

Oppositional Cultures among White Students: The Quest for Popularity and Normative Hegemony in American Secondary Schools

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Analysis of survey data from 37,000 students at 310
Educational Excellence Alliance schools

“To children in school, the most important people in the classroom are the other children. It is their status among their peers that matters most to them—that makes the school day tolerable or turns it into a living hell.”

--Judith Harris, The Nurture Assumption, 1998, p. 241

“One thing, [Les] is more like a teacher’s pet. He hangs around teachers. That I don’t like. I don’t know how to say this but it looks like you look at teachers as your friends. They [ones peers] got to think that a teacher is not your friend.”

Scott, one of the nerds commenting in 8th grade on Les at Cronkite JHS. Don Merten, J. of Early Adolescence, 1996

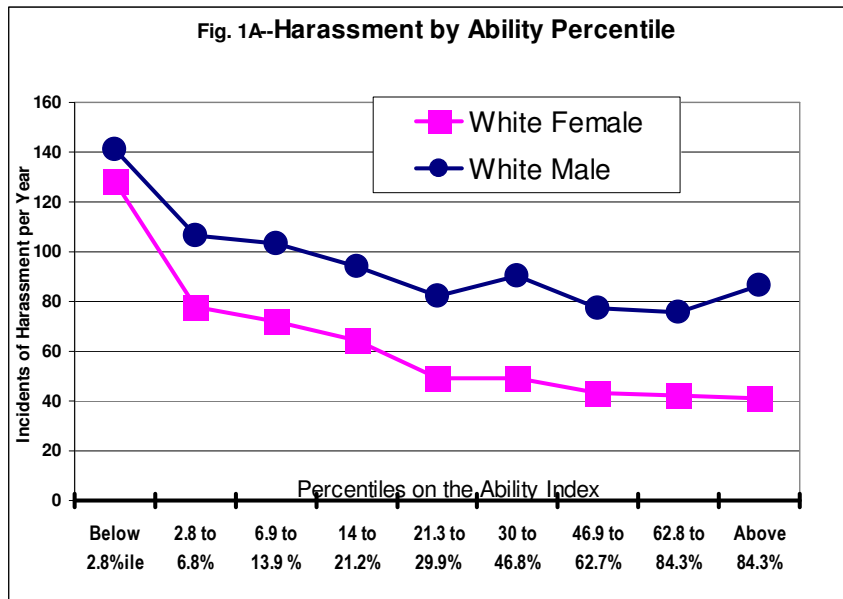
Norms of Middle School Boys in Ithaca

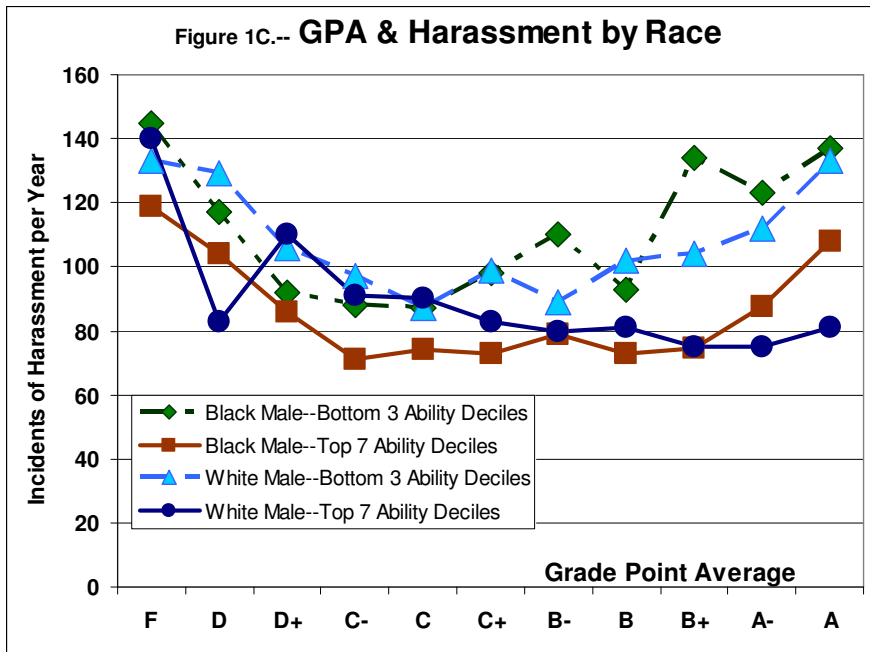
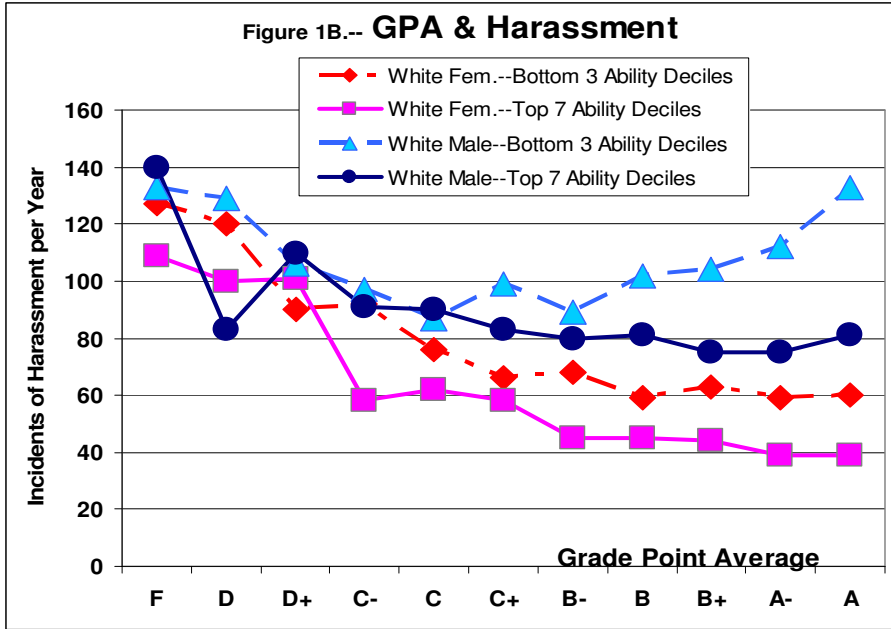
- *“avoid eye contact with teachers,”*
- *“do not hand in homework early for extra credit,”*
- *“do not raise one’s hand in class too frequently,”*
- *“talk or pass notes to friends during class.”*
- By conforming with these norms you demonstrate you value relationships with friends more than your reputation with the teacher.

Steinberg, Brown and Dornbusch's study of nine high schools in California and Wisconsin in 1994 concluded:

“less than 5 percent of all students are members of a high achieving crowd that defines itself mainly on the basis of academic excellence...

Of all the crowds the ‘brains were the least happy with who they were: nearly half wished they were in a different crowd.’”





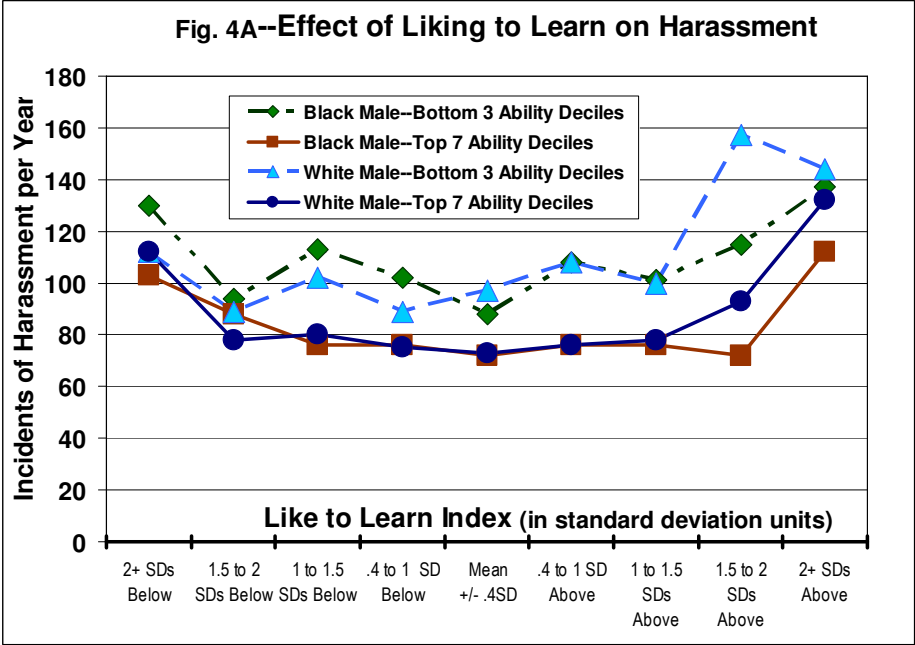
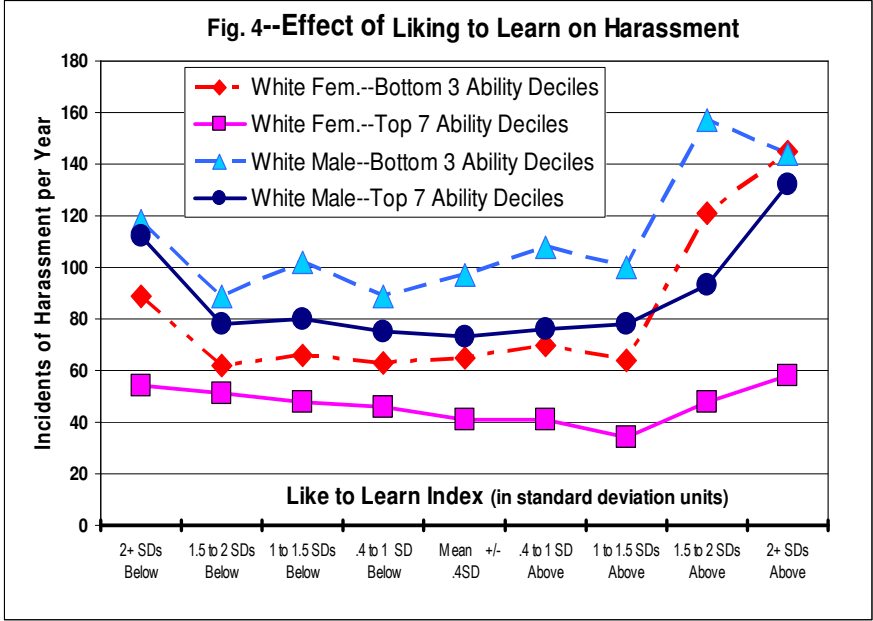


Fig. 5--Harassment by whether Close Friends are Pro-Learning

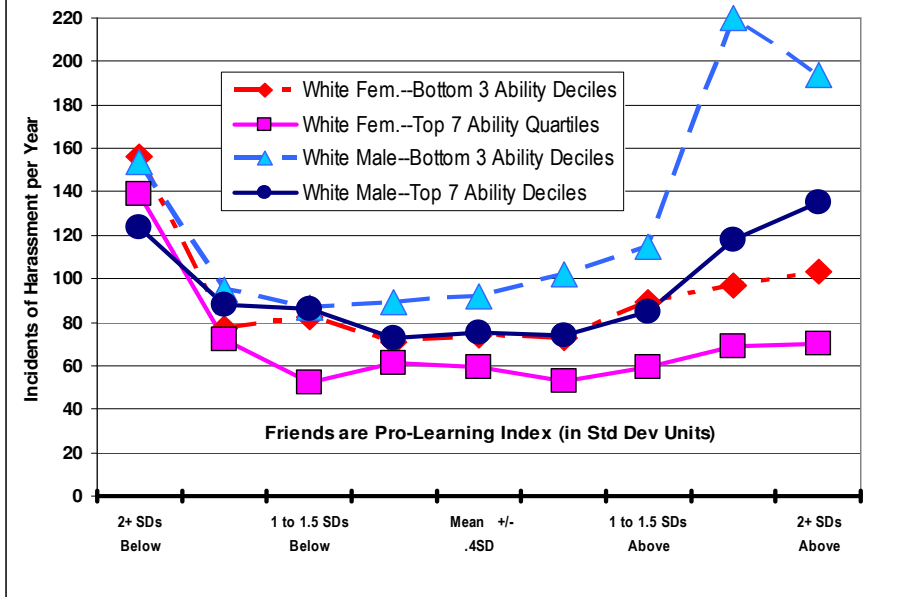
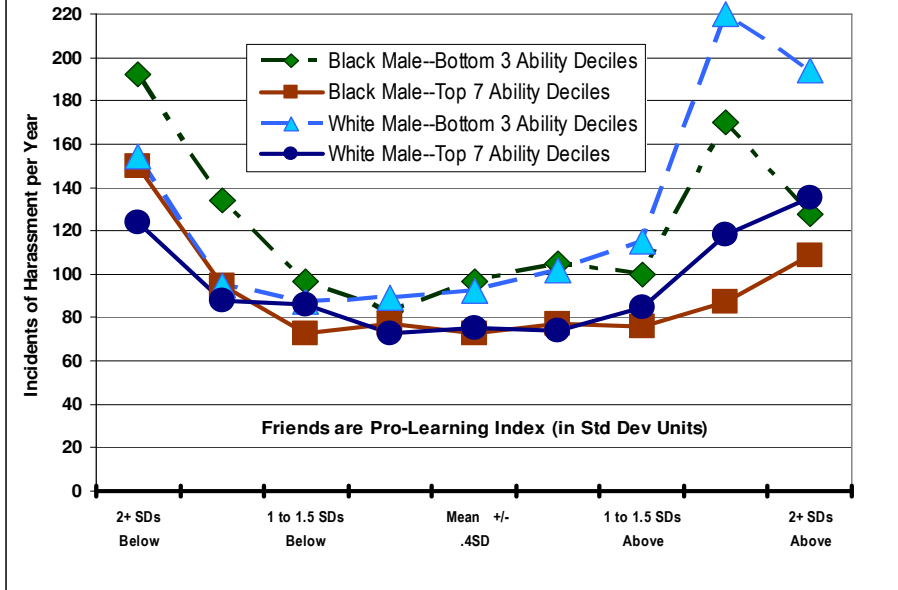


Fig. 5A--Harassment by whether Close Friends are Pro-Learning



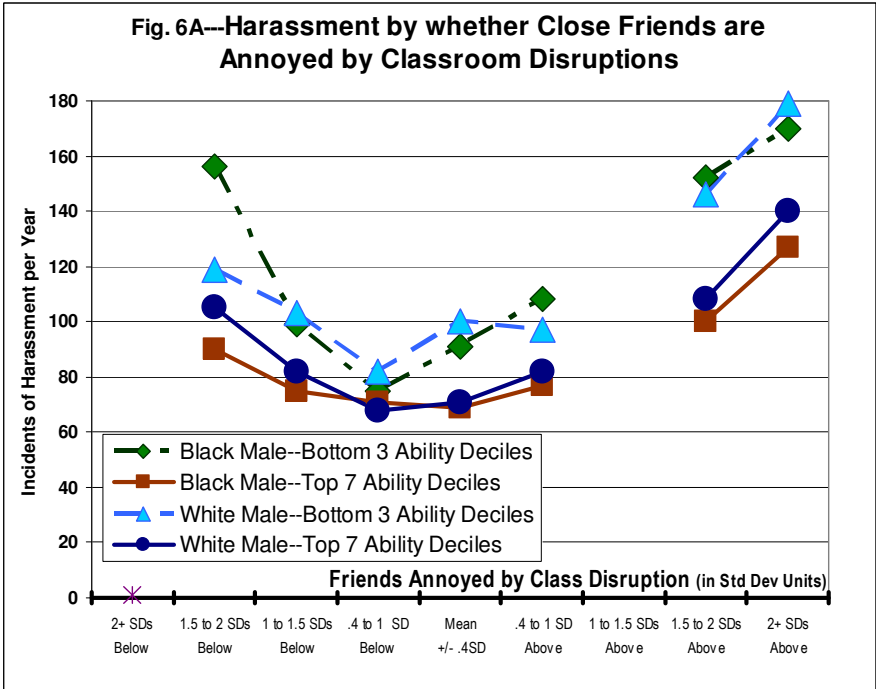
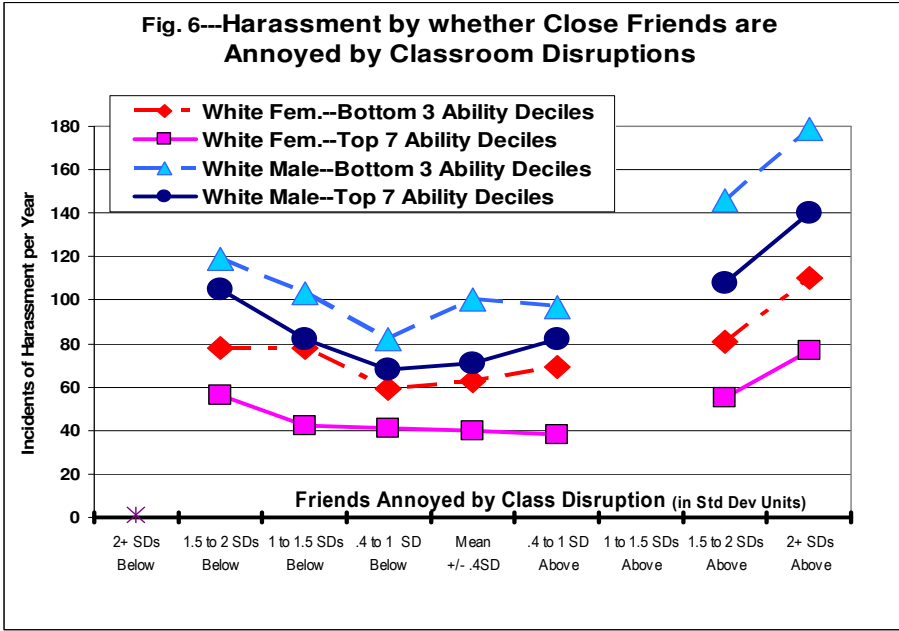


Fig. 7--Peer Harassment by Frequency of Participation in Classroom Discussions

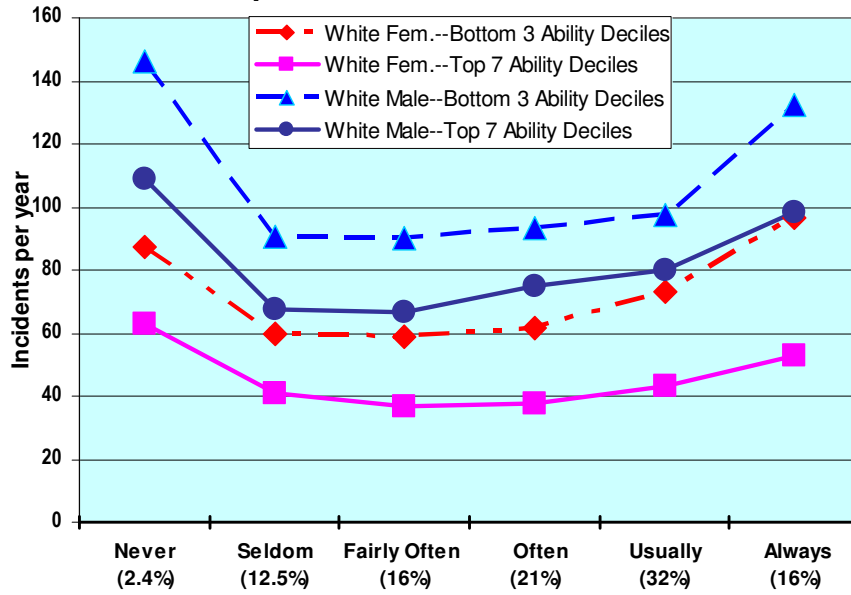


Fig. 7A--Peer Harassment by Frequency of Participation in Classroom Discussions

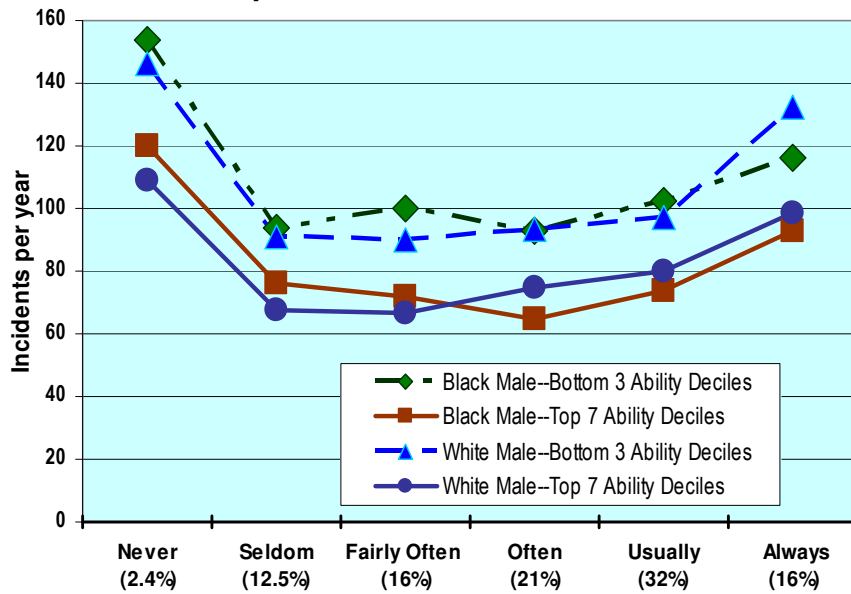


Fig. 8--Peer Harassment by Hours Doing Homework per Day

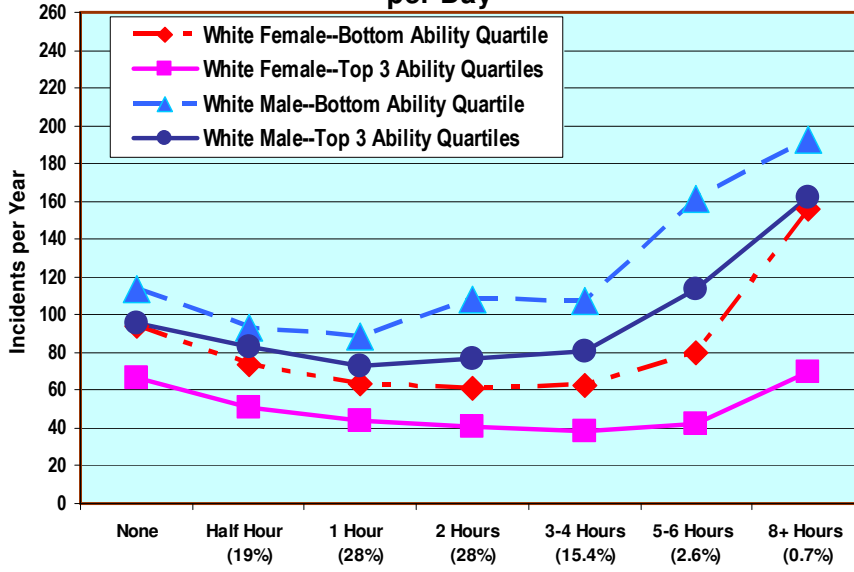
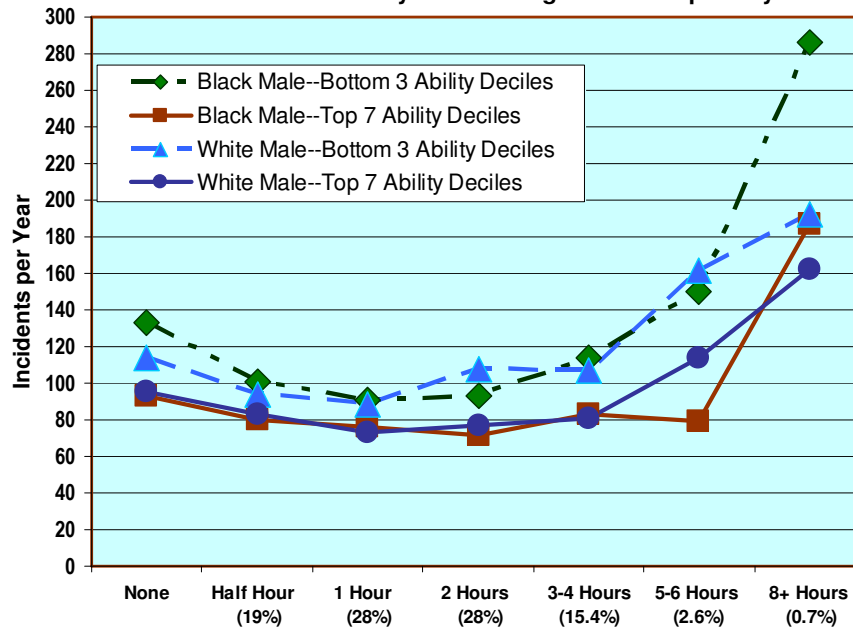
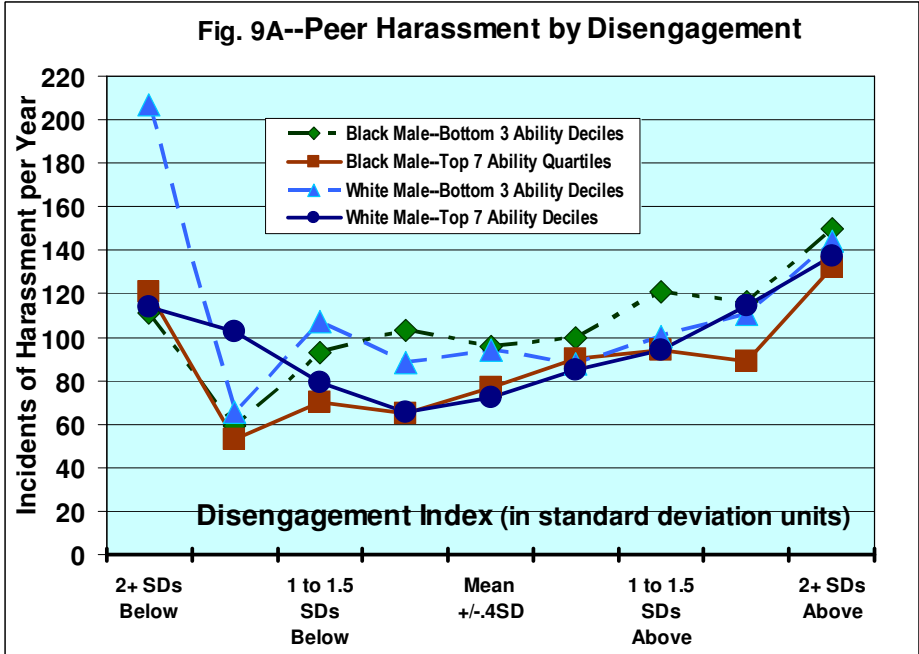
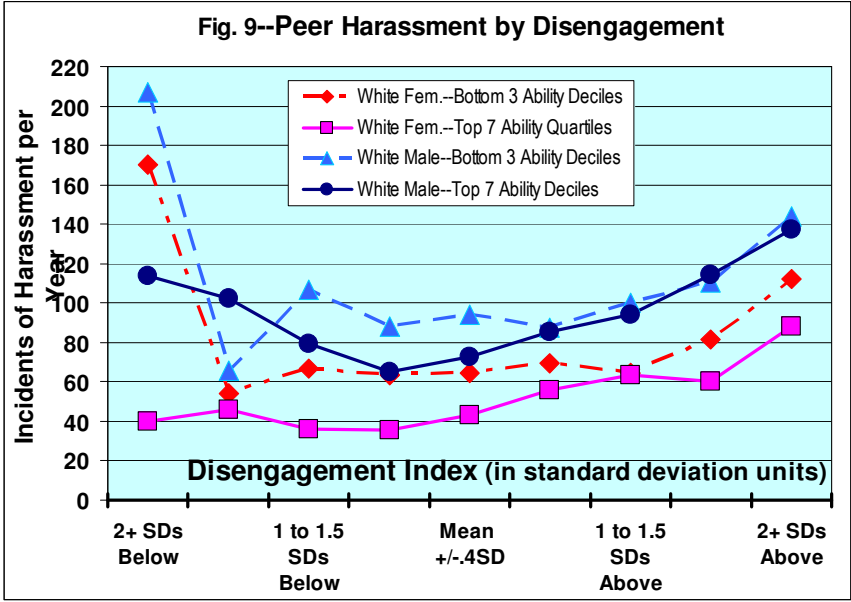


Fig. 8A--Peer Harassment by Hours Doing Homework per Day

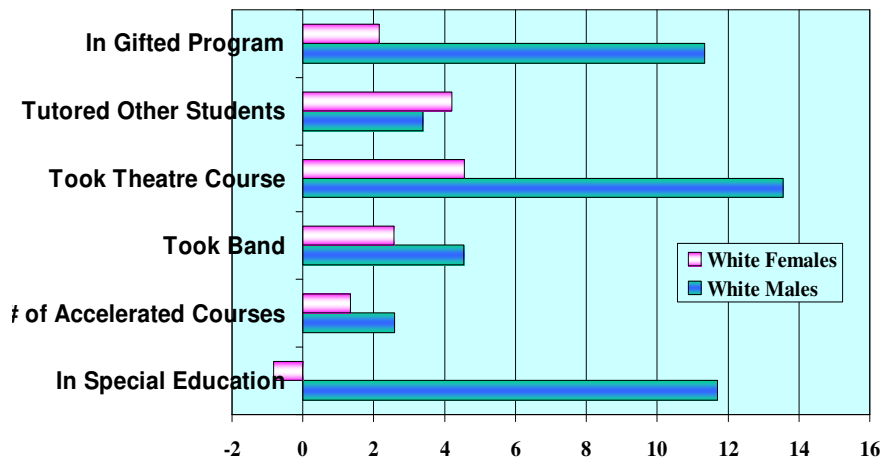




**These Patterns are consistent with a Culture in which
Peer Harassment:**

- Is intended to **Deter Visible** Actions and **Public Expression** of Attitudes (**Sucking up, Rate Busting, Disrupting Classes**) perceived to threaten the interests of other students.
- Enforces the Hegemony of leading crowds: **“OUR Talents and Activities are cool, so Honor us, Not them.”**
- Norms and the propensity to sanction classmates varies across crowds, classes and tracks.
- The threat of harassment deters most but not all visible violations of norms so **only a tiny minority are sanctioned** and some escape sanction because of protective social networks.
- **Decentralized copycat sanctioning** by vigilante enforcers accentuates the tendency of harassment to focus on just a few victims.

**Fig. 17--Effects of Signals of Academic Orientation
on Harassment Incidents per year for White Students**



Mean # of Incidents was 84 for white males and 49 for white females. Remedial courses had no effect. Models control for disengagement, contributing to class discussions, like to learn index, annoyed by disruptions, positive peer pressure, time spent on home work, hanging out, extracurricular activities, solitary leisure activities and a host of other student characteristics and their perceptions of teachers.

I couldn't stand it. I'd go in and give them everything I had. I would use all my acting talents, all my creative talents, trying to make interesting assignments for them. They weren't buying. They didn't give a rat's ass. All they wanted to do was fix automobiles and airplane engines.

--Ed McBain, (under pseudonym of Evan Hunter author of the screenplay for Hitchcock's "The Birds", the 87th Precinct novels and "The Blackboard Jungle") describing his first and only teaching job after graduating from Hunter College with honors. He quit the job before Christmas.

"It was then, to write on the blackboard, that I made a mistake...: I turned my back on the class. Whack! Something hard struck me in the head. Three rowdies broke into mocking laughter again.... I wondered if everyone knew which kid had thrown the rock. Were they all rooting for him? I wondered mostly what the kids thought of their new math teacher."

----The first day of teaching at a middle school in Brooklyn. Emily Sacher (a Stanford graduate had previously spent 5 years as Newsday's education reporter) left teaching at the end of the year. She is now a very successful designer of websites for national magazines.

“They almost broke me”

“Instead of teaching, I told them stories. Anything to keep them quiet and in their seats.”

--Frank McCourt (Pulitzer Prize Winning author of Angela’s Ashes, Tis and Teacher Man) speaking of his students at a Staten Island Vocational School where he taught the first five years of his teaching career. He spent the next 25 years teaching at Stuyvesant High School where teaching was a joy.

The cool kids in our school are kids who work hard, because we as adults have made sure that to be "in" you have to work hard. We have an extensive system of rewards and consequences that every teacher in every grade administers the exact same way....Our discipline is firm; if you don't work hard you don't get to sit with your friends at lunch, go on field trips, participate in gym class, attend special events, etc., and we, the adults, are all on the same page with this. It's hard to set the norms when you are not the one participating. the kids love it here, because they are discovering that great things happen to people who work hard.

----Dean of Students of KIPP DC: KEY Academy, 2002