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The Effect of Black Teachers in the Elementary School

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Abstract

There are many ways black teachers affect elementary schools. The influence of a black teacher is mainly on black students, but also white students, colleagues, and administrators. Black teachers help to enhance cultural awareness among white teachers and administrators. They do this by helping others recognize their implicit bias — the attitudes that affect understanding and actions in an unconscious manner (Toribio, 2018). Black teachers also hold high expectations in students that lead to the ambition to achieve and persevere. Having a natural disadvantage in society gives black teachers the will to succeed and strive for greatness and that characteristic gets passed onto their students. These teachers know the struggle to succeed in this world as a black person which gives them a fundamental understanding to their black students. This is when black teachers become strong role models and supports providing a realistic aspect of success that students can relate to.
The Effect of Black Teachers in the Elementary School

The only teachers I knew growing up were white teachers. They always told that I was smart and that I would do well in life, but for some reason I was not convinced. My grades did not stand out among my white classmates even though I was on the honor roll because I felt average compared to them. When I came to Northern Illinois University (NIU) I had my first black professor in my freshman year history class. Even though I was never particularly good at history, I did well in his class and I did not know why. The same was true for my English class the following semester. I did not understand why I did well until I had my third black professor in my Multiculturalism in Education class first semester of sophomore year. The class dove deep into topics including black teachers in education. This is when I began to realize why I was succeeding beyond expectations in history and English. It was because I had black teachers. I started to think about my childhood and wondered how different my education would be if I had a black teacher.

There is a significant national shortage of black teachers in public schools. This means that those black teachers who are present, especially in elementary schools, have more of an effect on those around them. Black teachers are a representative and example of success for black students which leads to higher graduation rates and college enrollment in the black community (Camera, 2018). It is vital to the success of future members of society to have a black teacher in elementary schools as a person to enrich cultural awareness, consistently motive all students, and support students of colors.

Black teachers are effective in elementary schools because they enhance cultural awareness among white teachers and administrators, hold high expectations leading to the ambition to achieve and persevere in students, and are strong role models and supports for students of color.
This is not to say that white teachers are not effective, but there are certain qualities that black teachers have that creates the difference between white and black teachers. These qualities will become clear in an in-depth look into colorblindness, implicit bias, culture, and experience in relation to elementary schools.

Black teachers play an important role in elementary schools by enhancing cultural awareness among white colleagues, administrators, and students. Most public school districts’ teaching staff is majority white which is not an accurate representation of the diverse student population of some school districts. This disparity suggests that teachers do not embody the proper cultural understanding to teach such diverse students. This is also true for administrators who are predominantly white “and may be unaware of their own biases, which may lead to the unfair treatment of children of color” (Arnold, Brooks, & Arnold, 2014, p. 146).

The way that black teachers have to go about combatting these cultural biases is by using data because a simple conversation is not good enough. A study was done by an Assistant Principal at a school in the Pleasantville School District in New York that shows a disproportionality of black students’ discipline. Leslie Fredrickson (2014) conducted a study getting at this phenomenon. Fredrickson, the Assistant Principal, collected data that showed minority students receive significantly more referrals than any other student groups. While irrelevant to her point, her building leadership and faculty chose to focus on the imbalance of discipline between genders instead. This shows that many administrators and faculty choose to be colorblind about important issues and mask their discomfort.

Color blindness is an issue that relates to ignoring differences across cultural groups. This ignorance began as a misinterpretation of the beliefs of Martin Luther King, Jr. when he stated that his dream was that children would “one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by
the color of their skin but by the content of their character” Lieberman, 2005, p. 2). By this, he meant that children would not be discriminated against because of their skin color, but not by completely ignoring their skin color. A person’s skin color plays a significant role to who they are as far as their identity and culture. To ignore a person’s skin color – if that is even truly possible – and acting “blind” to it disregards who that person is as an individual and how aspects of identity have a profound impact on shaping one’s experience. As Miller (2007) states, “Teachers should become aware of how their own biases and presuppositions of students based on family background, appearance, and discourse can disenfranchise and marginalize potential learners” (p. 159).

The idea of color blindness in elementary schools is a prominent issue to understanding why certain students, especially students of color, are treated different than white students when it comes to discipline. Another example can be found in an elementary school in DeKalb CUSD 428. A black fourth grade student, who will be called “Frankie” for confidentiality purposes, was referred to the office a countless amount of times by their white teacher for frivolous behavioral reasons such as “being disrespectful,” “uncooperative,” or “being rude to students.” This resulted in Frankie receiving a bad reputation among staff, students, and administrators, leading to lower academic growth. Frankie is currently a fifth grader and has not received a single behavioral referral. Some may say it is because they have matured from fourth to fifth grade, but the real reason is because Frankie now has a black classroom teacher and a black student teacher. Having these black teachers allow Frankie to be their true self without having to worry about being seen as anything negative and getting a referral. Frankie has built a strong relationship with both teachers who encourage and push Frankie to succeed in all aspects of their identity.
When discussing important issues in elementary schools, especially issues involving race and culture, it is important to define the difference between the two and how they relate to ethnicity. The word *ethnicity* stems from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning to give birth. In the mid-fourteenth century, *ethnos* was used in English as *ethnic* and was used to mean “heathen” until the mid-nineteenth century when it became defined as “a group of people of shared characteristics” (Fortier, 1994, p. 3). The term race is “culturalized” meaning “culture is conceived as primarily and naturally reproduced and transmitted through families” (Fortier, 1994, p. 9). This means that without ethnicity, there is no culture and without culture there is no race.

Based on the data taken by Fredrickson (2014), colorblindness is pronounced in many white teachers and administrators who choose to ignore students’ race and culture. This mindset can be seen in statements like, “I treat my kids the same,” another misplaced sensibility born out of colorblind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). The strategy of colorblindness impacts students significantly because it does not acknowledge one of the most important attributes of their identity and experience. Disciplinary actions is one of those ways. Students should receive the proper discipline to match their actions, not the color of their skin. According to Harper, Ryberg, and Temkin (2019), the disparity in the rates of discipline is 8% in black students which is more than twice as high than the 3.8% in white students. Research shows that teachers unconsciously consider a student’s race when administering discipline referrals (Arnold, Brooks, & Arnold, 2014). Since this treatment is an unfortunate aspect in the life of a black person, black teachers are more aware of when this injustice occurs which ignites conversations that can be uncomfortable. Black teachers use their awareness of this issue to call out their white administrators and colleagues to make them aware of their unconscious bias. This is why black
teachers are so important to cultural awareness in elementary schools. Without making white administrators and colleagues aware of their bias and colorblindness, these unjust acts of bias could go on without question.

Being culturally aware especially in an elementary school is crucial to the education of the students in that elementary school. According to Georgetown University (n.d.), cultural awareness is defined as being mindful and attentive to similarities and differences between cultural groups. Having this awareness helps teachers and administrators to “be more responsive to culturally diverse students and colleagues,” and “be alert to cultural differences and similarities that will present opportunities and challenges to working in a multicultural environment.” (Georgetown University, n.d., para 4). This ability to be more responsive and alert when it comes to cultural differences between students helps to support students of color. These students already feel as though they are not supported by our society based on how they are treated and viewed by other. To have the support of teachers and administrators creates a sense of community and welcoming among students of color.

Black teachers have different experiences of cultural awareness that white teachers and administrators need to learn. Black teachers still face the injustices and prejudices of the world regardless of their position as public educators. One thing that needs to be understood by white people of all professions is that black people are mainly seen by their skin color, not their job title nor accomplishments. While having these negative experiences is not wished upon, it does have value in educating white educators. Injustice and discrimination is one way black teachers can relate to black students in a that way white teachers cannot. Instead, white teachers need to learn from the experiences of their black colleagues to better understand their black students.
This will lead to lower discomfort when discussing racial topics allowing white educators to recognize their implicit bias towards black students.

Black teachers set high expectations for all students leading to the ambition to achieve and persevere. According to Gershenson and Papageorge (2018), there was a significant bias found when it came to white teacher’s expectations for students. They say that “white teachers, who comprise the vast majority of American educators, have far lower expectations for black students than they do for similarly situated white students” (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2014, para 4). Based on their data taken, white teachers were significantly less likely than black teachers to expect black students to earn a college degree. This indicates that a more diverse teaching force is a worthy goal for the expectations of all students.

Teacher expectations play a vital role in a student’s future achievement in college. Gershenson and Papageorge (2018) further show, “college completion rates are systematically higher for students whose teachers have higher educational expectations for them” (para 4). Since white teachers tend to not set as high of expectations for their black students as black teachers do, black student achievement suffers. The more black teachers there are to support and set high expectations for black students, the more black students achieve which lowers the achievement gap between black and white students.

The achievement gap is defined as the differences in the scores on a state or national level between multiple student demographic groups (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007). The gap that causes the greatest concern is between white and minority students. It could be argued that the achievement gap is caused by very high performing schools, however schools that actively work towards closing the gap “may be improving the performance of their African American and Hispanic students over time, relative to the performance of their white students” (Anderson,
Medrich, & Fowler, 2007, p. 5). This means that teachers in those schools are not only providing the proper education for their white students, but for all of their minority students. These teachers are also setting the same expectations for all students leading to more ambition to achieve in the students of color.

Black teachers act as role models and supports for students of color. This stems from the Civil Rights Movement when schools became integrated. With segregated schools, black students were accustomed to support from black teachers because they were their only teachers (Foster, 1997). When schools became integrated, black teachers were not as common because the white teachers took dominance. Fairclough (2017) says that “after integrations there were relatively fewer black teachers to act as role models for black youngsters” (p. 412). As the years passed, there were more and more black students but not enough black teachers. This student to teacher inconsistency can be seen in today’s elementary schools. For example, in DeKalb CUSD (Community Unit School District) 428 there are only 2.5% of teachers who are black while 21.1% of the students are black (Illinois State Board, 2019). This black student to black teacher ratio means that with every 1 black student there is approximately 0.12 black teachers. Compared to the white student to white teacher ratio which is approximately 2 white teachers for every white student, black students are not receiving adequate support in their elementary school experience.

Many black students yearn to see a successful person who looks like them. This is especially true for black students who come from low income families and neighborhoods. They need to be told they can be successful outside of sports and beauty. Having a black teacher as a role model shows students that “there is another way to live and there is another way to function in the world” (Arnold, Brooks, & Arnold, 2014, p. 13). In addition, most black teachers teach from a
multicultural perspective that is rarely implemented in the curriculum. This means that black teachers make sure that their students regardless of race, understand the world around them from different cultural perspectives. For example, most of science is dominated by white males as portrayed in many if not all elementary science textbooks. To teach this content in a multicultural way, teachers would teach students about scientists and discoveries from all cultural backgrounds to ensure the students are not only accurately represented in the content, but that they also experience education from cultures other than their own. As Joseph Flynn (2018) points out in *White Fatigue: Rethinking Resistance for Social Justice*:

> With regards to race, American textbooks tend to offer uncritical portraits of race relations, sanitized of the depth of strife between White and non-White groups (Brown & Brown, 2010; Lowen, 2007; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Trossett and Love (2012) point out “previous studies examining school textbooks argue that textbooks reaffirm the status quo and fail to help students understand the complicated structures of racism, sexism, and classism which are embedded within American society” (p. 47).

It is important for students to have role models because they help to shape their behavior, relationships, and decision making (“Role Models,” 2017). Since black students usually look up to famous black entertainers and athletes, they are used to having a role model who is black. Teachers are similar to these typical role models in that they are of the same race and provide a more realistic role model. The black teacher as a role model adds a sense of practicality for students because they can actually interact and have discussion. Most times, students’ only interaction with these famous singers and athletes is through their electronic devices such as phones, tablets, video games, and computers. Furthermore, having a role model who relates to
you on more than one level of your identity especially in an academic setting is a confidence booster and an additional support system for students.

Black teachers are essential in the lives of elementary school staff and administrators. Since most leaders in education are white, they tend to have automatic and unconscious views and biases against their black students. This leads to a discrepancy of treatment between students which is unjust to the education of all students. Black teachers have the knowledge and the experience to enhance cultural awareness for white staff and administrators to ensure justice among students of color. Due to their discriminatory experience in society being black, these teachers set higher expectations for their students which leads to higher achievement and future success for students. The proper education of all students is displayed in the large achievement gap between white and black students, however those schools with a low achievement gap actively ensure students are receiving an unbiased education. Lastly, black teachers are strong roles for students of color. Having a relatable and realistic person such as a teacher be a role model and guide for a student creates a sense of realism in that student. That student is able to physically see and interact with a black teacher to promote high educational accomplishments for black students.
References


