

Teachers of Color Are Linked to Social-Emotional, Academic Gains for All Students




By [Madeline Will](#) — February 08, 2022 ⌚ 5 min read



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Teachers of color tend to bring specific practices and mindsets into the classroom that benefit all students, a new study finds—the latest addition to [the body of research](#) that emphasizes the importance of recruiting and retaining these teachers, who make up just 21 percent of the workforce.

[The new study reaffirms that](#)  teachers of color are linked to positive academic, social-

emotional, and behavioral student outcomes and finds that these effects are driven, at least in part, by mindsets and practices aligned to what's known as culturally responsive teaching.

“We think of culturally responsive teaching as being multidimensional, having multiple components to it,” said David Blazar, the study's author and an assistant professor of education policy and economics at the University of Maryland.

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For example, he said, culturally responsive teachers believe that all students can learn, so they are more likely to hold students to high expectations. They are more likely to build relationships with students' families, so they understand students' culture and can bring that into the classroom. They also work to differentiate their instruction by providing varied supports for all students to succeed.

“To me, that goes back to good teaching,” he said. “Some of the things I’m describing are

very much components of good instruction. ... They on average seem to benefit a range of student outcomes.”

Blazar analyzed a dataset of 4th and 5th grade teachers that included their students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes, as well as observation data and surveys to gauge the teachers’ mindsets and practices. The dataset came from four school districts on the East Coast of the United States.

He found that when upper elementary students are randomly assigned to a teacher of color, they are better at completing tasks and are more engaged, score higher on end-of-year math and English/language arts test scores, and attend school more frequently. This effect holds true for both students of color and white students, and the effects on test-scores and chronic absenteeism persist up to six years later, when the students are in high school.

The impact teachers of color have on student outcomes is partially explained by the fact that teachers of color are more likely to practice culturally responsive teaching, Blazar found.

The analysis found that teachers of color are more likely than their white colleagues to view student intelligence as malleable instead of fixed, build relationships with students and their families, spend more time differentiating their instruction to fit individual students’ needs, and lead well-organized classrooms. All are components of culturally responsive teaching.

Blazar was not able to rule out other reasons why teachers of color might have positive effects on student outcomes. Past research has found that teachers of color serve as role models for students of color, which could also play a role in students’ academic or social-emotional success.

Still, he noted, if teachers of color are engaging in culturally responsive practices, that benefits both students of color and white students.

More than just diverse books

Culturally relevant, or responsive, teaching is a term that was first introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings, a scholar and teacher-educator, in 1995.

“I think there’s a misconception that culturally responsive teaching is just about bringing in

diverse books or having multiple perspectives [in the curriculum], but it's more of a pedagogical approach to the way that you teach in the classroom," said Nadine Sanchez, the principal of Livingston Elementary School in New Brunswick, N.J.

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For instance, she said, a culturally responsive teacher makes sure that students feel connected to the content and are provided with the tools to be able to master it: "It's really about the way you are with students, the way you approach content, and the way that you give students access."

And high expectations for all students is a key component, Sanchez said. Past research has found that white teachers have lower expectations for Black students than they do for white students, and those can turn into "self-fulfilling prophecies" when students internalize them or when teachers change their approach to students as a result of their mindsets.

For instance, a [2012 study from Rutgers University-Newark](#) found that when white teachers were presented with a poorly written essay, they provided more praise and less criticism if they thought the essay was written by a student of color than if they thought the essay was by a white student.

Teachers' racial biases can also result in [decreased access to advanced coursework and higher rates of suspensions](#), past research has found.

When teachers utilize the practices of culturally responsive pedagogy, students feel empowered and are more likely to thrive, Sanchez said.

“I see dramatic shifts in the way our students engage in the classroom,” she said. “I’ve noticed a tremendous difference [in particular] in my English-language learners and my students of color because they feel much more connected to their classrooms and their peers, and they’re more willing to take risks.”

White teachers can follow these practices, too

Of course, this work is not unique to teachers of color. White teachers can and do incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy into their classrooms. But they are less likely to do so than teachers of color, Blazar’s study found.

After all, for many teachers of color, this work is instinctive, Sanchez said. Many teachers of color remember feeling marginalized in classrooms when they were growing up, and they want to help their students have a better experience.

“I’m Latina, and I came in [to the classroom] already with that mindset—I’m coming in to empower my people,” she said.

Blazar said his study shows the need for professional development that focuses specifically on culturally responsive teaching. That could help train the mostly white teacher workforce to engage in these practices that benefit students, he said.

A supportive school leader also helps. For example, Sanchez encourages teachers in her school building to share positive stories about student success in an effort to make some of these practices visible. She also works to create a school climate where families are valued

partners to educators.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the need for districts to recruit and retain teachers of color, Blazar said. He added that these findings also add some nuance to the heated national debate over “critical race theory,” as state legislators introduce bills seeking to limit discussion of race in the classroom and community members push to ban books about race and social identity.

“White students are benefitting from what is happening here, from having teachers of color, from culturally responsive teaching,” Blazar said. “This doesn’t need to be a them or us discussion.”