ABSTRACT

MILLER, LAURYN ANGEL. Student-Teacher Relationships in Early Years: The Impact on Social and Literacy/Language Skills in Black Girls Through a CRT Lens. (Under the direction of Dr. Isaac Woods).

Children spend a significant portion of their day in school, making student-teacher relationships (STRs) crucial for their development. While research suggests that teachers' perceptions influence student outcomes, Black girls face unique challenges stemming from the intersection of race and gender, including harmful stereotypes and disproportionate disciplinary actions. This study examined how teacher perceptions of preschool-aged Black girls' literacy/language and social skills impact their perceptions of STRs, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework. Using secondary data from the Head Start CARES project (N=280), two hierarchical multiple regressions investigated how teacher-perceived literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) influence both close and conflictual STRs, while controlling for transient housing. Results showed that assertion skills emerged as the strongest predictor of close relationships, while self-control demonstrated a negative relationship with closeness and was the only significant predictor of conflictual relationships. Notably, literacy/language skills initially showed significance but became non-significant when social skills were included in the model. The full model explained 34.4% of the variance in close STRs and 18.4% in conflictual STRs. Through a CRT lens, these findings suggest that teachers' interpretations of Black girls' behaviors may be more influential in shaping relationship dynamics than their academic capabilities. This research addresses a significant gap in early childhood education literature and provides insights for promoting equitable educational experiences for young Black girls from the earliest stages of their academic journey.

Student-Teacher Relationships in Early Years: The Impact on Social and Literacy/Language Skills in Black Girls Through a CRT Lens

By

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BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Children spend 18.5 percent (6.3 hours) of their day in school, second only to time spent sleeping (Hall & Nielsen, 2020). Because children spend a large portion of their day at school, one of the most meaningful relationships for children is with their teachers (Rudasill et al., 2022). Early childhood education teachers are important because the relationships they build with their students are salient for student success considering that they engage with multiple developmental processes that influence positive outcomes for their students (Ansari et al., 2020). For example, research suggests that teachers' perceptions of their relationship with their students may influence their perceptions of children's academic skills, including literacy/language, and social skills, and likely influence the quality of interaction and instruction they provide to children meaning good teachers increase educational and social skills through positive relationships (Graves & Howes, 2011; Hughes et al., 2005). For Black girls specifically, these teacher relationships can be particularly influential, as research shows that positive student-teacher relationships (STRs) can serve as protective factors that support both academic achievement and cultural identity development (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). This dynamic becomes especially significant for Black girls, as teacher perceptions may be influenced by cultural similarity or misalignment between home and school environments (Iruka et al., 2022).

Researchers suggest that teachers view children with stronger academic abilities more favorably (Jerome et al., 2009). Teachers may be inclined to build stronger relationships with students who actively engage in learning activities. However, for Black girls, what constitutes active engagement may be culturally influenced, as different communities have varying ways of expressing engagement and participation (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2017). Children who struggle

academically and with their social skills might feel frustrated and may not participate as actively in classroom activities. As a result, the quality of relationships between teachers and students may be influenced by the academic and social abilities children bring to school, as well as teachers' cultural understanding and recognition of diverse ways of demonstrating these abilities (Iruka et al., 2023).

Importance of the Study

Black girls face unique challenges that stem from the intersection of race and gender. Black girls are often burdened with harmful stereotypes related to their demeanor, sexuality, and perceived aggressiveness, while simultaneously being viewed as exceptionally strong and resilient, leading to the misconception that they do not need support (Aldridge, 2018; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Negative stereotypes about Black girls contribute to various disparities, including underrepresentation in gifted programs, disproportionate disciplinary actions, and inequities in the foster care and juvenile justice systems (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2011; Williams-Butler et al., 2020). Studies indicate that Black girls experience lower academic achievement and harsher school discipline compared to their White counterparts (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; K. W. Crenshaw et al., 2015). Pyne & Musto (2022) found that teachers rated Black kindergarten girls lower than their Asian, White, and Hispanic peers. While perceptions of the other groups improved over time, teachers' perceptions of Black girls remained unchanged (Pyne & Musto, 2022).

African-centered education (ACE) provides a crucial context for understanding and addressing these challenges in early childhood education settings. This approach centers African and Black American cultural values, traditions, and ways of knowing as fundamental to educational practice (Iruka et al., 2023). For young Black girls specifically, ACE offers a

counternarrative to traditional educational approaches by validating their cultural ways of being and learning, emphasizing the strength of community and collective growth, and supporting identity development. In early childhood education, ACE emphasizes several key principles: the importance of communal learning, respect for cultural knowledge and expression, recognition of family and community as primary educators, and the celebration of African heritage and identity (Iruka et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2020).

Research suggests that when early childhood programs incorporate ACE principles, Black children demonstrate stronger academic outcomes, more positive self-concept, and better social-emotional development (Goldberg & Iruka, 2023; Iruka et al., 2023). These approaches create learning environments that affirm rather than suppress Black girls' cultural identities and ways of engaging with education (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). This is particularly significant given that traditional educational settings often fail to recognize or value Black girls' cultural strengths in areas such as oral traditions, storytelling, and communal learning approaches (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012; Iruka et al., 2023).

For Black girls, student-teacher relationships (STRs) are more than academic interactions. These relationships represent a critical space where identity, resilience, and academic potential are negotiated and affirmed (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). In educational contexts historically designed to marginalize Black students, positive STRs become a form of cultural resistance (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Positive STRs offer a counternarrative to deficit-based perspectives, providing a context that recognizes and celebrates Black girls' cultural strengths, supporting academic and personal growth (Iruka et al., 2023). Through culturally responsive relationships, teachers can actively challenge systemic racism by creating affirming educational environments that honor Black girls' unique cultural knowledge,

communication styles, and ways of being (Cole, 2020; Griffin & Tackie, 2016). Such relationships are powerful sites of cultural validation that can address racial marginalization in educational spaces (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020).

Despite the various challenges that Black girls face in school, there is a notable gap in research specifically focusing on preschool-aged Black girls. While studies have examined race or gender separately, few have explored the intersectionality of these factors in early childhood education. This study will address the gap in the literature surrounding preschool-aged Black girls by investigating how teacher perceptions of preschool-aged Black girls' literacy/language and social skills impact their perceptions of STRs. By focusing on this specific demographic, the study findings will provide valuable insights into the unique dynamics at play for young Black girls in education. This research aims to illuminate pathways for fostering positive educational experiences that can help counteract the documented patterns of inequity faced by Black girls throughout their academic careers.

Student-Teacher Relationships (STRs)

Student-teacher relationships (STR) encompass three interconnected elements: (1) the beliefs and expectations that both the student and teacher hold regarding themselves, each other, and the nature of their relationship, (2) the ongoing interactions and behavioral exchanges between them serve to reinforce or reshape these beliefs over time, and (3) individual traits like temperament, as well as prior experiences such as previous attachments, exert an influence on the other components that make up the STR dynamic (Pianta, 1999). Two key dimensions define STR quality: closeness and conflict. Closeness refers to high levels of warmth, positive emotional tone, and a sense of approachability characterizing the interactions between student

and teacher. In contrast, conflict signifies negativity, lack of rapport, and disconnect between the student and teacher (Pianta, 1999).

In Black communities, relationships and interconnectedness have historically formed the foundation of child development and education (Iruka et al., 2023). While much of the existing research on STRs have not focused specifically on Black girls, studies have established general patterns in how these relationship dimensions affect student outcomes. Close STRs are associated with positive outcomes such as improved academic performance, engagement, social-emotional development, motivation, self-regulation, and prosocial behavior (Cadima et al., 2016; McCormick et al., 2017; Roorda et al., 2011; Rucinski et al., 2018; Skalická et al., 2015). Conversely, conflictual STRs are linked to negative outcomes, including lower academic achievement, behavioral problems, school avoidance, reduced participation, and poorer peer relationships (Archambault et al., 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; O'Connor et al., 2011; C. Wang et al., 2016).

African-Centered Education (ACE)

Within African-centered educational contexts, positive STRs serve multiple cultural functions: they reinforce communal bonds, provide cultural validation, and create spaces where Black children's cultural ways of knowing and being are celebrated rather than suppressed (Iruka et al., 2023). At its core, ACE celebrates Black cultural ways of knowing and being, offering a foundation for identity development that exists independently of, and before, experiences of oppression (Iruka et al., 2023). This approach emphasizes the richness of African and Black American cultural traditions, viewing them as strengths that enhance learning and development (Thompson et al., 2020). When teachers affirm Black girls' cultural identities and embrace

communal values, they create a nurturing environment that supports both positive development and academic success (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020).

For young Black girls, STRs are particularly significant during early childhood education when children first encounter formal schooling. Quality of early education experiences predicts both immediate and future academic outcomes for Black children (Ansari et al., 2020). Positive STRs foster school readiness, early literacy/language, and social competence (Hatfield et al., 2016; Mashburn et al., 2008), while conflictual relationships link to lower academic skills and persistent behavior problems in Black children (Hajovsky et al., 2020; Lee & Bierman, 2018). Understanding these dynamics is crucial as STRs significantly shape Black girls' early educational experiences and future academic outcomes.

Literacy/Language Skills and their Impact on Student-Teacher Relationships

From an ACE perspective, literacy/language development are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and communal practices. Black communities often have rich oral traditions and storytelling practices that serve multiple purposes: preserving cultural knowledge, building collective identity, and fostering intergenerational learning (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012). These African-centered approaches to language emphasize the role of community in language development, viewing linguistic growth as a collective rather than individual achievement. Because of this cultural foundation, Black girls often develop strong narrative language skills which translate to other aspects of literacy/language such as vocabulary and phonological awareness (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012). However, traditional educational settings often fail to recognize these culturally-rooted strengths, as teachers often judge literacy/language skills against narrow Western standards that overlook Black children’s strengths in oral tradition and storytelling (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012, 2017). The student-teacher bond is essential for

language development in early childhood, as interactions with teachers play a crucial role in fostering children's linguistic growth (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hoff, 2006). Through interactions with teachers, children not only acquire new vocabulary but also improve their language skills (Christ et al., 2011).

Notably, there is a reciprocal nature to the STR dynamic. Previous research has consistently shown that positive STRs enhance children's literacy/language development, while children with stronger literacy/language skills tend to have closer bonds with teachers (Gallagher et al., 2013; Schmitt et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2015; Spritz et al., 2010; Vatou et al., 2023). This pattern holds even in high-risk samples. For instance, in a study of predominantly Black and four-year-old girls, close STRs as perceived by teachers predicted better reading outcomes and skilled readers had closer relationships with their teachers (Justice et al., 2008). Additionally, a high-risk sample study found that children who had closer relationships with their teachers showed higher levels of expressive vocabulary. Lastly, children with higher levels of receptive vocabulary at the beginning of the preschool year tended to develop closer relationships with teachers (Cadima et al., 2019). These findings underscore the reciprocal relationship between language skills and student-teacher bonds, particularly in vulnerable populations.

However, the evidence regarding conflictual STRs is less consistent. Some studies suggest that teachers report lower conflict with children who have better literacy skills (Gallagher et al., 2013), and that conflictual STRs negatively impact children's receptive vocabulary skills, particularly in samples of mostly Black preschool-aged children (Rojas & Abenavoli, 2021). In contrast, other research has found only weak associations between conflictual relationships and language skills (Vatou et al., 2023) or no predictive relationship at all (Schmitt et al., 2012). These mixed findings highlight the need for an African-centered

understanding of literacy/language development in early childhood settings. When teachers recognize and value cultural approaches to literacy/language, they can better support Black girls' development by building on existing cultural strengths rather than imposing deficit-based perspectives. This cultural alignment is important in early childhood, where foundational literacy/language skills and STRs are first established.

Social Skills and Its Impact on Student-Teacher Relationships

Using the ACE perspective, social skills are understood through a cultural lens that emphasizes collectivism, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. These behaviors do not only reflect individual abilities, but cultural ways of being and relating that have been historically sustained by Black communities. Social skills include assertion, the ability to initiate and respond effectively; cooperation, which reflects helpfulness and compliance; and self-control, the ability to regulate behavior in both conflict and non-conflict situations (Gresham & Elliot, 1990; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). Teacher interpretations of Black girls' social behaviors are frequently influenced by racialized and gendered biases. These biases often lead to disproportionate disciplinary actions for behaviors perceived as low cooperation or self-control, with research showing that Black girls face harsher consequences compared to their peers (Annamma et al., 2019). For instance, Blake et al. (2011) found that Black girls are often disciplined for behaviors viewed through a deficit lens, a pattern that begins as early as preschool (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

Positive STRs are essential for social skill development, providing children with secure, supportive interactions that model appropriate social behaviors and foster peer connections (Mohamed, 2018). Close STRs serve as an important resource, creating trust and mutual respect between teachers and students. These relationships not only support social development but also

contribute to a positive perception of school, enhancing both social and academic outcomes (McCormick & O'Connor, 2015; Rucinski et al., 2018). Numerous studies have demonstrated that children with close STRs exhibit stronger social skills, as reported by their teachers (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Mohamed, 2018; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). For example, Ewing & Taylor (2009) observed this association across gender and ethnicity in a predominantly Mexican sample. However, Mohamed (2018) found that this effect was stronger for girls than boys, and closeness was positively linked to cooperation, assertion, and self-control. Conversely, Paes et al. (2023) reported that closeness in STRs during preschool did not significantly predict social skills in kindergarten, suggesting that these relationships may influence specific social skills.

In contrast, conflictual STRs have been associated with lower social skills in preschool students, though findings remain inconsistent. Multiple studies indicate that conflictual student-teacher dynamics negatively affect social skill development, particularly self-regulation and cooperation (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Paes et al., 2023; Skalická et al., 2015; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). However, Mohamed (2018) found no significant overall association between conflictual STRs and social skills, though specific subscales revealed notable trends. For instance, Mohamed's study highlighted that conflict was negatively correlated with self-control. Similarly, Paes et al. (2023) found that higher levels of conflict in teacher-child relationships predicted lower social skills, including assertion and engagement, among preschool-aged children from low-income backgrounds.

The relationship between STRs and social skills in early childhood is influenced by gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, yet little is known about how these dynamics affect preschool-aged Black girls. Their unique cultural contexts and the potential for teacher misinterpretation of their behaviors underscore the need for focused research. This study

addresses this gap by examining how teachers' perceptions of Black girls' social skills shape views on close and conflictual STRs, offering insights to promote equity and support in early childhood education.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been frequently used in education research to understand disparities in school systems (Albritton et al., 2023; Capper, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) have used CRT to explain education disparities for Black girls in K-12 settings. CRT is composed of six tenets; however, three of them are used to provide a foundation for examining teacher perceptions of Black preschool-aged girls (Capper, 2015). These tenants are described in Table 1.

Table 1.

Definitions and Sources of Critical Race Theory Tenants.

CRT Tenant	Definition	Source
Intersectionality	Considers how an individual's racial identity intersects and interacts with their other identities and differences, such as socioeconomic status, language, disabilities, sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression	Crenshaw (1991); Crenshaw (1988)
Permanence of racism	Considers racism to be deeply rooted and permeates all aspects of society in the United States, influencing and shaping individuals' daily experiences and activities across all domains	Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995); Tate IV (1997)

Table 1 (continued).

Whiteness as property	Recognizes that whiteness is synonymous with valuable property thus White individuals have consistently and historically benefitted from unearned advantages and access	Harris (1993); Ladson-Billings (1998); Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995)

Note. This table was adapted from Capper (2015).

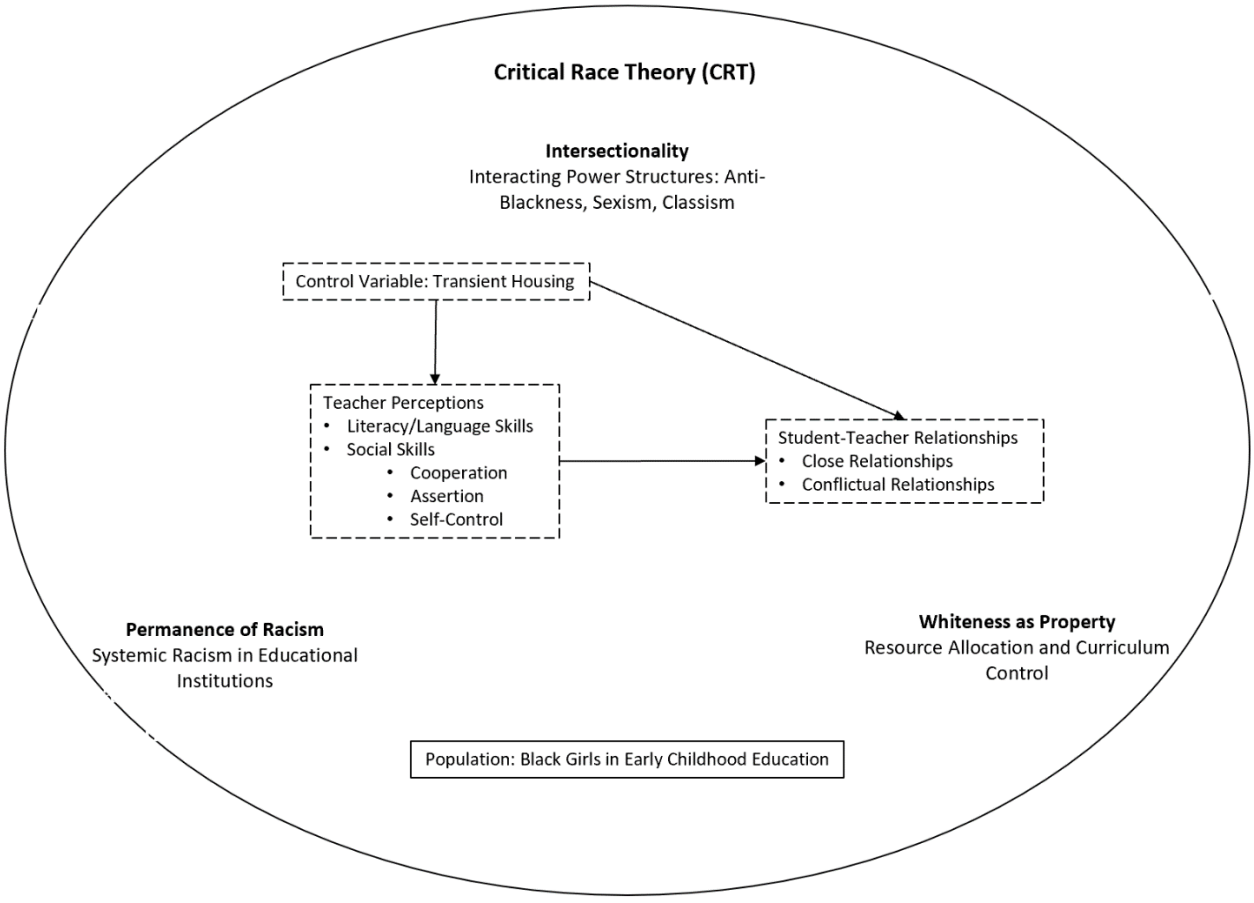
Teacher perceptions of Black preschool-aged girls' literacy/language and social skills, and their relationships with these students, can be understood through CRT's core tenets of intersectionality, permanence of racism, and whiteness as property. These theoretical elements provide a framework for examining how teacher perceptions are shaped by and contribute to systemic inequities in early childhood education. These aspects of CRT inform how teacher perceptions of Black girls' academic and social skills shape relationship formation in early childhood settings. This theoretical orientation supports the methodological choice to center Black girls' experiences without defaulting to White comparison groups, allowing for examination of their educational experiences on their own terms rather than through a deficit lens.

Black girls often face a unique school experience shaped by oppressive systems of power. In navigating these systems, they may feel pressured to sacrifice one aspect of their identity in order to succeed academically, balancing the burden between maintaining their cultural identity and conforming to expectations that favor dominant norms. Albritton and colleagues (2023) applied CRT to analyze disparities in schooling for preschool-aged Black boys and the potential of a strength-based approach in addressing the disparities in early childhood education. Because

CRT can explain the reasoning behind disparities in early childhood education and has been used to address educational disparities for Black girls, it was employed to explore how teacher perceptions of literacy/language and social skills in Black preschool-aged girls impact their perceptions of STRs with these girls, as depicted in Figure 1. At this point, there are no studies that use CRT to examine Black girls in early childhood education. Therefore, this study will address this large gap in the literature.

Figure 1.

Theoretical Model for CRT.



Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a concept introduced into educational literature by scholar Solorzano (1997) and extrapolated from legal studies, is crucial for understanding the multifaceted experiences of Black girls in education. Many discussions of intersectionality focus on intersecting identities, such as how Black girls' experiences cannot be reduced to just being Black or just being a girl, and how factors like disability, socioeconomic status (SES), and language influence their unique experiences. However, it's essential to understand that intersectionality is primarily about examining relations of power and oppression. Intersectionality looks at where power exists, how power operates, and how power changes over time and across different contexts. It examines how systems of power like capitalism, heterosexism, colonization, classism, white supremacy, sexism, anti-Blackness, and patriarchy are interconnected (e.g., racial capitalism, gendered racism, white supremacist patriarchy) and how they shape people's lives. Additionally, intersectionality explores ways to challenge and dismantle these power structures to create new approaches to thinking, living, and being (Cole, 2020; Collins, 1990, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991).

For Black girls, housing instability represents a critical intersection of race, class, and gender inequities that shape their educational experiences. Black children are disproportionately affected by housing instability, with research showing they are more likely to experience homelessness and transient housing compared to their White peers (Burns et al., 2021). This disparity stems from the complex interaction between systemic racism in housing policies and economic inequalities. These intersecting systems of oppression create barriers to stable housing that can significantly impact Black children's educational experiences and relationships within schools (Burns et al., 2021).

The impact of transient housing on Black girls' education demonstrates how systems of oppression intersect. Transient housing disrupts school attendance and positive STRs (Galvez & Luna, 2014). When children are constantly moving, teachers are not able to build strong bonds with their students which may lead to incorrect assumptions or perceptions of their students (Galvez & Luna, 2014). For Black girls, combining the negative effects of transient housing, such as lower student achievement and increased externalizing behaviors, with existing racial and gender biases in education can contribute to negative teacher perceptions, leading to conflictual STRs (Blake et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2021). However, close STRs can serve as a protective factor for students in transient housing by mitigating its negative effects on social and behavioral adjustment (Haskett et al., 2021). This intersection of housing status, race, and gender highlights why transient housing must be considered when examining teacher perceptions of their relationships with Black preschool-aged girls.

Research has shown that teacher expectations are lower for Black girls compared to White girls (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Systems of power, such as misogynoir (discrimination at the intersection of anti-Blackness and sexism), create distinct experiences for Black girls and contribute to these lowered expectations (Bailey, 2021). Implicit bias and racism lead to differences in teacher expectations, perpetuating misogynoir (Albritton et al., 2023). This highlights the significance of intersectionality in understanding how teachers negatively perceive the academic abilities of Black preschool-aged girls. Albritton et al. (2023) demonstrate how limited access to high-quality preschool education stems from the intersection of anti-Blackness and classism. This intersectionality is evident in multiple ways. Limited access to quality preschool (affecting 75% of Black children) and systemic barriers, like housing segregation, create obstacles to their literacy development (Albritton et al., 2023; Bingham et al., 2023).

These intersecting systems fundamentally shape both social skill evaluation and relationship formation in early education. Anti-Blackness, misogyny, and classism influence how teachers evaluate Black girls' social behaviors, with misogynoir leading to harsher judgment of their social expressions (M. Morris, 2016). Poor education quality and low expectations increase challenges in how teachers perceive their social competencies. Moreover, socioeconomic disparities and racial/gender biases affect teacher interactions with Black female students from their earliest educational encounters (Schneider & Gibbs, 2022), compromising the development of positive STRs (Albritton et al., 2023).

This study's methodological focus on Black girls specifically, without requiring comparison to White peers, allows for deeper examination of how their unique educational experiences are shaped by intersecting systems of power (Collins, 2019; K. Crenshaw, 1991; Neal-Jackson, 2018). Rather than treating race and gender as separate variables to be compared against White or male standards, this approach recognizes how these identities function together in lived experience (Annamma et al., 2019; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

Permanence of Racism

Racism permeates all aspects of American society. Schools and school districts are not above racism as it perpetuates “racism throughout the culture, organization, policies, and practices, and will always do so” (Capper, 2015, p. 800). The disproportionality of disciplinary practices is one of the most discussed racist policies within and outside of scholarly research. One rationale for this disproportionality is deficit thinking. Deficit thinking involves attaching negative traits with deviations from the “norm,” leading to stereotyping and judgment. Deficit thinking can lead to implicit and racial bias and can have detrimental impacts on Black girls’ success in school (Albritton et al., 2023). For example, while 6% of all K-12 students face one or

more out-of-school suspensions, the figure rises to 10% for Black girls and drops to 2% for White girls, illustrating a significant disparity (Department of Education Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2016). Despite constituting only 8% of enrolled students, Black girls represent 13% of those receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. Conversely, girls of other racial backgrounds did not experience disproportionate rates of out-of-school suspensions (OCR, 2016).

In preschool settings, although Black boys make up 19% of the male population, they account for 45% of those receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. While Black girls constitute 20% of the female preschool population, they represent 54% of those receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions, highlighting a notable disproportionality (OCR, 2016). These disparities manifest as systemic racism affects how teachers evaluate Black children's early literacy skills (Boutte, 2017). Furthermore, racial bias influences how teachers interpret Black children's social behaviors in early childhood, with Black girls' social expressions facing misinterpretation through racialized lenses (Blake et al., 2011). These racialized misinterpretations begin in preschool and lead to disproportionate discipline (OCR, 2016), fundamentally shaping STRs in ways that persist throughout education (Ansari et al., 2020).

Whiteness as Property

Whiteness as property has been conceptualized in educational scholarship by Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) by linking “Whiteness” to property taxes as public schools are funded based on local property tax. Ladson-Billings & Tate IV (1995) argue that wealthier communities can allocate more funds to education than poor communities and, because of this, the wealthy assert the right to control the “property” they wish to protect in public schools, thus upholding White privilege (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). For instance, only 25% of Black

children are in high-quality early childhood settings compared to 36% of White children and 40% of Latinx children (Bingham et al., 2023). Another manifestation of this is evident in the public school curriculum, where advanced placement (AP) and gifted and honors programs often underrepresent Black students, while special education programs overrepresent them (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

Another way White privilege is perpetuated in the curriculum is by erasing the Black perspective (Albritton et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). White children are more likely to see themselves in the curriculum, especially when discussions of Black historical figures occur primarily during sanctioned Black holidays (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Black History Month, etc.). A clear example of a lack of representation is evident in children's books. Studies indicate that the absence of culturally relevant children's literature in classrooms impacts Black children's perceptions of their racial and cultural identities, in addition to causing reading difficulties and diminished interest in reading (Wood & Jocius, 2013). The privilege of whiteness extends beyond funding to fundamentally shape literacy/language assessment. White cultural norms dominate early literacy practice and these norms affect the standards of literacy/language skills (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012, 2021). Additionally, White middle-class behavioral standards become default expectations in early childhood, affecting how teachers evaluate Black girls' social competencies (Annamma et al., 2019). Negative teacher perceptions of Black preschool-aged girls' literacy/language skills and social skills could negatively impact STRs (Hatfield et al., 2016; Mashburn et al., 2008).

Whiteness as property influences how research is conducted and valued in education (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Traditional methods often treat White experiences as the default standard, while viewing other racial groups' experiences as deviations (Stanley, 2007; Wang,

2016). This creates a hierarchy where White ways of knowing and being are the norm, while Black children's cultural strengths and ways of learning are overlooked or devalued (Iruka et al., 2023; Wood & Jocius, 2013).

QuantCrit

While CRT scholarship has traditionally favored qualitative approaches, this study uses quantitative methods through a critical race lens, an approach known as QuantCrit (Gillborn et al., 2018). QuantCrit integrates CRT with quantitative research methods to challenge how numbers are used in racial analysis. This approach recognizes that racism is too complex to be simply counted or measured. Researchers using QuantCrit carefully examine how statistical data can promote deficit-based analyses that ultimately serve White racial interests, showing that numerical categories are not neutral but socially constructed (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). This approach gives equal importance to personal stories and numerical data, ensuring that the real-life experiences of marginalized communities are not ignored by statistical analysis (Gilliam et al., 2016).

QuantCrit is particularly relevant for examining teacher perceptions of Black girls, as traditional quantitative measures often encode racial bias beneath a cover-up of objective measurement (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). It guides both the collection and interpretation of quantitative data regarding teacher perceptions of Black preschool-aged girls' literacy/language, social skills, and STRs. By applying QuantCrit principles, this study aims to use quantitative methods while remaining aware of how statistical measures may reflect and recreate racial inequities in early childhood education.

The Current Study

The present study aims to address critical gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of preschool-aged Black girls in early childhood education settings. While extensive research has explored STR, literacy/language skills, and social skills in early childhood education, there is a notable lack of focus on the specific experiences of young Black girls at the intersection of race and gender.

This study seeks to investigate how teacher perceptions of preschool-aged Black girls' literacy/language, and social skills impact their perceptions of STR, both in terms of closeness and conflict. By focusing on this specific demographic, I aim to provide valuable insights into the unique dynamics at play in these early educational experiences. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the effect of teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) on the variance in teacher perceptions of close student-teacher relationships, after controlling for transient housing for Black girls in early childhood education?
2. What is the effect of teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) on the variance in teacher perceptions of conflictual student-teacher relationships, after controlling for transient housing for Black girls in early childhood education?

Given the existing literature, I hypothesize that:

1. After controlling for transient housing, higher teacher ratings of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) will be associated with higher perceptions of close student-teacher relationships for Black girls in early childhood education.
2. After controlling for transient housing, lower teacher ratings of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) will be associated with significantly higher perceptions of conflictual student-teacher relationships for Black girls in early childhood education.

This study will contribute to the growing body of research on early childhood education by focusing specifically on the experiences of preschool-aged Black girls. By examining the interplay between academic skills, social competencies, and relationship quality, I aim to provide insights that can inform educational practices and policies to better support this often-overlooked demographic. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the persistent opportunity gaps and promoting equitable educational experiences for young Black girls from the earliest stages of their academic journey.

Methods

Participants

This study utilized secondary data from the Head Start Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social-skill Promotion (Head Start CARES) project, a national randomized study that evaluated three intervention strategies aimed at promoting children's social-emotional development. The sample demographic for the present study comprised of four-

year-old Black girls (*N*=280) and their teachers with complete demographic information listed in Table 1.

This study focuses solely on four-year-old Black girls to center their unique experiences without aligning whiteness as the default comparison. Research in educational and psychological fields focusing on Black and Brown populations is often required to justify their sample selection and explain their reasoning for not including a White comparison group, while studies with White samples are rarely held to the same standards (Stanley, 2007; Q. Wang, 2016). This practice reinforces the idea that whiteness is the standard that everyone should be measured against. A strengths-based approach, grounded in CRT's tenets of whiteness as property (challenging the default comparison to White standards) and intersectionality (recognizing the unique experiences at the intersection of race and gender), allows for a more meaningful examination of the factors shaping STRs without reinforcing deficit-based narratives (Buchanan et al., 2021; Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Iruka et al., 2023).

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

	N	*%*
Parent/Caregiver Monthly Income		
$799 or fewer	58	20.7
$800 to $1,199	38	13.6
$1,200 to $1,499	40	14.3
$1,500 to $1,999	45	16.1
$2,000 to $2,499	25	8.9
$2,500 or more	30	10.7
Household Receiving TANF		
No	239	85.4
Yes	34	12.1
Parent/Caregiver Owns Home		
No	233	83.2
Yes	47	16.8

Table 2 (continued).

Parent/Caregiver Lives in Transient Housing		
No	226	80.7
Yes	54	19.3
Household Receiving Food Stamps		
No	67	23.9
Yes	208	74.3

Note. $N = 290$

Procedures

The Head Start CARES broader research included 107 Head Start centers and 307 Head Start classrooms, strategically selected to ensure representative sampling across the United States, with approximately 3,900 children participating. The Head Start CARES study employed a comprehensive data collection approach, gathering information at multiple levels including child, teacher, classroom, and coach to assess various outcomes and implementation fidelity. Data were collected across four time points: baseline (spring before implementation), fall of implementation year, spring of implementation year, and spring of children's kindergarten year (Morris et al., 2014) The teachers in this study reflected the typical demographic make-up of Head Start teachers nationally (Morris et al., 2014). I will access these data through a confidential data agreement with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICSPR).

For the proposed study, I analyzed baseline data collected during a single fall quarter, before any intervention implementation. Specifically, I examined teacher reports on student-teacher relationship quality, social skill competence, and literacy/language skills, alongside parent reports to identify four-year-old Black girls within the sample. This approach allowed for a focused analysis of the target population using data collected from both teachers and parents/caregivers before any intervention effects.

Measures

Predictor Variable: Social Skills Rating System Teacher Form (SSRS)

Teachers' assessments of their students' social skills utilized the SRSS Teacher form – Social Skills Scale. The SSRS is a comprehensive, multi-rater tool standardized for students aged three to 18 (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). It evaluates social behaviors in preschool (ages 3-5), elementary (grades K-6), and secondary students (grades 7-12). This study specifically focuses on the elementary forms due to the grade level of the sample. The SRSS assesses Social Skills, Problem Behaviors, and Academic Competence (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

The SRSS was normed using a standardization sample considering the four geographic regions of the United States, with a greater number of children from the South and North Central regions and fewer from the West and Northeast. The teacher sample consisted of 259 individuals who rated their students in 1988 (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). The standardization group was thoughtfully chosen to represent diverse racial and ethnic groups, with 27% of the sample consisting of minority students (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and "Other"), compared to the US population's 31% minority representation (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

Teachers answered questions in three social skill domains: cooperation (i.e., behaviors facilitating academic performance), assertion (i.e., behaviors involving initiation of social interactions or expression of opinions), and self-control (i.e., behaviors that involve inhibition of impulses or negative behaviors). Items were rated on a 3-point scale based on the rater's perceived frequency of a certain behavior: 0 = *Never,* 1 = *Sometimes*, 2 = *Very Often* (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Items also include a 3-point Importance rating scale for the Social Skills Scale. The Importance rating scale documents the behavior standards and expectations of teachers (Gresham

& Elliot, 1990). Behaviors are rated as 0 if they are perceived to be *Not Important*, 1 if they are perceived to be *Important*, and 2 if they are perceived to be *Critical* (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

Internal consistency was measured based on data collected from the aforementioned sample. Internal consistency yielded an average coefficient alpha reliability of .90 for the Social Skills scale (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). The SRSS Teacher forms demonstrated appropriate construct and convergent validity. Several score comparison studies were conducted using the SRSS and a variety of other tools. For example, the SRSS Teacher form was compared to the Social Behavior Assessment (SBA) and Harter Teacher Rating Scale (TRS; (Community-University Partnership, 2011). Moderate validity coefficients (.44-.70) were found between the SSRS-Teacher form and TRS while correlations with the SBA ranged from (-.15 to -.73) for the Social Skills subscales. The SBA and TRS are suggested to similarly measure aspects of social skills as the SRSS Social Skills scale (Community-University Partnership, 2011). Lastly, there was a correlation of .75 between the Walker-McConnel Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment and the SRSS Teacher form, suggesting them to similarly measure aspects of social skills (Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, 2011).

Predictor Variable: Academic Rating Scale (ARS)

The ARS (Academic Rating Scale) was specifically developed for the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (Rock and Pollack, 2002). This scale serves to assess teachers' evaluations of students' academic achievement across three key domains: language and literacy (reading), general knowledge (science and social studies), and mathematical thinking. Teachers' perceptions of their students' literacy/language skills were measured using the ARS Literacy and Language subscale (Rock & Pollack, 2002).

For the Literacy and Language subscale, teachers were asked teachers to use a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not yet*, 2 = *beginning*, 3 = *in progress*, 4 = *intermediate*, and 5 = *proficient*) to rate their students' literacy skills. If a particular skill had not yet been introduced into the classroom, the teacher rated that item as N/A or not applicable (Rock and Pollack, 2002). The questions covered a range of aspects, including straightforward and objective items (e.g., "names all upper- and lower-case letters of the alphabet") to those with more subjective elements (e.g., "composes simple stories"; Rock and Pollack, 2002). Teachers provided ratings based on a comparison with other students of the same age level (Rock and Pollack, 2002).

The ARS Literacy and Language subscale exhibits strong reliability. LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) reported an internal consistency alpha of .91, and another study found similarly robust levels of internal reliability (α = .89; Baker et al., 2015). Lastly, in Downer et al.'s (2010) study, the alpha coefficient was .94, further attesting to the scale's reliability. Several studies report adequate concurrent validity (Baker et al., 2015; Downer et al., 2010).

Outcome Variable: Student-Teacher Relationships Scale – Short Form (STRS)

To assess how teachers perceive their interactions with the child participants, teachers were tasked with completing the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (STRS; Pianta, 2001). This scale comprises 15 self-report items categorized into two subscales. The Closeness subscale, consisting of eight items, evaluates teachers' perceived warmth and open communication with the child. On the other hand, the Conflict subscale, made up of seven items, measures the teacher's perceived negativity and discordance with the child (Pianta, 2001). Teachers assess each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely does not apply*) to 5 (*Definitely does apply*). Higher scores on the Closeness subscale suggest more positive interactions, while higher scores on the Conflict subscale indicate more negative interactions (Pianta, 2001). Sample

items from the STRS include statements such as “This student and I always seem to be struggling with each other,” “If upset, this student will seek advice from me,” and “This student tries to please me.”

Previous research on the psychometric properties of the STRS has indicated internal consistency estimates (Cronbach’s alpha coefficients) of .92 for Conflict and .84 for Closeness (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Researchers identified a strong correlation between teachers’ ratings of conflict and problem behaviors (r=.73; Hamre et al., 2008). In examining the variance within STRS, Hamre and colleagues (2008) found that over half (53%) of the variance in teachers’ reports of conflict with young students was explained by their perceptions of those students’ problem behaviors. Steinberg (1993) observed low correlations between STRS scores and preschool measures of children’s language development. The STRS is widely used and exhibits appropriate reliability and validity for racially and ethnically diverse children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Webb & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2011).

Control Variable: Transient Housing

Transient housing will be used as a control variable since it can significantly influence the nature and quality of STRs. Research has demonstrated that students in transient housing face unique challenges that can affect their school experiences: they show higher rates of absenteeism and suspension, particularly among students of color, which can lead to conflictual STR (Burns et al., 2021; Galvez & Luna, 2014). On the other hand, close STRs can serve as a protective factor for students experiencing transient housing, as positive STRs can mitigate the adverse effects of transient housing on children’s social and behavioral adjustment (Haskett et al., 2021). To assess for transient housing, parents were asked what type of housing the family lived in.

Emergency housing, temporary housing, and living with friends or relatives were considered transient housing, while owning or renting a home or apartment was not.

Data Screening

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Before performing any planned statistical analyses, data screening and power analysis were conducted. I checked for missing data, and any missing data were handled using the pairwise method to ensure no biased parameters and estimates occurred and to maintain the statistical power of the analysis. Outliers and normality were examined before performing the planned statistical analyses.

Analytic Strategy

Before testing the hypothesis, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for literacy/language, cooperation, assertion, self-control, close STRs, and conflictual STRs. Pearson correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) were examined to assess the strength and direction of the relationships between these variables.

To test the hypothesis, two hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted, each with transient housing included as a control variable in the first block. In the first regression, close STRs were entered as the outcome variable, with literacy/language skills added in the second block as predictors. Cooperation, assertion, and self-control were included as additional predictors in the third block. For the second regression, conflictual STRs were the outcome variable. Transient housing was again controlled for in the first block, followed by literacy/language skills in the second block. Finally, cooperation, assertion, and self-control were included in the third block to assess their impact on the relationships.

Before conducting the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, certain assumptions were verified. The normality of variables was checked using histograms and p-plots of regression standardized residuals. Linearity between the predictors and the outcome variables was examined using scatterplots. Homoscedasticity, or the even spread of data points around the line of best fit, was reviewed via scatterplots. Independence of errors was verified by inspecting standardized residuals to confirm there was no correlation among residuals. Outliers were checked using residual, studentized residual, Cook's D, and centered leverage values. Lastly, multicollinearity was assessed through variance inflation factor (VIF), tolerance, and collinearity diagnostics to evaluate any potential high correlations among predictor variables.

Results

Prior to analysis, data screening was conducted. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion, meaning cases with any missing values across the study variables were excluded from all analyses. The final sample consisted of 280 Black preschool-aged girls (5.4% missing from the original sample of 296).

Descriptives and Correlations

All continuous variables were standardized to *z*-scores prior to analysis, resulting in standardized means close to 0 and standard deviations close to 1. Binary coding was used for transient housing status ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.40$), indicating that 19% of participants reported living in transient housing.

The standardized scores for literacy/language ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 1.04$) suggest that, on average, participants scored slightly above the mean on literacy/language measures. For social skills dimensions, students' standardized scores indicated levels around the mean for cooperation

(M = 0.28, SD = 0.93), assertion (M = 0.37, SD = 0.90), and self-control (M = 0.19, SD = 0.98). Regarding STRs, standardized scores showed average levels of closeness (M = 0.26, SD = 0.96) and slightly below-average levels of conflict (M = -0.47, SD = 0.97). These standardized scores indicate that teachers generally had positive perceptions of Black preschool-aged girls in their classrooms. Teachers viewed the girls as having above-average literacy/language and social skills, maintained slightly above-average closeness in relationships, and reported below-average conflict.

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between transient housing, literacy/language, social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control), and STRs (closeness and conflict). Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables are presented in Table 3. Correlational analyses revealed that literacy/language was weakly to moderately positively associated with all social skills dimensions (rs = .24 to .43, $p < .01$) and showed a weak positive association with close STRs (r = .25, $p < .01$). Social skills dimensions showed strong positive intercorrelations (rs = .62 to .76, $p < .01$) and were weakly to moderately positively related to close STRs (rs = .29 to .59, $p < .01$) but weakly to moderately negatively related to conflictual STRs (rs = -.22 to -.43, $p < .01$). Student-teacher relationship dimensions were moderately negatively correlated (r = -.34, $p < .01$). Transient housing showed no significant correlations with other variables.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

	Variables	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Transient Housing	280	.19	.40	—	.05	-.08	-.07	-.05	-.05	-.02
2.	Literacy/ Language	280	.45	1.04	.05	—	.34***	.43***	.24***	.25***	-0.3

Table 3 (continued).

3.	Social Skills Cooperation	280	.28	.93	-.08	.34***	—	.72***	.76***	.41***	-.34***
4.	Social Skills Assertion	280	.37	.90	-.07	.43***	.72***	—	.62***	.59***	-.22***
5.	Social Skills Self-Control	280	.19	.98	-.05	.24***	.76***	.62***	—	.29***	-.43***
6.	STRs Closeness	280	.26	.96	-.05	.25***	.41***	.59***	.29***	—	-.34***
7.	STRs Conflict	280	-.47	.97	-.02	-0.3	-.34***	-.22***	-.43***	-.34***	—

*p****<.001

Regression Assumptions

Prior to conducting the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of residuals, independence of errors, and multicollinearity were assessed. The data were screened for both models (STRs closeness and conflict as outcome variables).

Assumptions Testing for the Closeness Model

Several assumptions were tested for the regression model predicting close STRs. The normality assumption was met, as evidenced by the histogram showing a bell-shaped distribution and the P-P plot points closely following the diagonal line. Scatterplots demonstrated an adequate linear relationship between predictors and the outcome variable. While there was slight heteroscedasticity (uneven spread of residuals), the pattern was not severe enough to violate assumptions.

The independence of errors assumption was satisfied with a Durbin-Watson value of 1.993, which is very close to the ideal value of 2. A few potential outliers were identified (standardized residuals ranging from -3.922 to 3.031), but none were influential cases as indicated by low Cook's Distance values (max = 0.131, well below the critical value of 1) and

acceptable leverage values (range: 0.002 to 0.111). Multicollinearity was not a concern, as all predictors showed acceptable tolerance values above 0.3 and VIF values below 4, indicating the predictors were sufficiently independent of each other.

Assumptions Testing for the Conflict Model

Several assumptions were tested for the regression model predicting conflictual STRs. The normality assumption was reasonably met, as shown by the histogram's approximately normal distribution and the P-P plot points following the diagonal line with some minor deviations at the tails. Scatterplots indicated adequately linear relationships between predictors and conflict, though there was some clustering of residuals visible in the plot.

The independence of errors assumption was satisfied with a Durbin-Watson value of 2.090, close to the ideal value of 2. A few potential outliers were identified (standardized residuals ranging from -1.698 to 3.579), but none were influential cases as indicated by low Cook's Distance values (max = 0.086, well below the critical value of 1) and acceptable leverage values (range: 0.002 to 0.111). Multicollinearity was not a concern, as all predictors showed acceptable tolerance values above 0.3 (range: 0.315-0.985) and VIF values below 4 (range: 1.015-3.171), indicating the predictors were sufficiently independent of each other.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to examine how teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) predicted close STRs with Black preschool-aged girls, after controlling for transient housing status. Results can be shown in Table 4.

In the first step of Table 4, transient housing status of Black preschool-aged girls did not significantly contribute to the model [$F(1, 278) = 0.798$, $p = .372$], explaining only 0.3% of the variance in teacher-perceived closeness. Adding teachers' perceptions of Black girls' literacy/language skills in step 2 explained an additional 6.3% of variance, representing a significant change in R^2 [$F(1, 277) = 18.762$, $p < .001$]. The addition of teachers' perceptions of Black girls' social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) in step 3 explained an additional 28.9% of the variance in closeness, also a significant change [$F(3, 274) = 41.006$, $p < .001$]. The full model explained 34.4% of the variance in how teachers perceived their closeness with Black preschool-aged girls, [$F(5, 274) = 30.225$, $p < .001$].

In the final model, teachers' perceptions of Black girls' assertion skills emerged as the strongest predictor of close relationships (B = 0.69, β = 0.637, $p < .001$), suggesting that teachers reported closer relationships with Black preschool-aged girls whom they perceived as more assertive. Interestingly, teachers' perceptions of Black girls' self-control showed a negative relationship with closeness (B = -0.16, β = -0.162, $p = .034$). Teachers' perceptions of transient housing status (B = -0.03, β = -0.011, $p = .827$), literacy/language skills (B = -0.01, β = -0.015, $p = .782$), and cooperation (B = 0.08, β = 0.078, $p = .370$) were not significant predictors of how close teachers felt to Black preschool-aged girls in their classrooms.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Results for Close STRs.

Variables	B	95% CI *B*		*SE*	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	*UL*				
Step 1						0.003	0.003
Constant	0.29***	0.16	0.41	0.06			
Transient Housing	-0.13	-0.42	0.16	0.15	-0.05		

Table 4 (continued).

Step 2						0.07	0.06
Constant	0.19	0.06	0.32	0.07			
Transient Housing	-0.16	-0.44	0.12	0.14	-0.07		
Literacy/Language	0.23***	0.13	0.34	0.05	0.25		
Step 3						0.36	0.29
Constant	0.03	-0.08	0.14	0.06			
Transient Housing	-0.03	-0.26	0.21	0.12	-0.01		
Literacy/Language	-0.01	-0.11	0.09	0.05	-0.02		
Social Skills Cooperation	0.08	-0.10	0.26	0.09	0.08		
Social Skills Assertion	0.69***	0.53	0.85	0.08	0.64		
Social Skills Self-Control	-0.16*	-0.31	-0.01	0.07	-0.16		

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

An additional hierarchical regression was conducted to examine how teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) predicted conflictual STRs with Black preschool-aged girls, after controlling for transient housing status. Results can be shown in Table 5.

In the first step, transient housing status of Black preschool-aged girls did not significantly contribute to the model, $F(1, 278) = 0.148$, $p = .700$, explaining only 0.1% of the variance in teacher-perceived conflict. Adding teachers' perceptions of Black girls' literacy/language skills in step 2 explained an additional 0.1% of variance, which was not a significant change in R^2 [$F(1, 277) = 0.161$, $p = .688$]. The addition of teachers' perceptions of Black girls' social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) in step 3 explained an additional 19.7% of variance in conflict, representing a significant change [$F(3, 274) = 22.459$, $p < .001$]. The full model explained 18.4% of the variance in how teachers perceived conflict with Black preschool-aged girls [$F(5, 274) = 13.552$, $p < .001$].

In the final model, teachers' perceptions of Black girls' self-control emerged as the only significant predictor of conflictual relationships (B = -0.41, β = -.411, $p < .001$), indicating that teachers reported less conflict with Black preschool-aged girls whom they perceived as having higher self-control. Teachers' perceptions of transient housing status (B = -0.13, β = -.051, $p = .353$), literacy/language skills (B = 0.08, β = .079, $p = .191$), cooperation (B = -0.13, β = -.121, $p = .209$), and assertion (B = 0.09, β = .086, $p = .300$) were not significant predictors of how much conflict teachers reported in their relationships with Black preschool-aged girls.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression Results for Conflictual STRs.

Variables	B	95% CI *B*		*SE*	B	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	*UL*				
Step 1						0.001	0.001
Constant	-0.04	-0.16	0.09	0.06			
Transient Housing	-0.06	-0.35	0.23	0.15	-0.02		
Step 2						0.001	0.001
Constant	-0.03	-0.16	0.11	0.07			
Transient Housing	-0.05	-0.35	0.24	0.15	-0.02		
Literacy/Language	-0.02	-0.13	0.09	0.06	-0.02		
Step 3						0.20	0.20
Constant	0.02	-0.10	0.15	0.06			
Transient Housing	-0.12	-0.39	0.14	0.13	-0.05		
Literacy/Language	0.07	-0.04	0.19	0.06	0.08		
Social Skills Cooperation	-0.13	-0.33	0.07	0.10	-0.12		
Social Skills Assertion	0.09	-0.08	0.27	0.09	0.09		
Social Skills Self-Control	-0.41***	-0.57	-0.24	0.08	-0.41		

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Partial Correlation Analysis

To further investigate the relationships identified in the regression analyses, particularly the potential suppressor effect involving self-control, a partial correlation analysis was conducted

controlling for self-control. This partial correlation examined the relationships between teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills, social skills, and STRs for Black preschool-aged girls while controlling for self-control. The results revealed significant changes in the magnitude and significance of several relationships when self-control was controlled for, indicating its central role in these associations.

The relationship between assertion and close STRs remained strong when controlling for self-control $r(277) = .542$, $p < .001$, though slightly reduced from the zero-order correlation $r(278) = .587$, $p < .001$. This suggests assertion maintains a largely independent relationship with closeness beyond what is shared with self-control. The association between cooperation and closeness decreased more notably from the zero-order correlation $r(278) = .410$, $p < .001$ to the partial correlation $r(277) = .305$, $p < .001$, but remained significant.

Most noticeably, the relationships between both assertion and cooperation with conflictual STRs became non-significant when controlling for self-control. Assertion's negative correlation with conflict $r(278) = -.219$, $p < .001$ shifted to a non-significant positive association $r(277) = .067$, $p = .264$, while cooperation's relationship with conflict $r(278) = -.342$, $p < .001$ effectively disappeared $r(277) = -.025$, $p = .672$. These findings suggest that the previously observed relationships between these social skills and conflict were largely dependent on their shared variance with self-control.

The relationship between literacy/language skills and close STRs weakened but remained significant when controlling for self-control, decreasing from $r(278) = .249$, $p < .001$ to $r(277) = .193$, $p = .001$. The relationship between literacy/language skills and conflict remained non-significant, though the direction changed from slightly negative to slightly positive.

These findings reveal that self-control functions as a key mediating variable in the relationship between social skills and conflictual STRs for Black preschool-aged girls, while assertion maintains a unique and substantial relationship with close STRs independent of self-control. This pattern supports the identification of a suppressor effect involving self-control and provides a more nuanced understanding of how different social skill components uniquely contribute to relationship formation in early education settings for Black girls.

Discussion

The current study examined how teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills and social skills impacted their perceptions of STRs with Black preschool-aged girls, while controlling for transient housing. The findings reveal important information about the dynamics between teachers' perceptions of their young Black female students and their relationships with them in early childhood education settings.

Support of Original Hypotheses

Primary Hypotheses

The first hypothesis of this study suggested that after controlling for transient housing, higher teacher ratings of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) will be associated with higher perceptions of close STRs for Black girls in early childhood education. The findings partially support this hypothesis. The final model explained 34.4% of the variance in teacher-perceived close STRs, with assertion emerging as the strongest predictor of close relationships. Teachers reported significantly closer relationships with Black girls they perceived as more assertive. Unexpectedly, teachers' perceptions of self-control showed a negative relationship with closeness, indicating that teachers reported less emotional

closeness with Black girls they perceived as having higher self-control. This finding goes against previous literature which is discussed in detail below. Initially, teachers' perceptions of literacy/language skills positively predicted closeness in the second step of the model. However, this relationship became non-significant in the final model when social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) were included, suggesting that behavioral perceptions may be more influential than academic skills in shaping close relationships.

After controlling for transient housing, the second hypothesis was that lower teacher ratings of literacy/language skills and social skills (cooperation, assertion, and self-control) would be associated with significantly higher perceptions of conflictual STRs for Black girls in early childhood education. Similarly to the first hypothesis, the results partially support the hypothesis. The final model explained 18.4% of the variance in teacher-perceived conflictual STRs. Teachers' perceptions of self-control emerged as the only significant predictor of conflict meaning that teachers reported higher conflict with Black girls whom they perceived as having lower self-control. Neither literacy/language, cooperation, nor assertion significantly predicted conflictual relationships. Transient housing showed no significant effects on either close or conflictual STRs.

This study controlled for transient housing status given previous research suggesting housing instability could affect school experiences and relationships (Burns et al., 2021; Galvez & Luna, 2014; Haskett et al., 2021). The non-significance of transient housing as a control variable (explaining only 0.3% of variance in close STRs and 0.1% of variance in conflictual STRs) indicates that the findings regarding social skills and literacy/language are robust regardless of students' housing circumstances. This allows greater confidence that the significant

relationships identified between social skills (particularly assertion and self-control) and STRs reflect meaningful patterns in how teachers form relationships with Black preschool-aged girls.

Secondary/Exploratory Analyses

The exploratory correlational analyses revealed significant moderate positive correlations between literacy/language and all social skills dimensions (rs = .24 to .43, $p < .01$), suggesting interconnections between academic and social competencies. The strong positive intercorrelations among social skills dimensions (rs = .62 to .76, $p < .01$) indicate these constructs may have some overlap, though they appear to function differently in predicting STR quality.

Interpretation of Findings

Self-Control as Central to Student-Teacher Relationships

Unlike previous literature that primarily examined social skills as a composite measure, this study divided social skills into different components: assertion, cooperation, and self-control. This approach revealed more nuanced patterns in STRs with Black preschool-aged girls.

Teachers' perceptions of Black girls' self-control significantly predicted both close and conflictual STRs, revealing a complex and seemingly contradictory pattern. This study found that higher levels of teacher-perceived self-control predicted both decreased conflict and, unexpectedly, decreased closeness in STRs with Black girls. This finding contrasts with previous research showing positive associations between self-control and close STRs (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Mohamed, 2018; Zhang & Nurmi, 2012). While the negative association between self-control and conflictual STRs align with existing literature (Mohamed, 2018), the negative relationship with close STRs suggests a concerning pattern specific to Black girls' experience.

This finding characterizes why, as Stanley (2007) and Wang (2016) argue, requiring Black-focused research to include White comparison groups can cover important insights. The complex relationship between self-control and STRs revealed here might have been misinterpreted as a deficit or deviation if measured against White behavioral standards. Instead, by centering Black girls' experiences, this study identified how behavioral expectations intersect uniquely with relationship formation, revealing how traits typically considered universally positive (like self-control) may function differently within systems shaped by racial and gender bias.

Through CRT's emphasis on the permanence of racism, this pattern suggests that Black girls who demonstrate high self-control may experience less conflict with teachers but also receive less emotional warmth and closeness. When Black girls display high self-control, they are often subject to "adultification," where they are viewed as more mature and less deserving of nurturing than their peers (Blake et al., 2011). Black girls may be meeting behavioral expectations but potentially at the cost of being seen as needing less emotional support or connection. This aligns with what the literature describes as the "strong Black girl" stereotype, where Black girls are viewed as exceptionally strong and resilient, leading to the misconception that they do not need support (Aldridge, 2018; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020).

Assertion and Cooperation Findings

Partial correlation analyses provided important insights into how social skills relate to STRs when controlling for self-control. Notably, assertion's negative correlation with conflict shifted to a non-significant positive association, while cooperation's relationship with conflict essentially disappeared. These patterns suggest that both assertion and cooperation primarily

relate to conflictual relationships through their shared variance with self-control rather than as independent protective factors.

Teachers' perceptions of Black girls' assertiveness were the strongest predictor of relationship closeness, with teachers reporting stronger connections to students they viewed as more assertive. It is important to note, that when controlling for self-control, assertion's negative relationship with conflict shifted to a non-significant positive association, suggesting that assertion's protective effects against conflict operate primarily through self-control rather than independently. This unexpected directional shift (from negative to slightly positive) suggests a complex interaction between these social skills that traditional measures may not adequately portray. Through CRT and African-centered educational lens, this could indicate that teachers who recognize and value Black girls' cultural ways of expressing themselves, including what Iruka et al. (2023) describe as cultural strengths in expressive communication, form closer bonds with their students. Research has shown that positive relationships with teachers can serve as a protective factor for Black students, potentially mitigating some of the negative effects of systemic racism and bias in educational settings (Burchinal et al., 2002; Decker et al., 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2019). While Mohamed (2018) similarly found assertion was positively associated with close STRs, particularly for girls, most previous research has only examined social skills as a composite measure rather than exploring these distinct components.

In contrast, teachers' perceptions of cooperation did not significantly predict either close or conflictual STRs, a finding that contrasts with studies like Skalická et al. (2015). Through CRT's intersectionality lens, this non-significance might reflect how teachers' interpretations of "cooperation" are culturally mediated. The background literature notes that different communities have varying ways of expressing engagement and participation (Gardner-Neblett et

al., 2017). Through ACE principles, cooperation is understood as deeply rooted in communal values and collective responsibility (Iruka et al., 2023). What teachers recognize as "cooperation" may be based on White middle-class behavioral norms, potentially missing or devaluing culturally specific ways that Black girls demonstrate cooperative behaviors.

Literacy/Language and STRs Findings

In the second step of the model, teachers' perceptions of Black girls' literacy/language skills initially predicted closer STRs, with teachers reporting closer relationships with students they perceived as having stronger literacy/language skills. This finding aligns with extensive previous literature (Cadima et al., 2016; Gallagher et al., 2013; Schmitt et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2015; Spritz et al., 2010; Vatou et al., 2023), including a sample of at-risk, primarily four-year-old Black female students (Justice et al., 2008). This relationship likely reflects a more straightforward dynamic: teachers tend to form closer relationships with students they perceive as having stronger academic skills. However, after social skills were included in the third step, this relationship was no longer significant. The inclusion of social skills might better explain relationship variance, as discussed previously.

Notably, teachers' perceptions of literacy/language skills did not significantly predict conflictual relationships, indicating that academic performance neither protected against nor contributed to teacher-reported conflict. This finding contrasts with Rojas & Abenavoli's (2021) research which demonstrated that conflictual relationships impacted children's receptive vocabulary skills, particularly in samples of mostly Black preschool-aged children. Previous research on this association has been inconsistent, with Vatou et al. (2023) finding only a weak association, and Schmitt et al. (2012) found no association between literacy/language skills and conflictual STRs.

This finding becomes particularly significant when viewed through an African-centered educational lens, which emphasizes the importance of oral traditions, communal learning, and cultural ways of expressing knowledge (Iruka et al., 2023). The non-significance of teacher-perceived literacy/language measures may reflect how teacher perceptions of literacy/language skills fail to capture the rich linguistic and cultural strengths that Black girls bring to the classroom through storytelling and oral traditions (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012, 2021). For instance, Gardner-Neblett et al. (2012) highlight that Black children's narrative language skills incorporate techniques like call-and-response, signification or wordplay, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing techniques, which are Black cultural ways of oral storytelling. These storytelling styles often emphasize rhythm, repetition, suspense, and audience engagement, which are strengths for Black children but are often not important in the classroom setting. Therefore, they are not seen as strengths. However, these skills support better literacy outcomes (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012) and help facilitate the transition to reading (Curenton, 2004; Curenton et al., 2008).

Since Black girls have such strong oral competencies, teachers could be vital in scaffolding literacy/language skills since oral narratives happen in the classroom environment (Christ et al., 2011; Schick & Melzi, 2010). Teachers could create intentional opportunities for storytelling throughout the day that build on Black girls' cultural strengths in oral traditions. By recognizing these oral narrative skills as valuable literacy tools rather than deviations from standardized expectations, teachers can scaffold Black girls' transition from oral to written literacy while affirming their cultural ways of expression (Curenton et al., 2008; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021). This culturally responsive approach not only supports literacy development but also

creates learning spaces where Black girls' identities and cultural knowledge are centered and celebrated rather than marginalized (Iruka et al., 2023).

The non-significance of literacy/language skills in the final model raises questions about how teachers weigh different student characteristics when forming relationships with Black girls. Notably, literacy/language skills did not predict conflict levels, suggesting that for Black girls, academic performance may not protect against or contribute to conflictual relationships with teachers. This finding becomes particularly significant when considered alongside the significant role that social skills, particularly self-control, played in predicting conflict. Through a CRT lens, this pattern suggests that teachers' interpretations of Black girls' behaviors may be more influential in shaping negative relationship dynamics than their academic capabilities. This aligns with what we know about how Black girls are often disproportionately disciplined in educational settings (Blake et al., 2011), with these disciplinary actions frequently stemming from subjective behavioral interpretations rather than academic performance. The finding that literacy/language skills neither protect against nor contribute to conflict, while behavioral perceptions remain significant predictors, suggests that even strong academic performance may not shield Black girls from the negative impacts of racialized behavioral expectations.

Generalization, Limitations, and Implications

Generalizability

Several factors affect the generalizability of these findings. First, regarding population validity, while the sample focused specifically on Black preschool-aged girls, intersectional factors like social class, language background, and regional context may limit generalization across all Black girls. The Head Start context, while providing important insights about early

childhood education in low-income communities, may not reflect relationship dynamics in other early childhood settings like private preschools or family childcare homes.

The measures used rely on mainstream conceptualizations of social skills and STRs emerged from predominantly White samples (Gillborn et al., 2018; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). As a result, these frameworks may not fully reflect the experiences of Black girls, who often learn to assimilate into dominant cultural norms to be perceived positively by teachers (Morris, 2016). This pressure can influence their interactions in ways that traditional measures do not capture. Alternative culturally grounded measures might better capture relationship qualities unique to Black girls' experiences. Additionally, data collection at a single time point limits understanding of how these relationships develop over time.

These findings reflect a specific historical moment in early childhood education. Growing awareness of anti-Black racism in education and increasing focus on culturally responsive teaching may shape how contemporary teachers perceive and form relationships with Black girls differently than in the past. Regional and local policy contexts around early childhood education may also affect generalizability across settings.

Limitations

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting this study's findings. Following QuantCrit principles that "numbers are not neutral" (Gillborn et al., 2018), this study critically examines the suppressor effect identified in self-control. The suppressor effect revealed that self-control was amplifying the relationships between assertion, cooperation, and conflictual STRs, potentially altering interpretations of how these social skills function for Black girls in early education settings. This finding indicates a significant limitation of the measurement tools

themselves, as the SSRS may not adequately distinguish between different social skill components when applied to Black girls in early education settings. Future research should focus on developing and validating measures that can more accurately evaluate these distinct social skill variables in culturally responsive ways, better capturing the unique social competencies of Black girls without embedding dominant cultural biases in the measurement process itself.

While the SSRS and STRS demonstrate good reliability, both rely on teacher reports which can embed racial biases in the measurement process itself. This aligns with what Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) describe as "white logic" in quantitative research, where tools developed primarily through white perspectives may encode racial bias. Self-report bias may be particularly relevant when teachers rate social skills like self-control and assertion for Black girls, given documented tendencies toward adultification and over-scrutiny of Black girls' behaviors (Blake et al., 2011).

Although intersectionality was a key theoretical framework, the study could not fully capture all intersecting identities and systems of oppression affecting Black girls' educational experiences. Quantitative research often relies on fixed categories that may oversimplify or overlook the ways multiple social identities interact. For example, binary classifications (e.g., Black vs. non-Black) may not reflect the nuanced experiences of those navigating overlapping social positions (Collins, 1990; Covarrubias & Veléz, 2013; K. Crenshaw, 1991). While transient housing was controlled for, other socioeconomic factors, disability status, and language backgrounds were not included.

The social skills measure (SSRS) and literacy/language assessments may reflect White middle-class behavioral and academic standards that fail to recognize cultural strengths and alternative forms of expression common in Black communities. This limitation connects to the

broader critique that standardized measures often perpetuate whiteness as property in educational assessment (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021; Iruka et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995).

Finally, while the quantitative approach identified important patterns, it cannot fully capture the nuanced daily interactions and experiences that shape STRs. The concise nature of quantitative measures may miss important contextual factors and cultural nuances. Future research would benefit from mixed-methods approaches incorporating qualitative data through observations and interviews to provide deeper context and capture the full complexity of these relationships.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest several important implications for research, practice, and policy domains. For research, future studies need to expand beyond single-source teacher ratings to incorporate multiple perspectives including parents, observers, and when developmentally appropriate, the students themselves. Recent work by Paes et al. (2023) demonstrates the value of longitudinal designs in understanding how early STRs influence later outcomes. Vatou et al.'s (2023) incorporation of multiple measurement approaches shows how diverse data sources can provide a richer understanding of these relationships. Studies should also examine how teacher characteristics, including their own racial/ethnic backgrounds and cultural competency levels, influence relationship formation with Black girls in early childhood settings, building on work like Scott et al. (2019) that examined how student-teacher racial matching affects classroom interactions.

For practice and program development, these findings highlight the need for professional development that incorporates African-centered educational principles. As demonstrated by Iruka

et al. (2023), teachers need support in recognizing and valuing diverse expressions of social competence that may differ from dominant cultural norms. The finding that self-control shows different patterns with close versus conflictual relationships suggests teachers may benefit from training about how implicit biases and stereotypes about Black girls' maturity levels could unconsciously influence their relationship-building, a point emphasized in recent work by Pyne & Musto (2022). Programs should consider how their behavioral expectations might reflect White middle-class norms rather than embracing cultural diversity in relationship styles and social competencies (Boutte, 2017).

At the policy level, these results call for several systemic changes. Teacher preparation and certification requirements should include substantial coursework on cultural competency, African-centered education principles, and anti-racist education specifically focused on early childhood contexts. Policies guiding early childhood assessment and evaluation need revision to ensure they recognize and value diverse cultural expressions of social skills and relationship-building. Additionally, policies should support programs in providing time and resources for relationship-building between teachers and students, recognizing this as fundamental rather than supplementary to early childhood education.

These implications should be considered within the broader context of working toward educational equity for Black girls specifically, while recognizing that changes benefiting this population are likely to create more inclusive and supportive early childhood environments for all students. Future work in research, practice, and policy should maintain focus on how racism operates at multiple levels to shape educational experiences while working to dismantle barriers to positive relationship formation between teachers and Black girls in early childhood settings.

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