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NeMTSS Research Brief

Student-Teacher Racial Congruence

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Student-Teacher Racial Congruence: An NeMTSS Research Brief

Key Points:

- One proposed method of addressing the achievement gap between White students and students of color is student-teacher racial congruence, a practice of ensuring that students of color are assigned to teachers of the same race.
- There has been mixed evidence regarding the effect of racial congruence on the academic performances of students of color (Redding, 2019). The primary outcomes of research on this subject have examined standardized test scores and academic ratings, with some studies showing improvements for students of color when matched with a demographically similar teacher (Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015).
- The evidence for behavioral outcome benefits for student-teacher racial congruence is equivocal, though more research is necessary to thoroughly understand the effects of racial congruence on behavioral outcomes (Redding, 2019).
- The results of research on student-teacher racial congruence suggest academic and behavioral outcome benefits for students of color who are paired with teachers with similar cultural experiences and demographic backgrounds.

Racial/Ethnic Achievement Gap

Over the past 30 years, there has been a considerable achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts (Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015). Researchers and policymakers have sought to elucidate the contextual factors perpetuating this gap, with an additional goal of identifying methods of reducing this gap to serve students of color, a historically underserved population (Redding, 2019). Some identified factors include the demographics and makeup of schools, the funding they receive, teacher perceptions and expectations of students, and differences in discipline (Bates & Glick, 2013; Joshi et al., 2018).

School Demographics and Funding

This research has demonstrated that teachers and schools can perpetuate the social and racial inequities faced by students of color (Bates & Glick 2013). For example, there are considerable racial inequities related to the schools attended by non-Hispanic White children and their minority counterparts. Students of color are more likely to attend schools with high concentrations of other students of color and children from economically disadvantaged communities. On the other hand, non-Hispanic, White students, particularly those with greater economic advantage, are more likely to attend racially homogenous schools (Bates & Glick, 2013). Beyond the racial differences in populations attending schools, there are differences in the funding afforded to these schools (Joshi et al., 2018). An analysis of funding inequities revealed that public school districts serving the most students of color typically receive approximately \$2,000, or 15% less, per student than those with the lowest numbers of students of color.

Teacher Perceptions and Expectations

Academics: In the classroom, teachers have demonstrated different perceptions and expectations of students of color compared to their White peers (Dee, 2005; Egalite et al., 2015). Research focusing on academic and behavioral ratings of students has often demonstrated teachers' bias in these areas. This fact is especially concerning because research has linked teachers' expectations and dispositions toward students with educational performance and future educational attainment (Gershenson et al., 2016; Oates, 2003). Depending on the polarity of the perceptions and expectations, students may benefit or experience more significant difficulties. Several studies have indicated that teachers tend to have lower expectations for students of color and economically disadvantaged students (Bates & Glick, 2013; Boser et al., 2014; Gershenson et al., 2016). This evidence is especially concerning as lower expectations for students have been shown to undermine students' grades and the standardized test performance of students of color (Oates, 2003). Additionally, due to these poorer perceptions and lower expectations, these students may modify their expectations for themselves, which may lead to lower identification with the school environment and a higher identification with lower expectations, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of poorer performance (Gershenson et al., 2016).

Behavior: These same biases have also been found in teacher perceptions of student behavior (Bates & Glick, 2013; Redding, 2019). Teachers are more likely to perceive Black and Latinx students as more argumentative, disruptive, and likely to fight than their White peers. Interestingly, these negative biases do not equally affect all students of color (Chang & Demyan, 2007, as cited in Bates & Glick, 2013). These biases are especially true for Black students, while the evidence for biased behavioral perceptions of Latinx students is mixed (Dee, 2005; Wright et al., 2017). These disparities in behavior ratings and perceptions are of particular concern, as these behaviors are often precursors for disciplinary action and office referrals (Irwin et al., 2013, as cited in Redding, 2019).

Discipline

Over 25 years of building-, district-, state-, and national-level research has demonstrated disparities in discipline for students of color and their White counterparts (Skiba et al., 2011). Students of color are suspended at two to three times the rate of their White peers, and they are overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and expulsions. In 2013, the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights found that the disproportionality in discipline for Black students has increased since the 1970s. For Latinx students, the results have been more mixed. Some studies have reported disproportionate discipline for these students, while others have not compared to their White peers. In their investigation, Skiba and colleagues (2011) found that Black students were twice as likely to receive an Office Discipline Referral (ODR) compared to white students at the elementary school level. At the middle school level, Black students were almost four times more likely to receive an ODR than their white peers. At the middle school level, the researchers also found that Latinx students were significantly overrepresented for ODRs; however, they were underrepresented for ODRs at the elementary school level.

Racial Congruence

One practice of addressing these differences that has garnered attention over the last twenty years is assigning students to a teacher of the same race or ethnicity (Joshi et al., 2018; Redding, 2019). The literature on this subject uses several terms to describe this practice, such as teacher-student ethnic or racial congruence or congruency, demographic match, or ethnic/race-matching (Joshi et al., 2018; Redding, 2019). This practice will be described as racial congruence for the remainder of this research brief.

Racial Congruence Theoretic Foundations

It is no secret that teachers play a critical role in their student's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development (Bates & Glick, 2013). Teachers of color may play a critical role in the development of students of color. Several theories exist to explain why student-teacher racial congruence may be beneficial to students. One theory relates to the idea that teachers of color may serve as role models for their students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Egalite et al., 2015). Students may respond better and feel more comfortable when interacting with individuals who are demographically like them. Additionally, these teachers may reduce some negative academic stereotypes students of color have internalized.

Further, a student's assignment to a racially congruent teacher may directly affect student achievement if teachers display different biases, expectations, or perceptions of students with different demographic traits (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Egalite et al., 2015). Many researchers believe that the negative biases that students of color become part of a self-fulfilling prophecy, which may result in these students disengaging from school, avoiding seeking out additional educational opportunities, and performing poorly academically and behaviorally (Gershenson et al., 2016).

Academic Benefits

There are many purported benefits of pairing students with a racially congruent teacher. While some studies have demonstrated significant positive effects for students on test scores or teachers' academic ratings, the results of other studies have demonstrated insignificant results. Continued research in this area is necessary to elucidate the individual factors that may contribute to improved performance and rating for students of color.

Egalite and colleagues (2015) used a longitudinal dataset of over 2.9 million Florida students in grades three through ten between the 2001-2002 and 2008-2009 school years to examine the effects of racial congruence on the math and reading portion of a state-mandated achievement test. The results revealed a small but significant overall effect for racial congruence in math and reading, with the most significant effects in elementary school. For Black students assigned to Black teachers, math and reading scores improved. However, the same effect was not demonstrated for Latinx students (Egalite et al., 2015).

In a longitudinal data set including approximately 25,000 students from Tennessee, Dee (2004) found significant increases in math and reading scores for students assigned to teachers who shared their same racial background. This effect was especially strong for Black students paired with Black teachers (Dee, 2004). Using a separate longitudinal data set including approximately 1 million observations from Tennessee middle and elementary school students between the 2009-2010 and 2014-2015 school years, no significant effects were found on test scores (Joshi et al., 2018). However, a race-match effect was observed in elementary school math. Meaningful effects were also observed for Black students in both reading and math, race-

matched students performing in the bottom-most preparedness quartile and math, and race-matched students assigned to teachers rated in the middle two performance quartiles in math (Joshi et al., 2018).

Downey and Pribesh (2004) used a national dataset that included over 2,500 Black and 10,282 White students to examine race-matching effects for academic ratings. The researchers did not find any significant effects for their sample overall or individual student groups, such as Black students being rated by racially congruent teachers. Gershenson et al. (2016) conducted a similar study that explored the potential positive effects of racially congruent teachers on academic ratings of future educational attainment. Using data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2000 (ELS), they found that Black teachers were more likely to rate Black students as being likely to graduate from high school (Gershenson et al., 2016). Moreover, in a third study examining academic ratings conducted by Oates (2003) using the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 data including over 24,500 eighth graders, similar results were found. White teachers tended to rate Black students less favorably than white students. There was a negative trend noted for the relationship between these negative academic perceptions of Black students and their standardized test performance, though this effect did not reach significance.

In summary, racial congruence has some potential academic benefits when pairing Black students with Black teachers. However, this effect was not always observed. Several notable studies not included in this review did not demonstrate racial congruence-related improvements for students of color (Ehrenberg et al., 1995 and Fryer & Levitt, 2004, as cited in Redding, 2019). The most substantial effects have been found for Black students in southern states (Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015; Redding, 2019). For Latinx students, who have not traditionally been the focus of these studies, the research is more equivocal and needs more attention to tease out this relationship. Some hypothesized reasons for insignificant findings for students are the diverse backgrounds, histories, and cultures experienced by students and their teachers (Redding, 2019).

Behavior Benefits

There has been some documented empirical evidence of behavioral benefits of student-teacher racial congruence. However, there is a marked lack of research on the relationship between racial congruence and student behavioral outcomes (Redding, 2019). Most studies examining racial congruence have focused on the academic benefits that may be linked to racial congruence. At this time, more research is necessary to determine if racial congruence has behavioral benefits.

In the study conducted by Downey and Pribesh (2004), the authors also found that Black students were rated as poorer classroom citizens when assigned to teachers who were not racially congruent. In a second study conducted by Dee (2005), using the same dataset previously described, the results indicated that when students were assigned to teachers of a different race, they were more likely to be disruptive and inattentive. The effect of racial incongruence on behavior ratings was also influenced by a mismatch of student and teacher gender (Dee, 2005).

Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) 1998-1999 cohort, Bates and Glick (2013) examined the relationship between student-teacher racial congruence and behavior ratings. The results of this study demonstrated race-matching effects that were not equivalent across students of different races. With the exception of Asian students, students of color were the most likely to be rated as having more externalizing behaviors in this sample. For Black students, being paired with Black teachers was associated with decreasing negative ratings of externalized problem behaviors. However, the same could not be said for Latinx students, for whom no racial congruence effect was found (Bates & Glick, 2013). A study by

Wright et al. (2017) also used ECLS data from the 2011 cohort, which included approximately 9,000 students. In this study, the authors found that racial congruence was unrelated to teacher ratings of internalizing behaviors, interpersonal skills, approaches to learning, and self-control.

This study is one of few studies to examine classroom behavior changes. Racial congruence was associated with a decline in externalizing behavior for Black students. Further, there was a racial congruence effect when Latinx students were paired with Latinx teachers, but not when they were paired with non-Latinx teachers who spoke Spanish. The results of this study add weight to the idea that a shared cultural understanding is pertinent to the positive effect of racial congruence (Wright et al., 2017). Blake and colleagues (2016) explored the relationship between student-teacher racial congruence and exclusionary discipline practices. Black and Latinx students had a lower probability of experiencing exclusionary discipline as a greater racial congruence between students and teachers was achieved (Blake et al., 2016).

Several studies, such as Sullivan et al. (2013) and Kinsler (2011), as cited in a meta-analysis conducted by Redding (2019), found no evidence of a relationship between racial congruence and behavioral outcomes. Sullivan and colleagues (2013) examined a school district in Wisconsin and found no relationship between the proportion of White teachers and the risk of suspension. Kinsler (2011) used administrative data to examine the prevalence of racial bias in ODRs and the potential role Black teachers may play in reducing the risk of Black students receiving ODRs in North Carolina. The study's results indicated no differences in the risk of referral when a Black student was assigned to a White teacher versus when assigned to a Black teacher (Kinsler, 2011, as cited in Redding, 2019).

The results of these studies indicate potential behavioral benefits for students of color being assigned to racially congruent teachers; however, there have not been enough studies to adequately investigate this relationship for students of color as a population or specific racial subgroups (Redding, 2019). More research is necessary to control for the additional variables and factors that may be influencing these results positively or negatively.

Summary

Overall, there is empirical evidence of some academic and behavioral outcome improvements when students of color are paired with racially congruent teachers, however. Research has primarily focused on academic outcomes. This research has also sometimes suggested that there is no benefit. For behavioral outcomes, more research is needed to determine the effects of student-teacher racial congruence on students' behavioral outcomes.

Regardless of the mixed results observed in the research, there is theoretical justification to warrant the recruitment and retention of teachers of diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds. Though more research is needed to determine the effects of racial congruence on student outcomes, the ability to serve as a role model and potentially reduce the harmful effects of biases suggests that racial congruence may be an essential consideration for the future of education.

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