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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

Color Blind **Do students learn better from** **teachers of their own ethnicity?**

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EDUCATION

Color-Bind

Do students learn better from teachers of their own ethnicity?



Although the number of minority teachers is constantly increasing, it is not growing quickly enough. Black teachers account for only 8 percent of the teaching force in K-12 public schools, while black students represent 17 percent of the student body. “These disparities are even more pronounced in many urban schools, where student bodies that are nearly 100 percent minority are often taught by majority-white teaching staffs,” says Thomas S. Dee, an assistant economics professor at Swarthmore College.

If these white teachers are well-qualified, however, why should the disparities matter? In “The Race Connection,” published in the spring 2004 issue of *Education Next* (vol. 4, no. 2), Dee says that the disparity must be

addressed because black students learn better from black teachers.

Dee based his study on data collected from Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio), Tennessee’s well-known experiment on class size. In this experiment, 45 percent of black students had black teachers. By pooling the observations across all four years, he created a data set containing 23,883 math scores and

23,544 reading scores on which to base his observations.

The study found that for black students, “Having a black teacher for a year was associated with a statistically significant 3 to 5 percentile point increase in math scores.” Reading scores improved as well, by 3 to 6 percentile points. His results show similar effects of white teachers on white students – a 4 to 5 percentile point increase in math scores. White boys with white teachers also scored 2 to 6 percentile points higher on reading tests, while girls showed no significant difference.

While such percentile gains may not sound like much at first, the gains are cumulative and can be substantial over the course of several years. On average, test scores increase by 2 to 3 percentage points each additional year. This result, however, was based primarily on the data on white students: Due to the lack of black teachers, 96 percent of the data set of students who had teachers of the same race for consecutive years consisted of white students. Thus, it is not clear if black students experience similar cumulative effects.

Why should teacher and student sharing the same race matter? Dee speculates that students may form deeper bonds with teachers with whom they share a prominent characteristic. This teacher in turn may more easily act as a role model for a student. And this would enable the teachers to be more effective and respected.

**Black students with
black teachers scored
up to 5 percentile points
higher in math.**

Another explanation, the author writes, may be the effect of the “stereotype threat.” This is a situation where black students believe that “a stereotype regarding their ability will come into play – such as when a black student is taught by a white teacher.”

Racial bias of white teachers can’t be ruled out as the culprit, either, according to the study. Generally, minority teachers tend to focus more on minority students and hold a more positive outlook regarding their ability to succeed. Similarly, white teachers spend more time with white students. Dee points to studies that find that “black students with white teachers receive less attention, are praised less, and are scolded more often than their white counterparts.”

While the results of Dee’s study support the recruitment of more minority teachers to improve the attainment level of minority students, Dee is quick to point out that such efforts could result in a substantial reduction in the academic success of white students. He also includes the disclaimer that his research only studies schools in Tennessee and the K-3 grade levels.

However, his most crucial caveat is that the results not “be construed narrowly as supporting increased racial segregation of teachers and students as a means of improving overall achievement.” Rather, Dee proposes that researchers make an effort to understand why the racial relation between a student and teacher affects that student’s attainment level. Perhaps, teachers should be better trained to be more equally effective in teaching students of various races.

–Abe Nachbaur