout the course of their lives. This study will examine the relationship between teacher education students' interpersonal attributions of student behavior and the consequent disciplinary action decisions that teacher education students make as a function of female elementary students' race.

In attribution theory, success and failure are attributed to native ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck, with native ability and effort being the most dominating factors in teachers' perceived attributions of student behavior (Hunter & Barker, 1987; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). All four attributions exist at the intersection of three spectrums—locus of causality, stability, and controllability (Hunter & Barker, 1987; Weiner, 1979). This study focuses on interpersonal attributions of locus of causality and controllability.

Interpersonal attributions are perceived attributions of others' behaviors; locus of causality refers to one's "perception of the location of the cause" for a behavior or outcome (Hunter & Barker, 1987, p. 51). An internal locus of causality indicates a level of responsibility and maneuverability such that behaviors or outcomes are a direct result of a student's conscious decisions pertaining to areas such as effort or native ability. The locus of causality of a student's behavior does not only assume the vantage point intrapersonally of the student themselves, but also interpersonally by way of their teacher (Weiner, 1979; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). While attributions of success to an internal locus of causality can raise a student's self-esteem and illicit praise from their teacher, attributions of failure to an internal locus of causality result in frustration and anger from their teacher (Hunter & Barker, 1987; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

Controllability refers to the degree to which a student is in control of their behavior - whether they could influence their behavior by controlling the cause of it, which would ultimately lead to their success or failure (Hamilton & Lordan, 2023; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). Similar to the effects of attributions of failure to an internal locus of causality, attributions of failure to internal controllability also result in feelings of anger and indignation from their teacher (Hunter & Bark-

er, 1987; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). Having both moral and control facets, teachers' evaluations of students yield responses and emotions that are akin to benevolence, support, criticism and blame (Weiner, 1979). The way that a teacher responds to their students' behaviors, therefore, sends strong messages to the students about their ability and effort in the classroom (Graham, 2020). In distinguishing between locus of causality and controllability, one could say that locus of causality refers to where the behavior is originating from and controllability is an interpretation of the degree to which the behavior is static or dynamic, or whether it could be changed by the student.

It is crucial to recognize that perceived attributions are not necessarily reality because these perceptions are constructed with the heavy influence of personal biases that the observers of the behaviors are not fully aware of (Hamilton & Lordan, 2023; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). Differences in racialized culture between teachers and their students can lead to teachers making biased attributions of student behavior since their views of what constitutes "normal" and "abnormal" behavior may conflict with what students understand it to be (Hosterman et al., 2008). Despite this liability, students' recommendation for services and placement in special education programs, for example, heavily rely on teacher ratings, which are based on accumulated observations of student behavior that are by no means free of bias (Hosterman et al., 2008).

When a teacher is annoyed with their student's performance, this can signal to the student that they are responsible for their unsatisfactory behavior and should have been able to control it even if that is not possible (Graham, 2020). Conversely, when a teacher displays understanding and sympathy for their student despite the student's performance, this can signal to the student that they would not have been able to improve their unsatisfactory behavior because it is outside of their control (Graham, 2020). Figure 1 shows the progression from attribution to emotional response and, finally, to action (Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

In addition to sending nuanced signals to students about their ability and effort, teachers' interpersonal attributions of student behaviors may impact the disciplinary decisions that teachers make in response to student behavior (Hunter & Barker, 1987; Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023).

### ***Teacher Decisions about Student Behaviors***

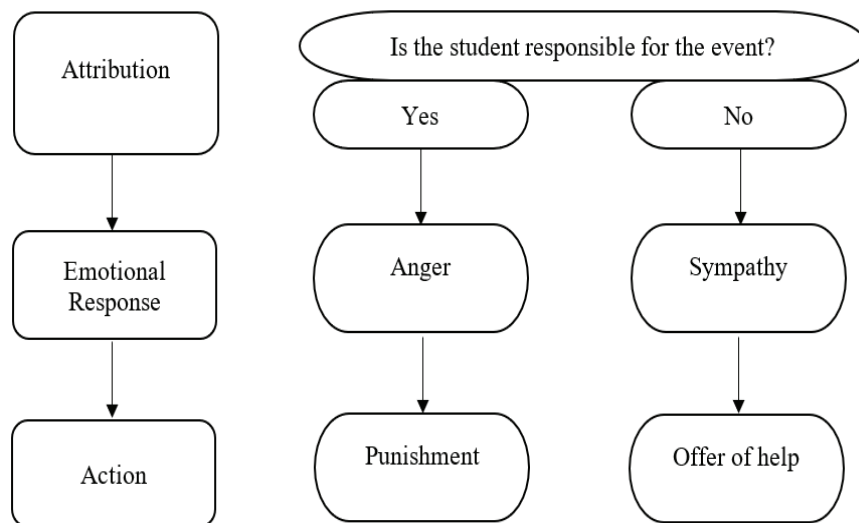
Teachers make hundreds of second-by-second decisions every day, which include disciplinary decisions that impact their students both in the short term and the long term. According to Cameron (2006),

School discipline is defined as school policies and actions taken by school personnel with students to prevent or intervene with unwanted behaviors, primarily focusing on school conduct codes and security methods, suspension from school, corporal punishment, and teachers' methods of managing students' actions in class. (p. 219)

While all schools have disciplinary policies that encompass some combination of these methods, it is becoming more and more apparent that such exclusionary discipline methods may do more harm than good to the students subjected to them (Skiba et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2010). Teachers' methods of managing classroom behaviors can be particularly problematic as they reflect discriminatory practices that overwhelmingly refer Black students to administrators for disciplinary action even when their White counterparts display comparable behaviors (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Both socioeconomic status and race have been found to be statistically significant predictors of suspension rates as school disciplinary practices, including individual teacher disciplinary decisions, reflect racist and classist biases (Cameron, 2006; Crenshaw et al., 2015). Without any conscious and structured efforts to reflect and reform, school disciplinary practices often end up having negative effects on the most vulnerable students who heavily rely on

**Figure 1**

*Teacher Reactions to Interpersonal Attributions Toward Student Classroom Behavior*



*Note:* From Lorenzetti & Johnson (2023). Copyright CC-BY-4.0-DEED

education as a vehicle to escape from a cycle of maximally maintained inequality (Cameron, 2006). Conventional disciplinary actions promoted by and used in schools are detrimental to students' short term and long term healthy development and well-being (Cameron, 2006).

Most of the teacher workforce in urban cities tends to be predominantly White and female with little to no experience serving Black children and their communities (Husband & Bertrand, 2021). Unsurprisingly, this poses problems in how teachers perceive, interpret, and react to the classroom behaviors of Black girls, especially if the teachers implicitly perceive Black girls to be more behaviorally challenged than their White counterparts (Husband & Bertrand, 2021). Black girls in urban cities like New York and Boston are disproportionately affected by extreme school discipline policies such as suspensions, which remove students from the classroom and adversely impact the academic, social, and emotional wellbeing of these students (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Disproportionate suspension rates are not only an issue in urban areas- a 2021 study of suspensions across 15 school districts in Ohio, for example, found that 67% of the suspensions involved Black girls and only 20% involved White girls (Husband & Bertrand, 2021). Other states have performed similar analyses. Schools are a place where Blackness is policed and punished rather than understood and embraced (Morris, 2016).

### ***Justification for Research and Research Questions***

The research presented thus far has shown that teachers' interpersonal attributions of student behavior influence disciplinary decisions, and that teachers' disciplinary decisions reflect discriminatory practices that disproportionately refer Black students to administrators for disciplinary action (e.g., Cameron, 2006; Crenshaw et al., 2015). Since Black girls first encounter these trends in the classroom with teachers, it is vital to investigate whether teachers' disciplinary decisions are influenced by racially biased interpersonal attributional beliefs even earlier, when they are teacher education students in teacher preparation programs. This brings forth the following research questions:

1. Do teacher education students attribute more internal causality and controllability of behaviors to Black elementary age girls than to their White peers?
2. Do teacher education students' disciplinary decisions disproportionately remove more Black elementary age girls from the classroom than their White peers?



3. Do teacher education students make different disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior based on interpersonal attributions for Black elementary age girls compared to their White peers?

Since schools are such dangerous places for Black girls, it is vital to examine if corrective measures could be taken to prevent the aggressive encounters that Black girls have with the public education system. To do so, it is necessary to assess the extent to which teacher education students' (TES) interpersonal attributions of elementary age girls' behaviors vary by student race. Research shows that teacher performance and classroom decisions are affected by their conscious and subconscious beliefs about their students' "intelligence, character, and potential," which can fluctuate based on student characteristics such as race (Cooper, 2003, pp. 101-102). Teachers of all races and even those with good intentions can be susceptible to racial stereotypes and their associated beliefs in consequences for students they hold personally responsible for their actions (Graham, 2020). *The first hypothesis is that TES attribute more internal causality and controllability of behaviors to Black elementary age girls than to their White peers.*

Research also indicates that racialized disciplinary decisions made by teachers are, *inter alia*, contributing to the achievement gap between Black and White students by removing Black girls from the classroom (Husband & Bertrand, 2021). Exclusionary disciplinary action results in reduced access to instructional time that is critical for education (Gregory et al., 2016). Disproportionate rates of suspension put Black girls at an educational disadvantage compared to their White counterparts by serving as a physical barrier to academic success with far reaching effects. *The second hypothesis is that the disciplinary decisions that TES make disproportionately remove Black girls from the classroom more than their White peers.*

The intersection of interpersonal attributions and the disciplinary decisions made by TES is worthy of exploration. If the findings indicate that there are disparities between interpersonal attributions and consequent disciplinary action choices made by TES for Black elementary age girls and their White peers, then there is strong evidence that racism will manifest itself when these TES enter real classrooms and work with real children. Such findings would demonstrate a dire need for a fundamental overhaul of teacher education programs to preserve the social, emotional, and academic well-being of Black elementary age girls. *The third hypothesis is that TES make different disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior based on interpersonal attributions for Black elementary age girls compared to their White peers.*

## Methods

This correlational study is an extension of previous work, which found that TES were more likely to believe that Black elementary age boys held more internal causality and controllability than their White peers with similar behavior (Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). The goal of the current study was to extend measures of interpersonal attributions of student behavior into the population of Black elementary age girls and to gain insight on how TES' interpersonal attributions of student behavior influence their disciplinary decisions as a function of student race.

### **Sample**

The participants in this study are 915 TES in an urban public university network of schools in the northeastern United States. The sample in this study is representative of the U.S. public school teacher population in terms of gender but not necessarily race. Of the participants in this study, 79% are female and 47.9% are White. Of all public school teachers in America, 77% are female and 80% are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Despite the study sample of teachers being more racially diverse than the national public school teacher population, it is important to note that the teaching force remains predominantly female and White both in this study and in public schools across the country. Participant demographics are shown in Table 1.

### **Recruitment**

This study recruited 915 TES from an urban public university network of schools in the North-Eastern United States to complete a survey that was split into two sections: a set of classroom behavior vignettes, and a demographic questionnaire. TES were recruited through their respective departments' research systems, and they received a research credit for one of their courses in return for study completion.

### **Overview of Instruments**

**Classroom Behavior Vignettes Survey.** The survey used to collect data included four pairs of vignettes with pictures of girls approximately 8-12 years of age (one Black and one White in each pair) with analogous behavioral pathologies. The students represented in odd number vignettes (1, 3, 5 and 7) are White elementary age girls while the students represented in even number vignettes (2, 4, 6 and 8) are Black elementary age girls. Vignette pair 1 includes students represented in vignettes 1 and 2, vignette pair 2 includes students rep-

represented in vignettes 3 and 4, vignette pair 3 includes students represented in vignettes 5 and 6, and vignette pair 4 includes students represented in vignettes 7 and 8. The behaviors briefly described for students in each of the four vignette pairs are characteristic of disorganization, disruptive behavior, ADHD, and internalization, respectively, operationalized using the ICD-11.

**Table 1**  
**Participant Demographics**

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Age (n = 906)		
<20	42	4.6
20-29	625	68.1
30-39	154	16.9
40-49	59	6.3
50-59	25	2.6
60-69	1	0.1
70-79	0	0
80-89	1	0.1
No response	9	1
Gender (n = 909)		
Female	723	79
Male	171	18.7
Other	15	1.6
No response	6	0.7
Race/Ethnicity (n = 909)		
White	435	47.9
Hispanic or Latinx	239	26.3
Black	106	11.7
Native American	9	1.0
Asian	171	18.8
Other	48	5.3
No response	6	0.7
# of semesters completed (n = 892)		
1-2	770	84.2
3-4	81	8.8
5-6	32	3.5
7-8	5	0.5
9-10	4	0.4
No response	23	2.5

Note: When asked for their Race/Ethnicity, participants were instructed to check all that applied, so N will total more than 909 and percentage will sum to more than 100%.

To more closely examine TES' interpersonal attributions of student behavior, a survey question pertaining to causality and controllability is included. For each of the eight vignettes, the question asks respondents, "On a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being 'not at all' and 6 being 'completely,' in this situation, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?" The first statement is, "The student's behavior is due to circumstances outside [her] control." TES who report a lower rating on this statement believe that the student in the vignette has a more internal locus of causality. The second statement that follows this question is, "The student's behavior is due to choices [she] makes." TES who report a higher rating on this statement believe that the student in the vignette has more internal controllability for her actions and, therefore, is responsible for the amount of effort she puts forth to mitigate her behavior.

Following the attribution measures, the survey requires TES to rank five disciplinary action choices in response to the student's behavior described in each of the eight vignettes: institute a warning system with a consequence, modify the classroom to accommodate the behavior, develop a behavioral plan with the student's input, refer the student to the school psychologist, and ignore the behavior. Participants had the option of leaving any question blank.

These vignettes were developed in partnership with in-service teachers and other educational professionals to assess the clarity in reading and answering the survey questions, and to assess the validity of the vignettes using male protagonists (Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2022). There is research supporting the use of vignettes to examine racism in educational settings; in a meta-analysis of educational research on racism, "vignette experiments are the most frequently utilized in research on racism in U.S. education," making up 61.4% of studies reviewed in the meta-analysis (Janssen, 2023, p. 11).

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Upon completing the survey questions in the classroom behavior vignettes instrument, participants completed a demographic questionnaire in which they provided data about their ages, genders, races/ethnicities, and other background information pertaining to the nature of and their progress within their teacher education programs. Participants had the option of leaving any question blank for this instrument as well.

### **Data Analysis**

Statistical analyses were performed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. First, descriptive statistics about

the sample were determined. Next, paired samples *t*-tests were used to analyze whether there is a statistically significant difference in TES' interpersonal attributions between Black and White elementary age girls in each of the four vignette pairs - one set of tests was used for causality and another set of tests was used for controllability. Each pair of vignettes represented the same behavioral pathology criteria.

Additional paired samples *t*-tests were used to analyze whether there is a statistically significant difference in disciplinary decisions to remove students from the classroom via referral of the student to the school psychologist between Black and White elementary age girls in each of the four vignette pairs. In order to run these comparisons, it was necessary to dummy code the ranked-choice options for disciplinary decisions to represent choices that either kept the student in the classroom (institute a warning system with a consequence, modify the classroom to accommodate the behavior, develop a behavioral plan with the student's input, and ignore the behavior) as 0 or that removed the student from the classroom (refer the student to the school psychologist) as 1.

Finally, binary logistic regression models were used to analyze whether TES make different disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior based on interpersonal attributions for Black elementary age girls compared to their White peers. For these regressions, causality and controllability were used as predictor variables of disciplinary decisions that either keep or remove students from the classroom for each of the eight vignettes. The same dummy coded variable that was used in the analysis of data for the second research question was also used in the analysis of data for the third research question.

Exploratory analyses consisted of binary logistic regression models to analyze the effects of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and number of semesters completed in the current education program on TES' disciplinary decisions that remove students from the classroom via referral of the student to the school psychologist and that ignore the student behavior. For these tests, it was necessary to dummy code ranked-choice options for disciplinary decisions. Wilcoxon signed rank tests were used to analyze differences in the means of two binary variables for each vignette pair: keeping students in the classroom (institute a warning system with a consequence, modify the classroom to accommodate the behavior, develop a behavioral plan with the student's input, and ignore the behavior) or removing them from the classroom (refer the student to the school psychologist), and choosing any form of disciplinary action in response to student behavior (institute a warning system with a consequence, modify the classroom to accommodate the behavior, develop a behavioral plan with the student's input, and refer

the student to the school psychologist) or choosing to ignore it. Additionally, using the same dummy coded variable as described above, paired samples *t*-tests were used to analyze whether there is a statistically significant difference in disciplinary decisions to ignore student behavior between Black and White elementary age girls in each of the four vignette pairs.

### Results

This section describes the results of the statistical analyses, which were used to answer the three research questions in this study. For all analyses, a probability value of  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

#### *Locus of Causality*

The results of the paired samples *t*-tests for interpersonal attributions reveal that overall, TES attributed a more internal locus of causality of behaviors to Black elementary age girls than White elementary age girls, which supports the first study hypothesis. The mean scores on the causality question, which asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement that “the student’s behavior is due to circumstances outside [her] control,” were lower for Black students than White students in three of the four vignette pairs and indicate a more internal attribution of causality for Black students. The second pair of vignettes, which represents students displaying disruptive behavior, was the only pair for which the mean scores on the causality question are higher for Black students, indicating less internal attribution of behavior for these students. The difference in the mean scores on causality for each vignette pair was statistically significant. The results of the locus of causality paired samples *t*-tests are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**  
***Locus of Causality Paired Samples t-tests***

	<i>Behavioral Pathology</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pair 1	Disorganization	4.581	<.001***
Pair 2	Disruptive Behavior	-8.820	<.001***
Pair 3	ADHD	4.982	<.001***
Pair 4	Internalizing Behavior	4.162	<.001***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

### ***Locus of Controllability***

The results of the paired samples *t*-tests for interpersonal attributions also revealed that overall, TES attributed a more internal locus of controllability of behaviors to Black elementary age girls than White elementary age girls, which supports the first research question hypothesis. The mean scores on the controllability question, which asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement that “the student’s behavior is due to choices [she] makes,” were higher for Black students than White students in three of the four vignette pairs and indicated a more internal attribution of controllability. The second pair of vignettes, which represented students displaying disruptive behavior, was the only pair for which the mean scores on the controllability question were lower for the Black student, indicating less belief in Black students’ internal controllability. The difference in the mean scores on controllability for each vignette pair was statistically significant. The results of the locus of controllability paired samples *t*-tests are shown in Table 3 below.

### ***Disciplinary Decisions***

The results of the paired samples *t*-tests used to determine whether TES’ disciplinary decisions disproportionately remove more Black elementary age girls from the classroom than their White peers do not support the second research question hypothesis. Since the dummy coded variable in these tests used 0 to represent disciplinary decisions that keep students in the classroom and 1 to represent the disciplinary decision that remove students from the classroom, a higher *t*-score indicated more frequent decisions to remove students from the classroom. Contrary to the predictions made in the second research question hypothesis, the means are higher for White students than Black students in three of the four vignette pairs and show an overall more frequent removal from the classroom for White students than Black students.

**Table 3**  
***Locus of Controllability Paired Samples t-tests***

	<i>Behavioral Pathology</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pair 1	Disorganization	-12.919	<.001***
Pair 2	Disruptive Behavior	8.865	<.001***
Pair 3	ADHD	-4.712	<.001***
Pair 4	Internalizing Behavior	-5.847	<.001***

Note: \**p*<0.05, \*\**p*<0.01, \*\*\**p*<0.001

For the second pair of vignettes, once again, the opposite holds true. The difference in the mean scores on removal from the classroom for each vignette pair is statistically significant. The results of the removal from the classroom paired samples *t*-tests are shown in Table 4 below.

### **Attributions and Disciplinary Decisions**

To explore whether TES make different disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior based on interpersonal attributions for Black elementary age girls compared to their White peers, binary logistic regression models were run for each of the eight vignettes presented in the vignettes using causality and controllability as predictor variables of disciplinary decisions that either keep or remove students from the classroom. The results of these tests show that TES' interpersonal attributions of causality and controllability made a statistically significant difference in their disciplinary decisions for some, but not all the students. The adjusted odds ratio is used to examine the nature of the statistically significant relationships between TES' interpersonal attributions and the race of the elementary age girls. In this context, the adjusted odds ratio indicates that, compared to keeping the student in the classroom, the likelihood that a TES would remove a student from the classroom changes based on the participant's interpersonal attributions of causality or controllability to the student's behavior.

**Locus of Causality.** There are five statistically significant relationships between interpersonal attributions of causality and TES' disciplinary decisions: for Student 3, Student 4, Student 5, Student 6 and Student 8. The results of the binary logistic regressions for interpersonal attributions of causality are shown in Table 5 on the next page.

The reference for the binary dependent variable (keeping the student in the classroom versus removal from the classroom) was keep-

**Table 4**  
**Removal from the Classroom Paired Samples *t*-tests**

	<i>Behavioral Pathology</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pair 1	Disorganization	3.217	<.001***
Pair 2	Disruptive Behavior	-4.573	<.001***
Pair 3	ADHD	3.626	<.001***
Pair 4	Internalizing Behavior	14.103	<.001***

*Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$*



ing the student in the classroom. For all students who showed significant relationships, the odds of participants recommending them to the school psychologist (i.e., removal from the classroom) instead of keeping them in the classroom increased significantly as the degree to which participants rated their behavior as being due to an external locus of causality increased: Student 3 (OR=1.518,  $p=.012$ ); Student 4 (OR=1.348,  $p=.013$ ); Student 5 (OR=1.261,  $p=.002$ ); Student 6 (OR=1.207,  $p=.024$ ); and Student 8 (OR=1.226,  $p=.016$ ).

**Locus of Controllability.** Regarding attributions of controllability, there were seven statistically significant relationships between interpersonal attributions of controllability and TES' disciplinary decisions: for Student 1, Student 3, Student 4, Student 5, Student 6, Student 7, and Student 8. The results of the binary logistic regressions for interpersonal attributions of controllability are shown in Table 6 on the next page.

Once again, the reference for the binary dependent variable (keeping the student in the classroom versus removal from the classroom) was keeping the student in the classroom. For all students who showed significant relationships, the odds of recommending them to the school psychologist (i.e., removal from the classroom) instead of keeping them in the classroom decreased significantly as the degree to which participants rated them as being in control of their behavior increased: Student 1 (OR=.513,  $p <.001$ ); Student 3 (OR=.695,  $p=.029$ ); Student 4 (OR=.681,  $p=.003$ ); Student 5 (OR=.718,  $p <.001$ ); Student 6 (OR=.639,  $p <.001$ ); Student 7 (OR=.686,  $p <.001$ ); and Student 8 (OR=.784,  $p=.009$ ).

**Table 5**  
*Interpersonal Attributions of Causality Binary Logistic Regression*

	<i>Student Race &amp; Behavioral Pathology</i>	<i>Adjusted Odds Ratio</i>	<i>p</i>
Student 1	White, Disorganization	.958	.691
Student 2	Black, Disorganization	1.063	.673
Student 3	White, Disruptive Behavior	1.518	.012*
Student 4	Black, Disruptive Behavior	1.348	.013*
Student 5	White, ADHD	1.261	.002**
Student 6	Black, ADHD	1.207	.024*
Student 7	White, Internalizing Behavior	1.104	.093
Student 8	Black, Internalizing Behavior	1.226	.016*

Note: \* $p <.05$ , \*\* $p <.01$ , \*\*\* $p <.001$

### Exploratory Analyses

The results of the binary logistic regression models, which analyzed the effects of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and number of semesters completed in the current education program on disciplinary decisions that remove students from the classroom via referral of the student to the school psychologist and disciplinary decisions that ignore the student behavior, showed that the aforementioned demographic factors did not play a major role in TES' disciplinary decisions.

For Black students in vignettes 4 and 6, race/ethnicity and number of semesters completed in the current education program of the respondents, respectively, made a statistically significant difference in TES' disciplinary decisions to keep or remove the students from the classroom. For the White student in vignette 7, race/ethnicity also made a statistically significant difference in TES' disciplinary decisions to keep or remove the students from the classroom. While there are statistically significant differences in the three instances described above, none of the demographic dimensions of TES made a statistically significant difference for students in the remaining vignettes regarding disciplinary decisions to keep or remove the students from the classroom. Demographic dimensions of TES also made no statistically significant difference regarding disciplinary decisions to ignore student behavior in any of the vignettes. Therefore, TES' age, gender, race/ethnicity and number of semesters completed in the current education program are not significantly related to disciplinary decisions made by TES overall in this study.

**Ignoring the Behavior.** One of the five disciplinary action choices included in the classroom behavior vignettes was ignoring the stu-

**Table 6**  
*Interpersonal Attributions of Controllability Binary Logistic Regression*

	<i>Student Race &amp; Behavioral Pathology</i>	<i>Adjusted Odds Ratio</i>	<i>p</i>
Student 1	White, Disorganization	.513	<.001***
Student 2	Black, Disorganization	.748	.061
Student 3	White, Disruptive Behavior	.695	.029*
Student 4	Black, Disruptive Behavior	.681	.003**
Student 5	White, ADHD	.718	<.001***
Student 6	Black, ADHD	.639	<.001***
Student 7	White, Internalizing Behavior	.686	<.001***
Student 8	Black, Internalizing Behavior	.784	.009***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

dent behavior. Since this disciplinary decision is the only one generally characterized by TES' inaction in the classroom, it was a choice of particular interest for this study. Ignoring student behavior is a choice that TES make based on several factors, including their interpersonal attributions to student behavior.

The results of the paired samples *t*-tests that were used to analyze whether there is a statistically significant difference in disciplinary decisions that ignore the student behavior between Black and White elementary age girls indicated that TES choose to ignore the behavior of White girls more frequently than the behavior of Black girls at statistically significant rates. Since the dummy coded variable in these tests uses 0 to represent all disciplinary decisions other than ignoring student behavior and uses 2 to represent the disciplinary decision to ignore student behavior, higher means indicate more frequent decisions to ignore student behavior. For these tests, the mean scores of the White students were higher than the mean scores of Black students for all four vignette pairs. The difference in the mean scores on the disciplinary decision to ignore the student behavior for each vignette pair is statistically significant. The results of the Disciplinary Decision to Ignore Student Behavior paired sample *t*-tests are shown in Table 7 below.

### Discussion

This study examined the effects of teacher education students' interpersonal attributions to student behavior on their disciplinary decisions as a function of student race. To achieve this, teacher education students' interpersonal attribution measures and disciplinary decisions in response to theoretical behaviors described in vignettes of Black and White elementary age girls with identical behavioral pathologies were analyzed. This study aimed to answer three research questions. The first hypothesis was that teacher attributes to Black

**Table 7**  
**Disciplinary Decision to Ignore Student Behavior Paired Samples *t*-tests**

	<i>Behavioral Pathology</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Pair 1	Disorganization	3.639	<.001***
Pair 2	Disruptive Behavior	2.125	.034*
Pair 3	ADHD	2.202	.028*
Pair 4	Internalizing Behavior	6.894	<.001***

Note: \**p*<0.05, \*\**p*<0.01, \*\*\**p*<0.001

elementary age girls than to their White peers more internal causality and controllability of behaviors. The second hypothesis was that the disciplinary decisions that teacher education students make disproportionately remove Black girls from the classroom more than their White peers. The third hypothesis was that teacher education students make different disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior based on interpersonal attributions for Black elementary age girls compared to their White peers.

The results of the paired sample *t*-tests used to answer the first research question indicated that overall, teacher education students in this study believed that Black elementary age girls' behavior was due to circumstances within their control and was due to choices they made whereas White elementary age girls' behavior was due to circumstances outside of their control and was not due to choices they made. These findings support the first research question hypothesis. Such a polarized perspective on the locus of causality and controllability for student behavior can be interpreted, for example, as teacher education students believing that Black girls are displaying their behaviors on purpose while White girls are doing the same things by accident. This ascription of greater responsibility for one's actions to Black elementary age girls is, perhaps, a manifestation of Morris's (2016) "adultification" of Black girls and a reflection of internalized racist beliefs. This pattern holds true for three of the four vignette pairs; however, the second pair of vignettes shows the opposite relationship such that teacher education students attributed a more external locus of causality and controllability to the Black girl than the White girl.

According to the results of the paired samples *t*-tests used to address the second research question, teacher education students chose to remove the White girls from the classroom more frequently than they chose to remove the Black girls. These findings refute the second research question hypothesis. While removal from the classroom of any kind has detrimental effects on student learning due to missed instructional time, it is important to note that removal from the classroom in this study entailed referring students to the school psychologist rather than any sort of referral to school administration for punishment (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014). In future studies, options that include recommending students to the administration for discipline should be included to address this limitation. The pattern of teacher education students' choosing to more frequently remove White girls than Black girls from the classroom holds true for three of the four vignette pairs, but the second pair of vignettes, once again, shows the opposite relationship such that teacher education students chose to remove the

Black girl from the classroom more frequently than they chose to remove the White girl from the classroom. While there is no apparent reason for the reversed trends observed in the second pair of vignettes, there are two possible explanations that may be worth exploring. First, in alignment with teacher emotions towards “misbehaving” students as described by the attribution theory literature, TES may have elected to remove the Black girl from the classroom due to increased feelings of anger and frustration towards her. Alternatively, the wording used to describe disruptive behavior in the second pair of vignettes could be responsible for the reversed trends. In particular, the use of the phrase “talks back,” which is coded language often used with Black students, could have evoked an unintended emotional response or a more extreme interpretation of the described behavior. An analysis of the qualitative data collected for these survey questions could potentially provide some clarity about TES’ selected disciplinary decisions for the girls in the second vignette pair in comparison to the others.

The results of the binary logistic regression models used to answer the third research question showed that teacher education students’ interpersonal attributions of causality and controllability to student behavior influence their disciplinary decisions to keep or to remove students from the classroom. These findings support the third hypothesis. Interpersonal attributions of causality affected teacher education students’ disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior for five out of the eight students in this study. For all five statistically significant relationships, the odds of participants removing students from the classroom by recommending them to the school psychologist instead of keeping them in the classroom increased significantly as the degree to which participants rated their behavior as being due to an external locus of causality increased. One interpretation of these results is that teacher education students may have greater sympathy for and a greater willingness to help students who they believe are not responsible for their behavior (Weiner, 1979). When teachers feel that a child is behaving a certain way because they can’t help it, they are more likely to withhold reprimand, not condemn, help, and not retaliate against the child (Graham, 2020). Interpersonal attributions of controllability affected teacher education students’ disciplinary decisions in response to student behavior for seven out of the eight students. For all seven statistically significant relationships, the odds of participants removing students from the classroom by recommending them to the school psychologist instead of keeping them in the classroom decreased significantly as the degree to which participants rated students as being in control of their behavior increased. These results

can be interpreted as teacher education students having less sympathy and a lesser willingness to help students who they believe are displaying their behaviors due to conscious choices they make (Weiner, 1979).

According to attribution theory, teachers are more likely to feel anger and frustration towards students who they believe are misbehaving on purpose, which explains why teacher education students would be less likely to refer such students to a school psychologist (Graham, 2020). In their eyes, the student does not need help because they are misbehaving by choice, which is a problematic viewpoint for any educator to have. It is concerning, but essential, to note that for three out of the four vignette pairs, teacher education students attributed more internal causality and controllability to Black girls' behaviors and, consequently, chose to keep them in the classroom despite choosing to refer their White counterparts with identical behavioral pathologies to the school psychologist. Such disparities in consequences for virtually the same classroom behaviors provide White girls with support and, if appropriate, could lead to the institution of mandated accommodations. Black girls, on the other hand, are less likely to experience that privilege.

The findings of the exploratory analyses established that the demographics of teacher education students do not significantly impact their disciplinary decisions. In other words, teacher education students make the kinds of race dependent disciplinary decisions described above regardless of their age, gender, race/ethnicity, and number of semesters completed in their current education program. Interestingly, the findings of the exploratory analyses also indicate that teacher education students have a higher tolerance for the misbehavior of White girls than they do for the misbehavior of Black girls since they chose to ignore the behavior of White girls more frequently than the behavior of Black girls at statistically significant rates. Considering that teacher education students also attribute more external causality and controllability to the behaviors of White girls, it is reasonable to conclude that teacher education students have a higher tolerance for the misbehavior of White girls than Black girls because they believe that the White girls cannot control their behaviors while the Black girls can.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study, discussed previously in this section, is the lack of disciplinary decision choices on the survey instrument that would remove students from the classroom without helping them in some way, such as removal from the classroom for a school suspension.

The survey instrument should be revised slightly to reflect additional disciplinary decision options of a punitive nature.

Another limitation is that all participants in this study are teacher education students in the same urban public university network of schools in the northeastern United States and the sample is, therefore, only representative of teacher education students from this network of schools. It would be interesting to see how differences in teacher education students' interpersonal attributions and disciplinary decisions would vary if the sample were more representative of a larger area, such as the tri-state area or east/west coasts, or even the United States as a whole. If follow up studies are conducted, researchers would benefit from administering an updated version of the instrument to teacher education students in other state and city public university networks.

While Type 1 error may be a concern with the number of *t*-tests and regressions performed on a sample of this size, most of the results are still statistically significant even with a Bonferroni correction. All the paired samples *t*-tests for locus of causality (see Table 2), controllability (see Table 3), and removal from the classroom (see Table 4) remain the same when Type 1 error is accounted for. With the Bonferroni correction, all five statistically significant binary logistic regressions for interpersonal attributions of causality (see Table 5) appear to be a product Type 1 error. Only three of the seven statistically significant binary logistic regressions for interpersonal attributions of controllability (see Table 6) appear to be a product of Type 1 error.

Lastly, further investigation is necessary to understand why teacher education students showed opposite relationships for interpersonal attributions of causality and controllability as well as disciplinary decisions for the second vignette pair, which represented disruptive behavior, in contrast to all of the other vignette pairs. Qualitative data collection in the form of participant interviews post-survey completion may yield additional information for analysis to understand the reason for these reversed trends.

### **Significance of Findings and Conclusion**

Despite being enrolled in programs that are supposed to prepare them for working with real students in real classrooms, teacher education students' interpersonal attributions of student behavior in elementary age girls in this study appeared to be racially biased and led to race-dependent disciplinary decisions even in response to hypothetical student behaviors.

When Black elementary age girls display behaviors characteristic

of disorganization, disruptive behavior, ADHD or internalizing behavior, they are held responsible for their actions and are less likely to be referred to the school psychologist by their teachers than their White counterparts. When White elementary age girls display the same behaviors, they are not held responsible for their actions and, instead, they are referred to the school psychologist or their behavior is ignored by their teachers. In other words, Black girls are met with accountability and a lower tolerance for their classroom behaviors from their teachers while White girls are met with support and a higher tolerance for the same classroom behaviors from their teachers.

Considering the possibly supportive and caring intention behind the removal of the student from the classroom via referral to the school psychologist, purportedly some help to the student, this difference in disciplinary decisions could be interpreted as teacher education students responding to elementary age White girls' behavior with a greater desire to help them. This interpretation is supported by attribution theory, which posits that teachers are more likely to respond to students with sympathy if they believe that the students cannot help their behaviors (Graham, 2020). These patterns should not continue to prevail in our schools. School districts must be held accountable via equity audits so that teachers and administrators alike can actively work to maintain equitable and appropriate disciplinary practices (Husband & Bertrand, 2021). Without these and many other immediate actions, schools remain as—simply put—dangerous places for Black girls.

To combat such disturbing trends, teacher education programs must train preservice teachers to become social justice educators who are cross-culturally competent and understand the needs of the communities they serve (Cooper, 2003). Showing up just to teach is not enough. Educators must show up to teach *and* to work as agents of political activism. Schools improve when teachers reflect on their beliefs, acknowledge their biases, and work to better their teaching practices accordingly (Cooper, 2003). Teachers who blindly believe that society is meritocratic are likely to think that schools are, too (Cooper, 2003). Such teachers are oblivious to the ways in which their students' more privileged counterparts are better positioned for success by being privy to the knowledge, skills and cultural capital of the dominant middle class White society (Cooper, 2003).

The influence that teachers have on students is one of immense proportions and, therefore, requires teachers to be extremely cognizant of it; to use it to maximize benefits for their students and eliminate any possible abuse or harm (Cooper, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2010). Purposeful, consistent, and lifelong learning and self-re-



reflection must take place to sustain the required cross-cultural competence for responsible wielding of the power that teachers possess. Teacher preparation programs must be revolutionized in a way that fosters critical reflection and cross-cultural competence for teachers to view and conduct themselves as the professional agents of change that they are (Cooper, 2003). While culturally responsive frameworks for teaching are being introduced into teacher education programs, the examination and application of these frameworks is not being sufficiently taught to or internalized by in-service and pre-service teachers. Restructuring teacher education programs to include explicit anti-racism curricula would address issues of racial bias *before* teachers ever step foot in a classroom and cause irreparable damage to vulnerable students. Black girls must be protected and prioritized. Redesigning teacher education programs to adequately prepare future teachers for a diverse classroom is a very small price to pay for higher quality and truly culturally responsive teachers. As a result, states and educational institutions would aim directly at the deeply ingrained roots of systemic racism in the public education system rather than providing temporary and superficial solutions that are performative in nature.

The findings of this study do not merely reflect the results of a hypothetical thought exercise—they reflect the racial biases of teacher education students who are being trained to go into classrooms in urban environments where they will be serving primarily students of color; students who will undoubtedly be affected by the choices their teachers make for them, be they low or high stakes. The findings of this study represent real-world thought processes of current and future teachers that have real-world consequences for Black girls across the country. So long as the racially biased interpersonal attributions of teacher education students are not addressed, schools will remain a dangerous place for Black girls.

The most important takeaway of this study is that teacher education programs in higher education institutions are in dire need of close, critical examination of how they are preparing teacher education students to address classroom behavior in race-conscious ways. Making teacher education students aware of their attributions through explicit training could help alleviate some of the concerns that arose in this study. However conscious or subconscious, teacher education students' interpersonal attributions of elementary age girls' behavior play a role in the race dependent disciplinary action choices they make. The data in this study points to the need for mandatory explicit training for both pre-service and in-service teachers for them to actively acknowledge and address their biases, and to ensure a more equitable and qual-

ity education for students of all races. “Recognition of the role that teachers’ political perspectives play in shaping pedagogy” is essential to combating the “passive acceptance of ways of teaching and learning that reflect biases, particularly a White supremacist standpoint,” which plagues modern day schools even in urbanized areas (hooks, 1994, p. 37).

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