

Who Should Teach Black Students? Research on the Role of White and Black Teachers in American Schools

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Abstract

At seventeen per cent, Black students represent the second largest school age minority population in public schools in America, while Black teachers make up only six per cent of the nation's teachers. Research explored in this paper demonstrates why there is a discrepancy between the percentage of Black students and teachers and how racial mismatches between teachers and students have negative implications for Black students' academic achievement and behavior evaluations. There is a specific focus in the paper on a lack of 'cultural synchronicity' between White teachers and their Black students and how this disconnect may affect the existence and persistence of the racial academic achievement gap on standardized national achievement tests. Recommendations for recruitment and instructional strategies are presented.

There is a growing disconnect in education in the United States between teachers and students. While the percentage of White teachers has remained constant over the past thirty years at approximately ninety per cent, the percentage of non-White or Hispanic/Latino students has grown from less than twenty per cent in the 1960s to more than forty per cent today. Due to shifting population structures influenced by immigration patterns and birth rates, the percentage of non-White and Hispanic/Latino students in public education is expected to continue to rise while the percentage of White non-Hispanic/Latino teachers is expected to remain stable.¹ Although Hispanic/Latino students represent the nation's fastest growing and largest school age population, Black² students comprise the largest minority group in the Midwest, South, and Northeast.³ At seventeen per cent Black students represent the second largest school age minority population in public schools in the US, while Black teachers make up only six per cent of the nation's teaching force.⁴ Due to the disproportion of White teachers, all students, regardless of race, are far more often assigned a White teacher than a Black teacher.

Sabrina Hope King of the University of Illinois suggests that Black teachers have particular importance in the lives of Black students as 'African-American teachers represent surrogate parent figures, disciplinarians, counselors, role models, and advocates.'⁵ This influence comes from the 'threatened state of many communities composed of people of color' and the emphasis these communities 'place on education as a survival mechanism and the principle means to advancement.'⁶ Although certainly not always the case, children of color in the US have higher chances of being from poor or low income families and living in distressed neighborhoods.⁷ Specifically, Black children live in poverty at three times the rate of White children, are twice as likely to live in low-income families, and are nearly forty times more likely to live in severely distressed neighborhoods.⁸

Low socioeconomically situated students and students of color may be more dependent on their teachers and more often affected by the expectations that their teachers hold for them than middle class or White students.⁹ In *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit explains that White children often have greater access to the dominant culture at home and are less dependent on teachers as guides to academic success. White teachers and even some middle class Black teachers unfamiliar with the life experiences of Black or poor children may operate from a deficit perspective and perceive these students as 'other people's children', stereotyping them as 'damaged and dangerous caricatures' rather than 'the vulnerable and impressionable beings before them.'¹⁰ These stereotypes can lead to the lowering of expectations resulting in less rigorous academic instruction and may contribute to the

lower performance of Black students.¹¹

This is not to suggest that there are not talented White teachers that greatly impact the lives and education of the Black students that they teach. Nor is it to criticize White teachers as their jobs are often challenging, ever changing, emotionally demanding, and not particularly financially lucrative. It is, however, necessary to investigate the importance of the discrepancy between the percentage of Black students and the percentage of Black teachers with the underlying assumption that Black teachers often serve a special role in the lives of Black students. This paper explores research that demonstrates that these racial mismatches between teachers and students have negative implications for Black students' academic achievement and behavior evaluations.

The Racial Achievement Gap

There is a much discussed measurable achievement gap in national standardized tests in the US that exists and persists between White and Black students. Since 1971, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been used to measure student achievement in reading and mathematics at the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade levels. Between 1971 and 2004, there was a reduction in the Black-White achievement gap at all three grade levels studied; however, much of this change took place during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, there was not a significant narrowing of the gap for reading or mathematics after 1990, except at the fourth grade level in reading.¹² In addition to lower scores on national tests, there is also often a gap between White and Black students' grade point averages, course level enrollments, rates of participation in special needs and gifted programs, and graduation rates.¹³

In *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips explain that there is no evidence to suggest that these academic gaps are the product of inferior genetic intellectual ability.¹⁴ It is widely accepted within social science disciplines that race is socially constructed and defined. Unlike gender, which has clear biological attributes, racial classifications have no biological determinants and only become meaningful when categories are developed and meanings are ascribed to them. These racial categories are often taught and reinforced in society by the media and governmental policies.¹⁵ Social commentator, Cornell West, argues that despite its social construction, race does matter in the lives of Black Americans. In his 1993 book *Race Matters*, West posits that race matters, not only because of historical inequities and pervasive cultural stereotypes, but also because our very thought systems and behaviors as Americans are influenced by how we have defined race.¹⁶ Race is significant in American life because 'the meanings people attach to race and racial difference pervade everyday life, shape social action, and are a dynamic component of interpersonal relations'.¹⁷ Race also seems to matter in education, as the White–Black academic achievement gap is persistent even when allowing for disparities in family income, wealth, and schooling; and continues, even when Blacks and Whites attend the same schools.¹⁸ Anthropologist John Ogbu's book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* serves as an excellent case study of the academic gaps persisting between Black and White students despite a school district's high expectations and the middle to upper middle class background of the majority of students.¹⁹

There is not one encompassing reason explaining why the achievement gap exists and continues. Researchers have attributed the gap to numerous social, cultural, familial, and environmental factors, some of which are difficult to measure.²⁰ Although it is most likely that the academic achievement gap is due to a number of interrelated factors, this paper explores the theory that teacher characteristics, including race, have an impact on student performance and are one of a number of factors that contribute to the racial achievement gap.

Teacher Qualifications and the Racial Achievement Gap

'Recent studies offer compelling evidence that teachers are one of the most critical factors in how

well students achieve.²¹ As teachers are crucial to student learning, it is necessary for all students to have access to high quality experienced instructors. This section examines Black students' access to experienced teachers with high academic qualifications and how teacher turnover impacts this access.

In a 2004 study examining teacher quality and race, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor found that Black students in North Carolina are more likely to have a novice teacher than their White peers. Between districts, those serving a greater percentages of Black students had a higher percentage of novice teachers. However, a greater variation was found within districts, where 'novice teachers are disproportionately assigned to schools and to the classrooms within schools that disproportionately serve Black students'.²² Darling-Hammond demonstrates that teachers gain significant experience over their first five years of teaching, and that this experience increases teachers' effectiveness with students.²³ If being assigned to a novice teacher has a detrimental effect on student achievement, then certainly being repeatedly and disproportionately assigned to novice teachers over time could have cumulative negative effect on student learning and achievement.

In a 2006 study of teacher and principal distribution in North Carolina schools, Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, and Wheeler found that the:

.....consistency of the pattern across many measures of qualifications for both teachers and principals leaves no doubt that students in high poverty schools are served by school personnel with lower qualifications than those in the lower poverty schools.²⁴

Similar studies in New York, California, and Missouri found that high poverty students have teachers with weaker qualifications.²⁵ In the Missouri study higher ability teachers (determined by ACT scores for college entry) 'sort into schools with lower levels of student poverty rather than higher rates of pay'.²⁶ As mentioned previously, Black students live in poverty or in low-income homes at much higher rates than Whites (sixty-one per cent to twenty-six per cent); making it even more likely that they will be assigned inexperienced and less qualified teachers.

Often schools serving low socioeconomically situated, high minority, or low performing populations have higher teacher turnover. District policies often allow existing teachers with seniority to transfer to more desirable schools before placing new hires. This creates a pattern wherein the new hires, who are often novice teachers, are then used to replace the experience teachers who have left. This leaves students in the most difficult schools with the least experienced instructors.²⁷ Stinebrickner, Scafidi, and Sjoquist found that in Georgia, student race plays a part in teacher turnover as White teachers more often leave schools serving predominantly Black student bodies. As the proportion of Black students in a school increases by one standard deviation, the probability that the average White teacher will exit increases more than twenty per cent. By contrast, a one standard deviation shift in student achievement test scores, socioeconomic factors, or teacher salary results in much smaller percentages of teacher exit.²⁸ In a study of teachers in Texas, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin found similar patterns of teacher mobility in which White teachers moved to higher achieving schools with fewer minority students while Black teachers moved to higher achieving schools with more minority students.²⁹

High teacher turnover at schools with large Black populations can lead to a lower overall quality of education at these schools.

If attrition is concentrated at particular types of schools, then certain types of students may systematically receive a lower quality education than other students..... In this case, teachers of all quality will want to leave these schools and it will likely be the better teachers who will be able to find new principals who agree to hire them. Thus, under the seemingly reasonable assumption that

minority schools do not get better new hires than other schools, it seems likely that high attrition rates at Black schools will tend to be indicative of lower quality education in this case.³⁰

High turnover can also cause systemic problems in establishing the necessary trust and collaboration between teachers, and disrupting instructional programs and meaningful professional development. Schools with high levels of turnover also often have fewer qualified applicants for each open position, reducing the principal's ability to be selective when making new hires.³¹

Teacher Race and Student Achievement

In addition to research demonstrating that Black students are often instructed by less qualified and less experienced instructors in schools with less stable faculties, there is also some evidence about the importance of the match between teacher and student race on student academic achievement. Thomas Dee, an economics professor from Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, uses data from the Tennessee STAR class-size experiment to demonstrate that 'assignment to an own-race teacher significantly increased the math and reading achievement of both Black and White students'.³² Dee suggests that there are a number of cultural reasons that influence the racial disconnect between teachers and students. The commonly cited factors can be categorized as passive and active factors. Passive factors include theories that Black teachers serve as role models of academic success for their Black students, Black students feel more comfortable with Black teachers, Black students do not feel stereotyped by Black teachers, and Black teachers may have different expectations for student success. Active factors point to differences in actions taken by Black teachers in their allocation of time, interactions with students, use of examples, use of instructional methods, and in the design of classroom materials.³³

In an examination of the effect of teacher race on student performance in Texas, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin found similar results. Minority teachers were generally more effective with minority students and Black teachers were specifically more effective instructors of Black students.³⁴ However, other studies found that the race of the teacher does not effect the academic achievement of their students. Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, and Brewer found, in an analysis of the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), and in the 1990 follow-up data, that teacher characteristics including race do not affect student test scores.³⁵ Contrary to this, in an examination of the very same data sets with the addition of the 1992 follow-up data, Oates found that teacher race is important to student performance on standardized tests.³⁶

The (mis)match between teacher's and student's race seems primarily consequential to the standardize test performance of African-American students – shaping both the way teachers feel about students, and (to a lesser degree) the extent to which these perceptions ultimately matter.³⁷

As there are only a limited number of studies in this area and these studies have contradicting results, more research is needed to determine the impact of teacher race on student academic performance.

Race and Teachers' Evaluations of Students' Behavior

Although the evidence that teacher race has a consistent and sizable affect on student academic performance is inconclusive, there is a great deal of evidence documenting how teacher race affects teachers' perceptions of students of different races. Lewis and Watson-Gegeo noted that teachers often 'assign meanings and motivations to the behaviors of children with whom they do not share racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds and invariably, teachers' social and institutional power allows their meanings and interpretations to trump those of the child.³⁸

In a study examining Kindergarten and 8th grade teachers' evaluations of students of different races, Downey and Pribish found that White teachers consistently rate Black students as poorer classroom citizens than White students.³⁹ Behavior ratings and student achievement may be closely related.

Teachers' evaluations of students' social behavior may be tied to academic measures such as time-on-task and work completion. Likewise students are often sensitive to teachers' attitudes toward them and perform in the classroom based on these perceptions.⁴⁰ There is also some evidence that Black students may be particularly sensitive to teachers' attitudes and 'unfavorable teacher perceptions, even if justified by prior performance and other relevant information, may more strongly undermine the performance of African-American students' than their non-Black peers.⁴¹ The data from the Downey and Pribish study shows that Black students are rated by Black teachers at statistically significantly higher levels. Studies of students from pre-school to adolescence have found similar patterns of Black students being consistently rated lower than White students in White teachers' evaluations.⁴²

The Downey and Pribish study explores theories that might possibly explain why the racial disconnect exists. The researchers disregard the possibility that large percentages of White teachers are overtly racist and act on their racist views in their evaluation of student behavior. The first plausible theory offered is that White teachers rate Black students more harshly than they deserve because White teachers misinterpret aspects of their Black students' behavior. 'Black students may be puzzled to find out that White teachers are angered by behavior that is unnoticed or even rewarded in the students' homes or neighborhoods.'⁴³ The authors note that there are exceptions to this theory as some minority groups, most notably Asian students, are able to adapt their behavior to meet teachers' expectations.⁴⁴ The second possible theory is that Black students actually do act worse in classes instructed by White teachers. 'From this perspective, Black students' behavior is not just different than White students' in a culturally arbitrary way, it disrupts what the teacher is trying to accomplish.'⁴⁵ This poor behavior may emanate from Black students resisting participation in a White-controlled institution. The researchers conclude that, as White teachers' evaluations of Black students are as low in kindergarten as in 8th grade, the source of the lower evaluations is not students' resistant behaviors. If resistance to White institutions was the problem, students would, in all likelihood, be more actively resistant at 8th grade than they are in kindergarten. Downey and Pribish attribute the lower evaluations to a disconnect in which teachers misinterpret students' behaviors.⁴⁶

This disconnect is referred to by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine professor at Emory University as a lack of 'cultural synchronization' in which the culture of the teacher does not correspond to the culture of the students.⁴⁷ In *Does Race Matter? A Comparison of Effective Black and White Teachers of African American Students*, Cooper suggests that a learning style that is influenced by Black community norms 'can leave children at odds with White teachers and schools since both traditional practice and institutions most often reflect Eurocentric worldviews, customs, teaching styles, and expectations for student behavior.'⁴⁸ Irvine also states that:

When teachers and students are out of sync, they clash and confront each other, both consciously and unconsciously, in matters concerning proxemics (use of interpersonal distance), paralanguage (behaviors accompanying speech, such as voice tone and pitch and speed rate and length), and coverbal behavior (gesture, facial expression, and eye gaze).⁴⁹

In her ethnography on how children learn language in the Carolina Piedmont, Shirley Brice Heath describes how teachers felt that Black students lacked mainstream manners and were unable to behave 'normally' in the classroom setting. Likewise, the Black students were often bewildered and frustrated by their White teachers' use of indirect hints and requests, which differed from the direct style of instruction found in their own community. Heath describes how White teachers can learn how to be effective instructors of Black children by utilizing some of the communication styles that students are already familiar with from their own community.⁵⁰ Black teachers of Black children often utilize this type of communication with their students and are therefore seen as more effective instructors by the Black community.

Teachers of Color – Beyond Role Models

Role models can be important contributors to the formation of students' aspirations. More specifically, same race role models can help students form ideas about opportunities available to 'people like them' and may result in more achievement-oriented goals and increased academic success.⁵¹ Because Black students disproportionately live in poor communities, they are less likely to see high achieving same race professionals; and having Black teachers who may serve as role models for Black students is, therefore, of particular importance.⁵²

Black teachers can serve as much more than role models. In addition to being places where academic knowledge is created and disseminated, schools provide experiences which shape students' value systems. Having a disproportionately small population of minority teachers and other professionals in schools is incongruous with the democratic ideals on which the United States was founded. This racial imbalance teaches students that jobs are stratified based on race and that the educational system is complicit in racial inequities. All students need to see non-White teachers in their schools in order to form appropriate ideas about job hierarchies and race.⁵³ Additionally, a lack of Black teachers promotes the idea that teaching is a White profession and serves as a disincentive for Black students to select the teaching profession for themselves.⁵⁴

Black teachers can also serve as mentors for Black students, helping them to navigate the complex structure of schooling. As mentors, Black teachers can serve as cultural translators for Black students, alleviating the alienation students of color may feel in traditionally White institutions which often results in diminished effort, poor academic performance, and behavioral problems. Black teachers can also assist White and other non-Black teachers in better understanding the motivations and actions of their Black students, as well as draw attention to discriminatory practices.⁵⁵

Successful Educators of Black Students

There is a growing body of literature about the work of Black teachers who are successful at instructing Black students. Understanding how successful Black teachers interact with their students has implications for the types of teachers that should be recruited to work with Black youth and the types of training these teachers should receive. In a meta-analysis of the existing literature, Professor Patricia Cooper found that there are often characteristics shared by these successful Black teachers across studies. Such teachers have an in-depth knowledge of subject matter, hold high expectations for student academic achievement and discipline; and utilize an authoritative-based classroom management style to create a safe and orderly environment. In addition, they engage in the community and act as extended family members or second mothers or fathers to students and promote positive racial identities while acknowledging the racism students continue to face within American society. The teachers are also often explicit about the importance of teaching students how to communicate in Standard English in order to negotiate the dominant culture.⁵⁶

Delpit expounds that often in the Black community a teacher indicates care for their students by:

.....controlling the class; exhibiting personal power;... demonstrating the belief that all students can learn; establishing a standard of achievement and 'pushing' students to achieve the standard; and holding the attention of the students by incorporating African-American interactional style in their teaching. Teachers who do not exhibit these behaviors may be viewed by community members as ineffectual, boring, or uncaring.⁵⁷

In her experiences, Delpit observes that White teachers may see the practices of senior Black teachers as 'repressive' in comparison to the progressive style of instruction promoted in many teacher education programs. Through experience Delpit has come to believe that traditional, structured practices, such as having students sit at desks and the use of skill-based instruction, are beneficial

to the academic achievement of Black students.⁵⁸ Gloria Ladson-Billings notes the similarities often found in the presentation style of Black teachers:

African American educators may bring a different teaching repertoire to the classroom. They may be more direct in their questioning, more exact in their requirements, or more expressive in their presentation. This is not to suggest that there is a stereotypical Black teacher who exhibits a 'Black teaching style'. Rather, I argue that some of the collective experiences of Black life may find their way into the classroom, just as the home, community, and cultural experiences of White teachers influence their classrooms.⁵⁹

There is far less research on successful White teachers of Black students. The writings that do exist are often auto-ethnographic narratives in which White teachers, rather than members of the Black community, describe him or herself as successful with Black students. Such authors include Kozol, Kohl, Ayers, Hoffman, Meier, and Paley.⁶⁰ This genre, often autobiographical in nature, 'depends heavily upon the melodrama and depictions of a cult personality' while 'revealing patterns of injustice' in the American education system.⁶¹ The authors often explore how their cross-racial teaching experiences shaped the way in which they understand their own White racial identity and the implications this has for power and privilege. These narratives generally 'provide an insight that cross-racial teaching is challenging and may require some set of not yet identifiable skills'.⁶²

Cooper finds commonalities in these narratives of self-described successful White teachers of Black children, including a belief that White teachers can be successful despite suspicion from Black families and the Black community. These White teachers have a personal awareness of their own race and the race of their students, use of culturally relevant curriculum, and high expectations for student success. The self-described successful White teachers differed from the successful Black teachers in several key ways. These White teachers used a less authoritative style of classroom management and discipline; were less concerned with teaching standardized curriculum, students' achievement in standardized tests, and students' use of Standard English; and used kin metaphors less frequently. Often the White teachers 'voiced shock and outrage at the subpar physical conditions, low expectations for students by fellow teachers, and institutional and educational racism.' Successful Black teachers more often voice the idea that Black students can learn despite these circumstances and saw their schools 'as places where Black culture could be celebrated and transmitted and where survival in the dominant culture could be learned'.⁶³

In one of the few studies examining White teachers nominated as successful White educators of Black children by members of the Black community, Cooper also found some commonalities. These White teachers were more similar to successful Black teachers in that they were more likely to use an authoritative voice in classroom management and discipline, use kin metaphors and see themselves as second mothers to students, and focus on standardized curriculum and success in standardized tests. Although these White teachers were racially conscious and were aware of racial injustices, they were less likely than Black teachers to talk about race, often for fear that discussing race would be misunderstood by the community, school administrators, or parents.⁶⁴

Tackling the Racial Disconnect Between Teachers and Students

One obvious way to address the racial disconnect between teachers and students is to create programs that attract and retain Black teachers in order to promote a better balance between the percentage of Black students and teachers. The current characteristics of students in teacher education programs indicate that without intervention the clear majority of teachers will continue to be White females.⁶⁵ However, some programs designed to bring teachers of color into the classroom are being implemented at the state and local level through pre-collegiate, paraeducator-to-teacher, community college, alternative certification, and advanced degree programs. Such programs generate interest in teaching and provide educational opportunities and incentives often in exchange for a commitment to

teach for a specified number of years.⁶⁶ However, there still remain deterrents to Blacks entering the education field. These include the expanse of career opportunities available to educated Blacks that provide higher social status and financial compensation than teaching, negative school experiences that turn students away from a career in education, and testing requirements for teacher licensure that may be culturally biased.⁶⁷ Additionally, the lived experiences of Black pre-service teachers may be in conflict with the formal curriculum of traditional teacher education programs.⁶⁸ In order for programs aiming to increase the number of Black teachers to be effective, they must consider and address all of the barriers to becoming a teacher and use a variety of strategies to support pre-service teachers. These should include: using peer recruiters; reducing institutional bureaucracy; guiding pre-service teachers on how to be successful in teacher education programs; and providing viewpoints on teaching which are congruent with the lived experiences of Black pre-service teachers.⁶⁹

In addition to a lack of Black teachers in general, there is a particular lack of Black male teachers as Black males represent only one per cent of America's teaching force. There are a number of explanations why Black men are so underrepresented in teaching. These include the reasons for the under-representation of Black women such as the availability of more career opportunities and greater difficulty with testing requirements, as well as, the reasons that keep White men from teaching such as the lack of financial returns on educational investments, difficulty navigating the feminized world of teaching, and being seen as potentially dangerous to students particularly at the elementary level. An additional difficulty in recruiting Black male teachers is the low rate of college completion among Black males. There do exist, however, some programs, including South Carolina's "Call Me Mister" initiative, designed to recruit and retain Black males in the teaching profession. Such offerings should be researched and reproduced in other localities in order to increase the number of Black male teachers in US schools.⁷⁰

As well as programs that are actively attempting to recruit Black teachers, states and districts must also try to recruit, retain, and create White teachers who are successful at working with Black student populations. There is no clear formula, however, of how to produce a White teacher equipped with the skills necessary to understand and instruct non-White students. Best practice in the area generally begins with a White teacher's self-examination of his or her own race and the benefits that this allows him or her in society and continues with an exploration of the overt and subtle racism present in the United States' education system.⁷¹

In *Making Meaning of Whiteness*, Alice McIntyre guides White female student teachers in action participatory research in which they explore the 'system of privilege and oppression that structures many of our institutions, shapes U.S. culture, informs our beliefs, and restricts our understanding of what it means to be White in society'.⁷² She recommends that a first step for White teachers aiming to best serve their students of color is to identify how their own Whiteness affects how they perceive and interact with society. 'By examining our racial locations within society' we begin 'to recognize the importance of our own racial identities as determinants in how and what we teach'.⁷³

In addition to knowing themselves, teachers need to 'know their students and the cultural setting in which a specific group of young people have been learning prior to their arrival in a specific classroom'.⁷⁴ In order to teach any group of students, Gloria Ladson-Billings recommends the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, which goes beyond similar-sounding concepts such as 'cultural congruence', 'cultural appropriateness', 'cultural responsiveness' and 'cultural compatibility'. These have their place in promoting connections between students' home lives and school culture.⁷⁵ Rather, culturally relevant pedagogy aims to empower students to be able to critically examine and challenge societal norms.⁷⁶

Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience

academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.⁷⁷

Not all Black teachers are culturally relevant and not all culturally relevant teachers are Black. Cultural relevant teaching requires teachers to be familiar with and appreciate Black culture and understand the social forces that result in inequitable educational experiences. Although some middle-class Black teachers may be unaware or indifferent to the experiences of low-income students, the underlying assumption is that Black teachers may have an easier time embracing culturally relevant practice due to familiarity with racism from experiences in their own lives.⁷⁸

Although there exist clear recommendations on how students should be taught in a culturally relevant manner in order to improve academic achievement, the implementation of these practices in schools is not mandated by states and districts.

Despite recent policies aimed at holding schools and teachers accountable for student achievement, the development of a pedagogical practice that addresses the challenge of effective cross-racial teaching and learning remains outside of the national education reform agenda.⁷⁹

If teachers are to be successful educators of Black students (and other students from backgrounds different than their own) they will need systematic guidance on how to translate principals of relevant pedagogy into actual practices in their classrooms and schools. Similarly, critical race theory, introduced by Ladson-Billings and Tate, is a call to acknowledge and address systemic educational inequities in American education.⁸⁰ Born out of critical legal scholarship, this theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life and that racism in education cannot be solved by simply promoting multicultural awareness or colorblind schools. Rather, educational injustice must be reflected upon, and action must be taken to stop inequitable practices. Dixson and Rousseau note that, although there has been much literature written exposing inequity and recommending practice, it is unclear to what extent critical race theory has been able to move beyond recommendations to actual policies and practices.⁸¹

Conclusion

There are many possible reasons why a racial achievement gap exists and persists between White and Black students in the United States. One reason may be the lack of Black teachers in American classrooms, as Black teachers can serve as important figures in the lives of their Black students. Although there are many talented White teachers who do meet the needs of their Black students, in some cases a lack of cultural synchronization between Black students and White teachers could result in lower expectations and test scores, lower behavior ratings, and higher rates of assignment to special education and behavior management classes.

In order to address this concern we must determine what best practices are for different groups within American society and truly provide students with a free appropriate culturally relevant education. More research must be done on how White teachers successfully (as defined by both the Black and White communities) educate Black children, so that the necessary techniques and skills can be taught in our schools of teacher education and brought to teachers through professional development. Turnover reduction programs, perhaps incorporating financial or other incentives, need to be designed, implemented, and researched in order to reduce teacher turnover in Black and low-income schools with the aim of creating cohesive and experienced faculties. In addition, we need to continue and increase efforts to recruit, train, and retain talented Black educators, both male and female, to serve as leaders in the struggle to close the Black-White academic achievement gap.

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Comment And Opinion

