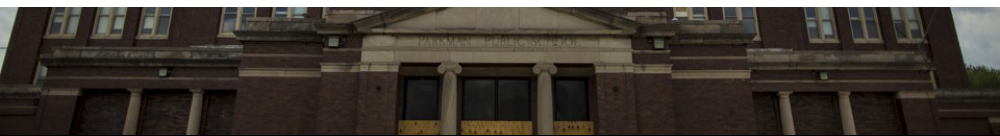


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This Chicago campus was shuttered in 2013 as part of a rash of school closures that disproportionately affected poor black and Latino children.

Jim Young / Reuters

Why the Myth of Meritocracy Hurts Kids of Color

A new study finds that believing society is fair can lead disadvantaged adolescents to act out and engage in risky behavior.

MELINDA D. ANDERSON

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Brighton Park is a predominantly Latino community on the southwest side of Chicago. It's a neighborhood threatened by poverty,

gang violence, ICE raids, and isolation—in a city where income, race, and zip code can determine access to jobs, schools, healthy food, and essential services. It is against this backdrop that the Chicago teacher Xian Franzinger Barrett arrived at the neighborhood's elementary school in 2014.

Recognizing the vast economic and racial inequalities his students faced, he chose what some might consider a radical approach for his writing and social-studies classes, weaving in concepts such as racism, classism, oppression, and prejudice. Barrett said it was vital to reject the oft-perpetuated narrative that society is fair and equal to address students' questions and concerns about their current conditions. And Brighton Elementary's seventh- and eighth-graders quickly put the lessons to work—confronting the school board over inequitable funding, fighting to install a playground, and creating a classroom library focused on black and Latino authors.



How Teachers Learn to Discuss Racism

“Students who are told that things are fair implode pretty quickly in middle school as self-doubt hits them,” he said, “and they begin to blame themselves for problems they can’t control.”

Barrett’s personal observation is validated by a [newly published study](#) in the peer-reviewed journal *Child Development* that finds traditionally marginalized youth who grew up believing in the American ideal that hard work and perseverance naturally lead to success show a decline in self-esteem and an increase in risky behaviors during their middle-school years. The research is considered the first evidence linking preteens’ emotional and behavioral outcomes to their belief in meritocracy, the [widely held assertion](#) that individual merit is always

rewarded.

“If you’re in an advantaged position in society, believing the system is fair and that everyone could just get ahead if they just tried hard enough doesn’t create any conflict for you ... [you] can feel good about how [you] made it,” said Erin Godfrey, the study’s lead author and an assistant professor of applied psychology at New York University’s Steinhardt School. But for those marginalized by the system—economically, racially, and ethnically—believing the system is fair puts them in conflict with themselves and can have negative consequences.

“If the system is fair, why am I seeing that everybody who has brown skin is in this kind of job? You’re having to think about that ... like you’re not as good, or your social group isn’t as good,” Godfrey said. *“That’s the piece ... that I was trying to really get at [by studying] these kids.”*

The findings build upon a body of literature on “system justification”—a [social-psychology theory](#) that believes humans tend to defend, bolster, or rationalize the status quo and see overarching social, economic, and political systems as good, fair, and legitimate. System justification is a distinctively American notion, Godfrey said, built on myths used to justify inequities, like “If you just work hard enough you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps ... it’s just a matter of motivation and talent and grit.” Yet, as she and her colleagues discovered, these beliefs can be a liability for

disadvantaged adolescents once their identity as a member of a marginalized group begins to gel—and once they become keenly aware of how institutional discrimination disadvantages them and their group.

“If you’re [inclined] to believe that ... the system is fair, then you’re maybe going to accept stereotypes about you more easily.”

Researchers measured system-justifying beliefs among 257 students from an urban, public middle school in Arizona. All of the students’ families were identified as low-income, as defined by their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches. The vast majority of the sample—91 percent—were also students of color: Fifty-five percent Latino, 18 percent black, 11 percent Native American, and 7 percent other nonwhite

youth. Additionally, the area, populated by many immigrant families and children, was experiencing social and political unrest due to Senate Bill 1070, a [controversial Arizona law](#) that in its original form criminalized undocumented people in the state.

Godfrey asked the sixth-graders to rate their endorsement of the “American Dream” and system-justifying ideas—namely, that America is the land of opportunity where everyone who works hard has an equal chance to succeed. Youth were then asked to rate themselves on various qualities,

including their self-esteem, risky behaviors (“stayed out all night without your parent’s permission,” “cheated on school tests,” etc.), and perceived discrimination (for example: “How often have others suspected you of doing something wrong because of your ethnicity?” and “How often have the police hassled you because of your ethnicity?”).

At three points over the course of middle school, the youth rated their self-esteem, behavior, and experience with discrimination. The results revealed an alarming trajectory. In sixth grade, among students who believed the system is fair, self-esteem was high and risky behavior was rare; by the end of seventh grade, these same students reported lower self-esteem and more risky behaviors—with no significant differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, or immigration generation (youth from newly arrived immigrant families and native-born counterparts).

What's more, for youth who perceived more discrimination from an early age, system-justifying beliefs were associated with less-risky behavior in sixth grade, but with a sharp rise in such behaviors by seventh grade.

Godfrey attributes this spike to a “perfect storm” in which marginalized young people are experiencing more discrimination; beginning to understand the systemic and institutionalized nature of that discrimination; and starting to strongly identify as a member of a marginalized group, seeing that group as one that's being discriminated against. As for why this leads to more risky behavior, Godfrey points to [research](#) that suggests people who really believe the system is fair internalize stereotypes—believing and acting out false and negative claims about their group—more readily than those who disavow these views.

And while it's easy to attribute the increase in risky behavior to developmental changes such as puberty, the fact that the students' outcomes started high in the sixth grade and then deteriorated suggests that psychosocial phenomena are at play.

“I do think that there's this element of *people think of me this way anyway, so this must be who I am*,” Godfrey said, adding that the behaviors—things like stealing and sneaking out—reflect stereotypes perpetuated about youth of color. “If you're [inclined] to believe that things are the way they should be, and [that] the system is fair, then you're maybe

going to accept stereotypes about you more easily.”

While the sample was relatively small, Godfrey said the findings are informative and mirror prior research. Indeed, previous analyses have found that system-justifying beliefs are associated with **lower self-esteem** in black adults and **lower grade-point averages** for Latino college students—though the same beliefs predicted **better grades and less distress** for “high status” youth.

“I was really interested in trying to think of [early adolescents] as active agents in their world,” Godfrey said, “and as people who can understand and interpret their social world in a way that a lot of research doesn’t recognize.”

“We cannot equivocate when it comes to preparing our children to face injustices.”

David Stovall, professor of educational-policy studies and African American studies at University of Illinois at Chicago, said the paper is a confirmation of decades of analysis on the education of marginalized and isolated youth. It's a "good preliminary piece" that lays the foundation for more academic study of historically disenfranchised adolescents and their motivations, he said.

"If young folks see themselves being discriminated against, they've been told that a system is fair, and they experience things

that are unfair, they will begin to reject this particular system and engage in behaviors that will not be to their betterment,” he explained. Stovall said it’s critical to guide young people from “defiant resistance”—defying what they’ve learned to be untrue regarding a just and fair system for all—to “transformative resistance”—developing a critical understanding of the historical context of U.S. society. Educators, he said, play a crucial role in this work.

“We have to ask different questions around school,” he said. “Does [school] contribute further to our [students’] marginalization and oppression? Is it just about order, compliance, and white normative standards that marginalized young folks of color don’t measure up to because the structure never intended for them to measure up?” He also warned educators and youth of color to be prepared for pushback, highlighting the [current legal battle](#) over the ethnic-studies

ban in Tucson public schools despite its [proven academic benefits](#).

Mildred Boveda, an assistant education professor at Arizona State University, likewise said the findings hold important implications for both teachers and teacher education. “This is of great consequence to ... teachers who may think they are protecting children by avoiding conversations about systems of oppressions,” she said, emphasizing that the onus is also on teacher-prep programs to ensure aspiring educators know how to address these controversial topics.

Given her recent experience teaching fifth-graders in Miami-Dade, Florida, Boveda disagrees with the researchers’ notion that sixth-graders lack a full understanding of social hierarchies. Her students on the brink of middle school, she noted, were hyper-aware of social inequalities. Still, she sees

valuable insights in the data.

“Unlike the majority of the teaching workforce, I once fit the demographics of the students in this study,” she said, alluding to the fact that [more than 80 percent of public-school](#) teachers are white. “I will admit that it sometimes felt risky to tackle these difficult conversations, but this [research] underscores why we cannot equivocate when it comes to preparing our children to face injustices.”

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