

RESEARCH REPORT

Can Positive Attitudes Impact Achievement?

Many educators are increasingly aware of race: how it impacts student achievement and how it obstructs connections between people. Fortunately, research offers some encouraging insights.

Confronting racial tensions, biases, and microaggressions can have powerful effects. But schools may also benefit from widening the lens. Behavioral psychologist Todd Pittinsky has found that when white teachers encourage and model overtly *welcoming* interactions between students of different races, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, student achievement increases.

These “microaffirmations,” as Pittinsky calls them, can be transformative—not only for academic work, but for broader school climate and even for life outcomes.

The Research

In a recent study, Pittinsky, who teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, tested whether positive attitudes of predominantly white teachers could augment the learning outcomes of mostly minority students. The results suggest that simply being welcoming and inclusive can help students not only



feel comfortable in school, but also grow academically.

The study looked at more than 1,200 teachers in predominantly minority schools in 14 states across the country. Of them, 80 percent were white and the rest nearly all Latino or African American.

It examined two characteristics of welcoming interactions: what Pittinsky calls “empathic joy,” or the happiness that comes from taking the perspective of another person, and “allophilia,” a term he coined as an antonym to prejudice, meaning “love or like of the other.”

MYTWOCENTS



Douglas Elmendorf (@delmendorf): *In my driveway. Watching my kids make trick shot videos inspires me to lead students to leverage tech in creative ways.*

Neil Gupta (@drneilgupta): *If you would have said a walkie-talkie app would be a tool to gather leaders, I would have laughed! I love @voxer.*

Kathy A. Melton (@kathyamelton): *I've encountered so much quality leadership development from my church & pastors.*

Where is the most unorthodox place you have found inspiration for leadership?

To determine teachers' levels of empathy and allophilia, the researchers asked them to rate their agreement to statements, such as, "When my students celebrate things, I am happy for them" and "In general, I have positive attitudes about my students." The researchers then measured these scores alongside assessments of the teachers' positive engagement with their students, and against end-of-year tests measuring students' academic growth.

The results? A chain of good effects. Teachers' empathic joy was associated with allophilia. Allophilia, in turn, was associated with positive engagements between students and teachers, which were then associated with greater student learning. The research suggests that these positive interactions can make students more optimistic at school and more committed to continuing their education.

Small Behaviors—Big Impact

This study also suggests that education could benefit from a more comprehensive focus on how behaviors—both big and small—impact students and schools. Teachers, school leaders, and researchers could look at how a wide range of microbehaviors impact students, and the various forms these small actions can take.

"Instead of narrowly focusing on slights and insults," Pittinsky writes, "we should be looking at the whole spectrum of microbehaviors and finding ways to promote the ones that

can help us best educate diverse K-12 students." And there's no reason for educators and researchers to stop with the latest findings. It's possible, says Pittinsky, that there is more good news to be discovered about microaffirmations, and more to learn in general about how small behaviors affect student achievement.

Reimagining Empathy

Finally, this study reimagines empathy, deliberately putting it in a new light. We tend to focus on "empathic sorrow," or the negative feelings that come along with recognizing the pain or misfortune of someone else. But Pittinsky's work shows that empathic joy is also a powerful tool in aligning disparate groups of people and in creating feelings of success. "Interestingly," he notes, "in other research on empathic joy, we observed an important trend: The teachers who felt the most empathic joy were the ones who were reporting lower levels of burnout."

This new emphasis on empathic joy makes it possible for schools to use empathy not only to boost student achievement, but also to reframe lessons in history and civics on the importance of kindness and mutual understanding in fostering constructive solutions.

From Usable Knowledge at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Learn more at www.gse.harvard.edu/uk.

Making the Most of Your (Very) Limited Time

Tips from National Distinguished Principals on carving out time for professional learning.

- My most useful professional learning has been shadowing, discussing scenarios, and being mentored by great principals. As an instructional coach, I find professional reading to be my starting place and then seek out authors I want to meet and hear in person. —Michelle Sumner, Oklahoma
- Definitely social media—It is 24/7 and available whenever you need it. It's also useful to meet with people; the Edcamp for leaders is an excellent opportunity. —Liz Garden, Massachusetts
- Joining professional learning networks and associations has been key—whether it be through social media, podcasts, conferences, or newsletters. They demonstrate that there are bigger things out there and I can be doing more. —Jenny Klipp, South Carolina
- If I promote a culture of continuous improvement, I must "walk the walk" that I talk about. Therefore, I go to conferences, training, and professional development on weekends, after-school hours, and during my winter and summer breaks. —Marcia Sidney-Reed, California

Chuck Poole (@cpoole27): I have experienced growth and development through coaching sports and transferring lessons learned into the classroom.

Michael Ojeda (@mike_ojeda): From a student; I learned about empathy. He saw a student who he thought couldn't pay for lunch; gave me his bus fare to share w/ her.

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