

Considering Race in Teacher Well-Being

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Despite evidence that teachers' professional experiences are racialized, few studies have quantitatively examined possible racial disparities in teachers' job satisfaction. Using data from a nationally representative survey of teachers in the United States, we find that Black teachers report significantly lower job satisfaction than their White colleagues. Moreover, we find that teacher perceptions of school safety are the primary predictor of this gap in job satisfaction. We argue that centralizing race and racialized experiences in consideration of teacher job satisfaction will open new sites of inquiry in educational research and can guide educational policy to promote equity in K–12 schools.

Keywords: *disparities, diversity, educational policy, equity, race, stress/coping*

TEACHERS deserve to feel satisfied and well at work. When they do, the quality of their instruction goes up, they are less likely to change schools or leave the profession, and their students perform better and are more motivated (Banerjee et al., 2017; Caprara et al., 2006; Høglund et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2012; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Shen et al., 2015). Research on teacher job satisfaction—the most commonly measured dimension of teacher well-being—shows that when teachers are dissatisfied at work, they are more likely to change schools or to leave the profession altogether, producing negative effects on students, schools, and the education system as a whole (Carroll, 2007; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Despite growing evidence that there are racialized patterns in the downstream consequences of teacher job dissatisfaction (i.e., turnover, retention, sorting), studies of teacher job satisfaction themselves tend to overlook the role

of race and racism in shaping teachers' professional experiences (Bristol, 2020; Gist & Bristol, 2022). Indeed, a recent review of interventions to improve teacher well-being showed that only half of the papers even report teacher racial demographics, suggesting a bias toward a “White default” in this literature (Griffiths et al., *under review*; Roberts & Mortenson, 2023). In this brief, we focus specifically on the contrast between Black and White teachers' job satisfaction to reflect this longstanding and persistent axis of inequality in the United States, while acknowledging that there is a diversity of racialized experiences among Teachers of Color (e.g., Kim & Cooc, 2021; Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). This brief begins to address the dearth of quantitative or national investigations of Black and White teacher job satisfaction (exceptions: Fairchild et al., 2012; Renzulli et al., 2011) and contributes a novel exploration of what might explain any racial disparities between teachers.

There are many reasons to believe Black and White teachers would systematically report different job satisfaction, but absent large-scale evidence, it may be difficult to mobilize a data-informed policy response to address possible disparities. First, at a national level, Black teachers are more likely to have challenging experiences at work than White teachers, citing poor working conditions, poor administrative leadership, and the absence of positive relationships with their colleagues as reasons for leaving their jobs (Bristol, 2020; Gist & Bristol, 2022). Second, due to patterns in teacher sorting, Black teachers are more likely to work in under-resourced schools where, on average, all teachers report worse job satisfaction and greater stress (Hernández-Johnson et al., 2023; Ingersoll et al., 2022). Finally, a growing and generative body of qualitative research suggests that Black teachers face unique stressors—such as unequal responsibilities and racial discrimination—that may undermine their job satisfaction, especially in schools where they are in the racial minority (Dixon et al., 2019; Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Kohli et al., 2022; Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). These racialized challenges are layered on top of teacher- and school-level factors that affect all teachers' job satisfaction, including lack of autonomy, access to professional learning, experiences of classroom disorder, negative school climates, insufficient salaries, and a lack of administrative support, among others (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Pas et al., 2012). In short, teacher job satisfaction can be understood as a long-overlooked matter of racial equity in schools.

This oversight in the literature becomes more urgent when considering the broader implications of teacher job satisfaction on educational outcomes nationally, particularly in racially diverse settings. Research has shown that Black teachers are more likely to teach Black students (Taie & Lewis, 2022), creating a direct link between the job satisfaction of Black teachers and the educational experiences of Black students (Banerjee et al., 2017; Gershenson et al., 2018). Enhanced job satisfaction could lead to improved instructional quality and stronger teacher–student relationships (Harrison et al., 2023), factors known to positively impact student achievement and engagement (Roorda et al., 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Furthermore, the

presence of satisfied and well-supported Black teachers in schools could contribute to higher academic aspirations and achievement among Black students, specifically (Gershenson et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding and addressing racial inequalities in teacher job satisfaction is not just a matter of equity for teachers themselves but could also serve as a crucial lever for reducing persistent educational disparities between Black and White students.

The purpose of the current study is to shed new light on the racial dimensions of teacher job satisfaction by leveraging a nationally representative dataset of teachers in the United States. Specifically, we answer the following research questions (RQ): (RQ1) Does job satisfaction differ between Black and White teachers? (RQ2) If so, what teacher- and school-level factors contribute to the difference? We test factors that past reviews (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Pas et al., 2012) have identified as important predictors of teacher well-being, as well as those included in the available datasets.

Methods

To answer these questions, we used data from a nationally representative survey of teachers conducted with the RAND American Educator Panels from 2016 to 2017, supplemented with school-level data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Civil Rights Data Collection for the same school year. We first estimated unadjusted Black–White differences in teacher job satisfaction (RQ1). The measure of job satisfaction is a linear composite of four survey items (e.g., “I wouldn’t want to work at any other school”; $1 = \textit{Strongly disagree}$ to $4 = \textit{Strongly agree}$; $\alpha = .90$). Then, we used a two-fold Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition model to examine what factors might explain potential differences in teacher job satisfaction (RQ2). The decomposition model determines the relative contribution to the Black–White gap in job satisfaction of a number of teacher- and school-level factors theorized to be predictive of teacher well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Pas et al., 2012). See Figure 1 for the categories of variables included and sample constructs within each category. Elaboration on each of these factors can be found in the Supplemental Appendix (Tables

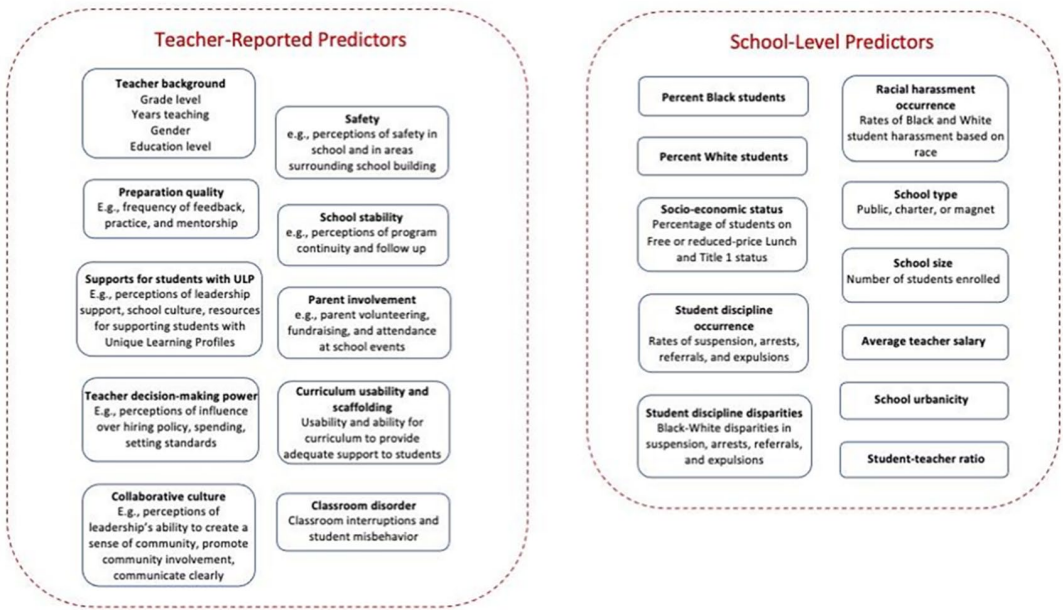


FIGURE 1. *Explanatory variables included in the Oaxaca Decomposition Model.*

Note. Teacher-reported predictors are from the 2017 Measuring to Learn and Improve survey fielded by RAND. School-level predictors are from data obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics. The Supplemental Appendix (in the online version of the journal) provides greater detail on the variables, including a number of items and sample item wording where appropriate.

S2 and S3 in the online version of the journal). Missing data, which was minimal (see Table S4 in the online version of the journal), was addressed by combining estimates across 25 multiply imputed datasets.

Results

RQ1: Does well-being differ between Black and White teachers?

Yes. We find that Black teachers, on average, report significantly lower job satisfaction than White teachers ($b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(11,861) = -6.93$, $p < .001$, $CI [-0.26, -0.15]$). See the Supplemental Appendix (Figure S1 in the online version of the journal) for the distributions of job satisfaction for Black and White teachers.

RQ2: What teacher- and school-level factors explain the difference in the well-being between Black and White teachers?

A significant proportion (21.5%) of the gap in job satisfaction between Black and White

teachers was explained by a single factor: teacher perceptions of school safety ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(79) = 2.17$, $p = .03$, $CI [0.00, 0.08]$).¹ That is, the difference in Black and White teachers' perceptions of safety in and around their schools was the strongest predictor of the Black–White gap in job satisfaction. No other school- or teacher-level factors, including salary, were significant predictors of the job satisfaction gap. See full model statistics in Table 1. As a robustness check, we conducted a supplemental analysis in which we dichotomized job satisfaction and examined the proportion of teachers reporting “very high” job satisfaction (≥ 3.5 on the four-point scale). As reported in the Supplemental Appendix (see Table S5 in the online version of the journal), Oaxaca analyses using this binary measure of job satisfaction produced qualitatively similar results.

Two potential explanations for why perceived safety might drive the disparity in job satisfaction are that (a) perceptions of safety differentially impact job satisfaction for Black teachers and White teachers and (b) Black teachers and White teachers are differentially exposed to

TABLE 1

Oaxaca Decomposition Model Results

Job satisfaction differentials	Coefficient	95% CI	$p > t $	
White teacher job satisfaction (scale: 1–4)	3.27	[3.00, 3.54]	.00	
Black teacher job satisfaction (scale: 1–4)	3.05	[2.79, 3.33]	.00	
Group difference	0.21	[0.01, 0.40]	.04	
				% of Gap explained
Teacher-reported predictors				
Background characteristics	.00	[-0.01, 0.01]	.74	6.5
Preparation program (y/n)	-.00	[-0.03, 0.02]	.72	2.1
Preparation quality	-.00	[-0.03, 0.03]	.90	0.8
ULP teacher (y/n)	-.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	.44	0.6
Supports for students with ULP	.01	[-0.02, 0.03]	.69	2.5
Teacher decision-making power	.01	[-0.02, 0.05]	.49	6.2
Collaborative school culture	-.00	[-0.06, 0.06]	.97	0.5
Safety	.04	[0.00, 0.08]	.03	21.5
School stability	-.01	[-0.03, 0.01]	.47	3.3
Parent involvement	-.00	[-0.02, 0.02]	.91	0.7
Curriculum usability and scaffolding	.00	[-0.00, 0.01]	.38	1.4
Classroom disorder	-.00	[-0.02, 0.01]	.68	1.7
School-level predictors				
Percent Black students	.03	[-0.03, 0.09]	.37	13.5
Percent White students	.05	[-0.01, 0.11]	.10	24.4
Socioeconomic status	.00	[-0.03, 0.04]	.91	0.9
Student discipline occurrence	.00	[-0.02, 0.03]	.68	2.4
Student discipline disparities	.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	.94	0.1
Racial harassment occurrence	.00	[-0.01, 0.01]	.92	0.3
School type	-.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	.85	0.2
School size	.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	.91	0.1
Average teacher salary	.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	.66	0.3
School urbanicity	.00	[-0.01, 0.02]	.71	1.4
Student–teacher ratio	-.00	[-0.01, 0.01]	.74	0.6
Group difference: total explained	.13	[-0.05, 0.32]	.16	65.4

Note. The table includes results from a twofold Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition model. As indicated in the first three rows, Black teachers report lower job satisfaction than White teachers. The fourth row represents the total amount of this difference (65.4%) that can be explained by the included features of teachers' professional experiences and contexts. The coefficient values represent the extent to which each predictor contributes to the Black–White gap in teachers' job satisfaction. Model statistics (SE , t , p) indicate the extent to which each predictor explains a significant proportion of the gap between Black and White teachers' job satisfaction. These analyses reveal that the only significant explanatory predictor is *teachers' perceptions of safety*. Differences in Black and White teachers' perceptions of safety explain 21.5% of the gap in their job satisfaction. ULP=Unique Learning Profiles.

school environments that they perceive to be unsafe. In our data, we do not find support for the first explanation; the interaction between perceptions of safety and teacher race in an unadjusted model predicting job satisfaction was nonsignificant ($b=-0.06$, $SE=0.05$, $t(11,856)=-1.28$, $p=.20$, 95%CI [-0.15, 0.03]). We do find support for the second explanation. Black teachers are more likely than White teachers to teach in

schools that they perceive as unsafe ($b=-0.20$, $SE=0.02$, $t(11,866)=-9.41$, $p<.001$, [-0.25, -0.16]).

Discussion

Researchers and policymakers have not sufficiently attended to racial disparities in teacher job satisfaction, despite evidence of

racial inequities in the downstream consequences of poor job satisfaction (e.g., turnover; Bristol, 2020; Jackson, 2009). The present investigation underscores the value of considering race when discussing or attempting to address teacher job satisfaction, finding that Black teachers report significantly lower job satisfaction than their White counterparts in a nationally representative sample and that this disparity is driven, in part, by differences in perceptions of safety in and around the schools where they work.

It is important to note that while our decomposition analysis did not reveal any other significant predictors of the Black–White difference in job satisfaction, the absence of significant predictors does not necessarily indicate that other factors in the model are unimportant in understanding teachers' job satisfaction. Instead, the lack of statistical significance for school-level racial characteristics with otherwise large magnitudes (e.g., percent White or Black student enrollment) suggests that the racial dimensions of school contexts may matter for teacher job satisfaction but that our study may simply have been underpowered to detect them. The student–teacher racial congruence literature supports the claim that a school's student racial demographics would contribute to teacher job satisfaction (e.g., Fairchild et al., 2012; Renzulli et al., 2011). Moreover, it is possible that our measures do not capture the full extent of the racialized experiences that contribute to job satisfaction. We suggest that while these included measures are informative, they may not be sensitive enough to detect the nuanced ways in which racism influences the professional lives of teachers (e.g., experiences of discrimination, unequal workloads; Dixon et al., 2019). In addition, the RAND survey only focuses on one dimension of well-being—job satisfaction—and it may be that our included variables are more predictive of other dimensions of well-being, such as belonging, stress, or self-efficacy (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Policy and programmatic interventions to improve teacher well-being can be varied. While the majority of interventions to date have focused on equipping teachers with psychological tools (e.g., mindfulness, self-compassion; Dreer & Gouasé, 2022), our data suggest that schools may improve teachers' well-being by implementing policies that improve contributing factors,

notably improving school safety. In addition, we recommend that local educational agencies collect and report data on teacher well-being, disaggregated by race, which can inform targeted interventions and hold schools and districts accountable for addressing racial disparities in job satisfaction. This could include individual-level interventions such as mentorship programs, workshops promoting healthy mental health practices or coping strategies, and the provision of affinity groups within- and outside school buildings. Despite the individual-level focus of our analysis, we also recognize a need for specific policy measures aimed at creating supportive and inclusive school cultures that recognize and value the contributions of Teachers of Color and address the unique challenges confronting them. This includes attempts to address disproportionate workloads and experiences of racial battle fatigue as well as experiences of discrimination; each of which could contribute to Black teachers' lower levels of perceived safety relative to White teachers (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). We also call for qualitative and quantitative studies about how teachers experience safety in their schooling environments. Finally, we encourage researchers of teacher well-being to consider job satisfaction from an intersectional perspective, including such factors as gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status—and specifically how these factors may compound challenges faced by Teachers of Color.

Although the current study extends prior research on teacher job satisfaction by incorporating a quantitative analysis of racial differences among teachers and exploring explanatory factors, it has limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, RAND measured safety as the extent to which teachers felt safe traveling between home and school, outside the school, in the hallways of their school, and in their classes. Future work can aim to distinguish between physical safety and emotional or psychological safety. Second, while the present study compared teachers *across* schools, future research could profitably examine differences in teacher perceptions of safety and well-being *within* the same school. That is, to what extent do Black and White teachers experience the same school environment in different ways? Moreover, the combination of there being substantial scholarship in the domain

of teacher job satisfaction but a paucity of research that includes a racial analysis suggests that a promising line of inquiry may simply be reanalyzing previously collected data and published studies on teacher job satisfaction with a racial lens. Understanding what detracts from teachers' job satisfaction and the contexts where job satisfaction is depressed may be helpful in supporting teachers and disrupting alarming rates of teacher attrition and staffing shortages (Bristol, 2020; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023).

Research has long shown that feeling well, satisfied, and valued at work is generally good for teachers, their students, and the schools in which they work (Banerjee et al., 2017; Caprara et al., 2006; Høglund et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2012; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Shen et al., 2015). Teacher satisfaction is not equally distributed across teachers, underscoring that teacher job satisfaction is, in fact, a racial equity issue. There is an urgent need for researchers, policymakers, and educators to acknowledge and address the intersection of race, racism, and job satisfaction among teachers. Moreover, in addition to individual-focused efforts to improve teacher job satisfaction, the current research suggests that schools and districts should consider targeted structural, procedural, and programmatic changes that enhance the school environment, particularly in terms of safety, and that support the workplace experiences of Teachers of Color in particular. By prioritizing targeted interventions, data collection, and accountability measures, a renewed focus on the racial dimensions of teacher job satisfaction will allow for more equitable and supportive environments that ultimately benefit both teachers and their students.

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Author Contributions

C.M.G., S.T.B., and F.A.P.: Conceptualization, methodology, writing (review & editing). C.M.G. and F.A.P.: Formal analysis. C.M.G.: writing (original draft).

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Note

1. School safety was measured as the extent to which teachers feel safe in and around their school. We do not define the construct of safety any differently than how it was framed in the survey question. See the Supplemental Appendix (in the online version of the journal).

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