

Finding the Right Teachers for Minority Students

Today's school leaders are charged with the task of preparing all children, regardless of their individual learning needs, with a solid educational foundation. It's essential for future generations, and our country, to flourish. But the achievement gap, the disparity in the performance of groups of students, continues to challenge educators.



The number of minority students continues to rise. But teacher demographics often do not match student demographics, and this inequity is frequently an area of concern for public school leaders, especially at the middle level. School districts often form committees to actively recruit minority teachers on the basis that this will increase minority students' achievement. Hours of recruitment and monetary resources are often designated for finding ways to balance the racial playing field among potential teachers in four-year college and alternative certification programs.

But the question remains: Does the recruitment and hiring of more minority teachers have a significant positive impact on the academic achievement of minority youth?

Race, Identity, and Achievement

Research suggests that students listen more to teachers who look like them. Sharing a cultural connection can foster an unspoken sense of familiarity

and an instant level of respect. For students, having a personal connection with a teacher creates an increased level of trust, breeds a sense of motivation, and produces higher academic achievement in many cases, according to Sara Rimm-Kaufman's 2011 study, "Improving Students' Relationships with Teachers to Provide Essential Supports for Learning."

This connection may be particularly important for middle-level students' identity development. Racial identity plays a huge part in a child's self-esteem, confidence, and resilience, all of which ultimately affect their academic progress in school. The rapid physical, psychological, and social changes happening in adolescence, along with the transition from a comfortable elementary school to a faster-paced middle school, have ramifications for students' evolving sense of identity. This period can be especially daunting for minority students, as they face the task of developing a positive sense of self while becoming

increasingly aware that society is stratified by ethnicity and race.

So, should schools hire more minority teachers to support minority students? My own research on the subject has yielded interesting results. According to my study of eighth grade students in 198 Title I Texas schools, academic achievement among black students was lower at campuses with a larger percentage of black teachers. These campuses also showed a larger achievement gap between black and white students in reading and math. Why? Several factors may be at work, including, for instance, quality of instruction. Teachers' skill and average years of experience can impact the quality of the instruction with a school's curriculum. In addition, some campuses may have unique factors that make it difficult to secure quality teachers. Therefore, it is challenging to isolate the cause.

Having the Right Teachers in Place

If some data indicate that minority teachers can forge strong connections with minority students, but other studies show the opposite, what should school leaders do? Are there other significant factors that contribute to the overall development of the middle-level child? Principals must consider how external factors (socioeconomic status, family dynamics) and internal school factors (experience level of teachers, a sound curriculum, and school culture) impact the academic success of adolescents.

Ultimately, having teachers who exemplify the demographics of the campus is essential for creating an environment where students can find racially similar role models. However, it is equally important for school leaders to incorporate dedicated, talented professionals, regardless of race, into a school. There is no "magic profile" of a teacher who can increase minority student achievement.

Regardless of the makeup of a school's teaching force, there are a number of structures that should be in place to help middle-level students succeed. These include:

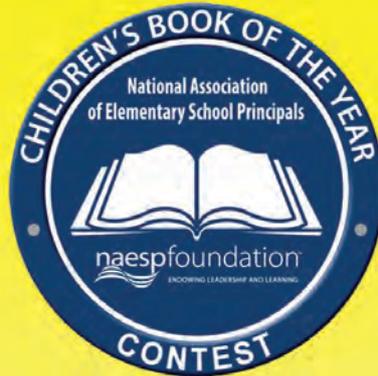
- **Highly qualified teachers**, regardless of race or ethnicity, who have a passion for teaching and develop best-practice teaching skills.
- **Readily-available counseling services**, both group and one-on-one. Counseling gives students an avenue for dealing with the everyday issues associated with identity development during the critical middle years.
- **Extracurricular activities, clubs, and organizations**, to allow middle schoolers to become vested in their school. Extracurricular activities help students develop a connection to their learning environment, decrease chances of dropout, and increase chances of academic success.
- **Parenting classes** to offer caregivers guidance on the difficult process of helping children develop identity in today's society. If parents feel more empowered, they can, in turn, empower their children.

Middle-level leaders who understand the sensitive nature of working with minority students can make a positive impact on student achievement. In the end, race should be considered as part of the hiring process when staffing campuses with minority populations. However, race and ethnicity cannot be the *only* considerations.

Race may contribute to a strong teacher-student connection at the beginning of the year, but making sure staff members have the necessary skills to carry out good teaching techniques matters just as much, if not more, for ensuring long-term effects on student achievement. After all, the goal for a teacher is to make a lasting impression on a student that deepens academic knowledge and understanding. Education is more than skin-deep. 

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