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Representation and the Achievement Gap: A Case for Prioritizing Cultural Sameness in the Classroom

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**Representation and the Achievement Gap:
A Case for Prioritizing Cultural Sameness in the Classroom**

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Representation and the Achievement Gap

Abstract

This study examined the impact of cultural representation on achievement for minority students academically and socially across diverse contexts. Recognizing the importance of cultural diversity in educational and youth mentoring settings, this research explores how the representation of various cultural identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, influences student achievement outcomes. Coming from a background in community based nonprofit organizations, I have seen how black and brown students respond in classroom and out-of-school time settings when having come in contact with teachers and mentors of similar culture. Having a teacher and/or mentor of a similar culture creates pathways of connections which enable adults in these positions to positively affect how minority students respond to academic learning and social growth.

Drawing upon a comprehensive synthesis of existing research, this paper identified key factors that may contribute to the relationship between cultural representation and academic success, including access to culturally relevant curriculum, culturally responsive teaching practices, and the promotion of positive cultural identities. Through a critical analysis, this study underscored the relationship between cultural representation and academic and social achievement, highlighting the need for inclusive and culturally affirming educational environments. Ultimately, this review offered insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers to promote educational equity and foster inclusive learning environments that empower all students to thrive academically, regardless of cultural background.

Keywords:

Cultural Representation, Cultural Sameness, Race Matching, Diversity, Achievement Gap

Chapter One: Introduction

Nationally, state public school teachers are on average 27 percentage points more likely to be White than their students (Schaffer, 2021). At the same time Marzia (2023) found 18 state legislatures in the US have enacted anti-critical-race-theory laws. For these 18 states, black and diverse history is not considered important to the broader educational landscape. With similar laws still moving through the legislative process, the future of America's classrooms is looking less diverse.

Similarly, diversity in leadership and workforce in the nonprofit sector is lacking, as well. A 2023 survey of nonprofit organizations shows approximately 58.4 percent of full-time staff in the United States were white people, significantly more than any other race or ethnicity (Statista, 2023). When just 21 percent of executive directors and board chairs are people of color, the nonprofit sector's effectiveness and relevance to the communities it purports to serve are unquestionably at risk (Mitchell, 2021).

These statistics open a conversation around the idea of creating culturally responsive spaces for minority students by prioritizing same-race hires over traditional diversity efforts when hiring for the classroom or direct service staff in community-based organizations. Do black and brown students perform better and engage more when in spaces with adults who look like them and share a set of cultural experiences?

This study considered whether hiring individuals from the same racial background as the communities served by the organization can help in closing the achievement gap for black and brown students. Based on the literature, doing so can help foster trust, rapport, and with the communities served by these institutions and non-profits it serves, leading to more effective engagement and service

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delivery. Existing research also showed positive outcomes sparked by same-race role models can last into adulthood and potentially shrink the educational attainment gap (Rosen, 2018). At the same time, there are threats to the basic purposes of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Prioritizing hiring based on race may raise concerns about fairness, equity, and discrimination. It may perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce systemic inequalities, and exclude qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds who could contribute valuable skills and perspectives to the organization.

This study addressed the problem of the lack of cultural representation for students of color in classroom environments and what effects that may have on the long-term success or engagement of minority children. This led to the larger question if academic institutions who serve communities of color should abandon traditional DEI initiatives which seek to create multicultural spaces for Cultural Responsiveness Measures, which lean into representation of the majority demographic.

The British Educational Research Association believes that educational research should support the development of education in the future, as well as highlighting what works at the present time to explore current and potential issues, to influence policy decisions, and to evaluate and progress classroom practice (Almalki, 2016). The findings and implications of this study could influence hiring policies and school board approaches to instituting culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices.

This paper moves into a review of the literature both supporting the theory of hiring for same-race as well as presenting barriers and contrasting views, followed by a discussion on the research method employed to collect and analyze data for this study. A synthesis of the findings adds to the knowledge and understanding of the topic, as well as whether or not the theory stands. There are

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recommendations on future research and finally a conclusion summarizing the process and final thoughts on the topic.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Some scholars attribute the birth of modern-day diversity protocols in the workplace to President Truman's 1948's Executive Order desegregating the armed forces, requiring equal opportunity and treatment throughout all its branches (*Evolution of Workplace Diversity — Brief History*, 2022). With the 1964 Civil Rights Act making it illegal for businesses to discriminate in their hiring practices, backed by other legislation such as affirmative action and equal employment laws, Gdlian and Gdlian (2024) discusses the evolution of diversity from a sub-component under Human Resources to a core business function.

This played out in organizations hiring minorities as a means to diversifying their teams, not to be representative of the populations they served, but rather as a means to develop multicultural teams who could offer a myriad of ideas and viewpoints in hopes of driving innovation. A report published by McKinsey showed companies in the study in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity were 35% more likely to have above-average returns (*Evolution of Workplace Diversity — Brief History*, 2022), seemingly making diversity more about driving the bottom line than cultural competence. Although diversity has increased, cultural representation is disproportionate to that growth, as a 2023 survey of nonprofit organizations in the United States show approximately 58.4 percent of full-time staff were white people, significantly more than any other race or ethnicity (Statista, 2023). In US public schools, nearly 80 percent of teachers are also Caucasian (USAfacts, 2023). Although other ethnicities are present in both industries, minority youth see themselves less often in these spaces. How does that relate to their decision to participate and ability to succeed in learning institutions and community-based non-profit programs?

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In a study led by researchers from Johns Hopkins, black students who have just one black teacher by the third grade were 13 percent more likely to enroll in college. Those with two were 32 percent more likely (Rosen, 2018). These findings open the door to conversation around hiring practices of learning institutions and community-based organizations and whether or not they should hire for cultural representation over racial diversity in efforts to increase the success of youth in urban communities.

Other research showed culturally competent programs validate the identity of each young person, affirming their unique backgrounds. When these youth see themselves reflected in a program's staff and resources – from diverse role models to literacy materials – they feel recognized and valued (Katrina, 2023). Accomplishing this would require very specific changes in an organization's hiring practices. Organizational change on this level would require effective communication, as well as education around why cultural representation is necessary in the current climate. The research presented here helps inform ideas behind how effective organizations have traditionally been in implementing cultural competence and responsiveness initiatives and what effect that has had on the success of programs in minority communities.

In spaces which service students of color in under-resourced communities, we wanted to understand which factors contributed to organizations not responding to this need through refocused diversity and inclusion effort and use that data to help inform how organizational culture and programming is defined and implemented. Also, this study helped to make a case for organizational reform in that respect, by showing how cultural awareness helps inform planning, implementation, and delivery of our initiatives ensuring that they meet the needs of our diverse target group effectively (Katrina, 2023).

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Barriers to developing an evidence-based plan to address this issue include existing research regarding the success Caucasian teachers have had instructing children of color and the positive outcomes those relationships can yield. According to McSpadden (2016), teachers and students who share no trait in common can be terrific partners in learning. Those relationships can be exceptionally strong – forged out of a respect and celebration for each other’s differences.

Other barriers included existing definitions and viewpoints of diversity, equity, and inclusion and the effects suggesting having all minority team service minority communities can mean to that conversation. Having marginalized people present in a board room or in an organization doesn’t inherently do anything to change the culture of that space, particularly in terms of creating inclusivity or promoting more diversity. In part, it’s because holding an identity that makes you a “minority” doesn’t inherently mean anything; it doesn’t automatically mean that you care about the people of those groups or are invested in their success (Gray, 2018). Even with that, the research showed the positive effects of cultural representation in urban based youth programming and similar educational and mentoring spaces.

For academic administrators and non-profit leaders this could mean taking an in depth look into the rate of long-term success for their minority population in comparison to the percentage of same-race educators and program leaders employed by their institution or organization. As the literature does discuss later, this may mean a divergence from the original ideas around diversity and multiculturalism as hiring practices look toward culture fit over diversity. This is a slippery slope as it then can create a loop hole for a reemergence of discrimination in hiring practices. If organizations can hire to be race facing for communities with high populations of ethnic minorities, arguably the same can occur in communities without that demographic in the name of cultural representation.

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The Importance of Cultural Representation

Cultural identity is an important part of the intellectual growth process for children as it helps them to establish a sense of themselves and can guard against the accepting of stereotypes and help share a positive self-image. When children do not see people with whom they share similarities, which can include race and culture, they are more likely to have a harder time developing a self-identity (Shride & Shirde, 2022).

Theories around Cultural Representation were first derived from the research of Stuart Hall, which argues that within a media text, there will oftentimes not be a true representation of events, people, places or history (*Stuart Hall: Theory and Representation | StudySmarter*, n.d.). This translates back to power and the idea that the cultural majority has the ability to create systems, images, and beliefs which can misrepresent minority cultures. This leaves children in learning and mentoring spaces without proper ideas about who and what they can become as an adult.

Research from For the Children, a non-profit dedicated to serving children in foster care, suggests a strong cultural identity has been shown to improve social well-being, mental health resilience and coping skills, among other benefits (*Why Representation Matters*, n.d.). This may be why the appeal of Historically Black Colleges and Universities remains high among African American students seeking secondary education. They want to see and learn from educators, administrators, that look like them. It builds a sense of security and a trust they will be understood and their voice heard. The same reasons exist for students who attend Predominantly White Institutions pushing for racial diversity among faculty. Seeing yourself in an adult opens up new possibilities and builds self-esteem in children. Scholars and community leaders have declared mottos like how it's "hard to be what you can't see," asserting

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that people from marginalized groups do not pursue career or academic opportunities when they are not exposed to such possibilities (Nadal, 2021).

Exposure as well as access to new career pathways where minorities are represented, even if that representation is less than half of that field's population, creates ideas of viability. This makes the case for learning institutions and community-based nonprofits which service or target minority populations to lean toward building cultural representative teams to ensure the long-term success of the youth in their programs. Findings from Kemper et al. (1999) supports youth interventions that promoted own-group cultural identity versus the dominant cultural identity resulted in better academic and mental health outcomes and greater resilience during periods of unusual stress. According to the US Department of Education the possibility of students receiving more culturally relevant instruction and having a more positive perception of their teachers is greater when they are taught by the same race or ethnicity (USAFacts, 2023).

This is significant in the conversation regarding making the shift to prioritize cultural representation over multiculturalism when building teams who provide direct service to youth, which has the probability of creating more meaningful and culturally impactful spaces. While multiculturalism accomplishes diversity in board terms, cultural representation dived deeper into the inclusion of underrepresented cultural groups in educational spaces.

The Lack of Cultural Representation in Multicultural Youth Spaces

The literature looked at the lack of cultural representation through the lens of academia, non-profits, and social service entities around the globe. In their study, Meinhard and Faridi (n.d.) indicated a lack of minority representation in nonprofit agencies in all multi-cultural western countries. Countries such as France, Great Britain, Spain, and Italy, which lead efforts of colonization as early as the 15th

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Century as well as the US which colonized parts of the Pacific Islands much later opened the door of multiculturalism and the creation of minority groups and systemic racism (Webster et al., 1998).

In order for a group of people to feel justified in conquering other people and developing the ability to keep the “conquered” subjected to rule, that group must be made to feel inferior. This was the beginning of minority groups being dominated by European cultures in religion, education, and civilization. Themes and social structures established in colonial times continue to inform attitudes and actions today, especially for specific marginalized racial and ethnic groups (*How European Colonialism Led to the Invention of Race-And Why That Still Matters - Getting Race Right*, 2023). This has implications to the current lack of minority representation in the labor force of western countries.

Ashiagbor (2021) traced the origins of racial inequalities in the contemporary labor market back to the ways in which race is constitutive of the labor market and present in the legal form by which labor is regulated. This article discussed how even in the wake of decolonization, the ideas of “deserving and undeserving” continued to drive legislation and social norms attached to labor, largely restricting racial minorities. The effects of this can still be felt as demonstrated by statistical data showing in recent years, nearly 80 percent of US public school teachers were white (USA Facts, 2023).

Nadal (2021) expressed how interpersonal contact, exposure, and representation in educational curricula can assist in reducing stereotypes, while providing validation and support for youth of marginalized groups. Yet these are the spaces which often lack high degrees of cultural representation. Majority populations make up nearly 80% of education administrators and social and community services workers, according to a recent US Labor survey (Division of Labor Force, 2024). The same with guidance counselors and teachers at all levels.

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As a product of a minority community having less than 10 black or brown educators from preschool through high school, this is real life for many students of color. This places children of color at an immediate disadvantage when serviced by teams who do not share their experiences, language, social norms, all of which help make up representation of a culture. The lack of connectivity can dissuade learning and growth while promoting harmful factors such as negative stereotyping, feelings of oppression and issues developing identity.

Lockhart's (2008) examination of Communities in Schools (CIS), one of the ten largest youth-serving organizations in the United States, looks into this issue. Between February 6, 2007 and February 8, 2008, 22 interviews, 17 focus groups and 2 surveys were conducted which pointed toward cultural representation as a key area of improvement and believed to be related to the success of programs focused on minority students. Most directors expressed the need and desire to have a diverse staff, especially one that would reflect the community and students served. Site level staff also recognized the importance and benefit of reflecting the race and cultures of the students they served (Lockhart, 2008). Overall, the lack of representation in minority serving institutions and nonprofits is evident, as is its relation to connectivity and growth among students of color.

Long-term Success of Cultural Majority Teams Versus Culturally Representative Teams with Students of Color

The long-term success of cultural majority teams versus culturally representative teams with students of color can vary. Cultural majority teams may lack diversity of perspectives and experiences and can perpetuate existing power dynamics and inequalities within the team and broader society. In the complex interactions between teachers and students, those biases, which shape our expectations of others particularly through race and culture, affect how students feel about school and how well they do

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there (McSpadden, 2016). Students of color often ask how they can thrive in white spaces if they don't feel as if they belong or if their identity is not acknowledged or celebrated daily (Lewis, 2023). Creating culturally representative teams with students of color can accomplish a sense of belonging through diverse perspectives, experiences, and greater cultural competence.

None of the research indicated that teachers and social services workers representative of the cultural majority cannot have success with students of color. Neither make any attempt to connect with their service populations. Success through this lens isn't completely connected to the racial background of the teacher, but a teacher's ability to effectively engage, support, and understand the needs of students. Lockhart (2008) showed when staff did not reflect the population, participants noted numerous adaptive strategies to address the potential divide between staff and students.

There have been several studies conducted on the success of white teachers with minority students. According to research, white teachers can be successful with minority students if they have cultural competence and understand the unique challenges that these students face. Additionally, building relationships with students and their families, creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, and incorporating culturally relevant teaching practices can also lead to positive outcomes. In her article, McSpadden (2016) discusses how Caucasian teachers successfully engage and impact minority students, citing increased cultural competency initiatives and relationship building as a "potent antidote to a lack of diversity in education."

In a survey of urban middle schools, Coleman (2017) found Black students attributed in-classroom success to teachers of whatever race, who demonstrated care, gave affirming feedback, and communicated with them on a personal level, labeling those educators as "nice." The nurturing and caring behaviors of "nice" teachers developed a sense of community and belonging in their classrooms

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(Coleman, 2017). In his book, "College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All," Strayhorn (2012) defines belonging as an individual's sense of identification in relation as it relates to a group or community, which may influence moods, feelings or attitudes. The idea is that when students feel a part of the whole, they are more likely to engage and take ownership of their academic process.

Even as some field experts, such as the Center for Multicultural Youth suggest in their 2015 Good Practice Guide, Caucasian teachers and nonprofit leadership have the ability through implementing culturally competent and sensitive curriculum and policies into their operations model gives the ability to create a sense of belonging in their buildings, there is a link between cultural identity and learning. Learning is successful when learners are able to summon up or construct an identity that enables them to impose their right to be heard (Sosyal Altuga, 2015). That level of empowerment can be linked back to identity, as well, through the lens Baumert et al. (2023) who found a strong identification with the host culture tends to go hand and hand with a greater willingness to invest in education. In terms of this research, the host culture more strongly connected to the academic success and positive character development for minority students is found in representatives of their own cultures.

Gershenson et al. (2018b) showed that Black students randomly assigned to at least one Black teacher in grades K-3 are 9 percentage points (13%) more likely to graduate from high school and 6 percentage points (19%) more likely to enroll in college than their same-school, same-race peers. Can non-cultural representative teams be effective in learning and mentoring spaces with students of color? Absolutely, but students who are exposed to educators and leaders who share their culturally identity tend to do better academically and flourish socially. Rosen (2018) underscores mounting evidence that

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positive outcomes sparked by the so-called role model effect can last into adulthood and potentially shrink the educational attainment gap.

The 'role model effect' surfaced in McSpadden (2016) when discussing the effect of cultural representation in schools, which showed minority students taught by minority teachers miss school less and are suspended less than minority children taught by white teachers. This feeds into reports of more positive feelings about their teachers and the readiness to look up to them as role models. Sharing cultural identity supports pathways to understanding and conflict resolution in educational and out-of-school time settings as culturally representative teachers, mentors, and youth service workers are more apt to identify challenges as adverse effects of trauma rather than innate behaviors. Having a teacher of color at the helm of a classroom benefits all learners, both academically and through deep and enriching social emotional connections (Rodriguez, 2021).

While both cultural majority teams and culturally representative teams with students of color can achieve success, cultivating diverse and inclusive teams is critical for fostering innovation, resilience, and long-term sustainability. These results complemented mounting evidence that same-race teachers are beneficial to underrepresented minority students on a number of contemporaneous dimensions, such as test scores, attendance, course grades, disciplinary outcomes, and expectations in a variety of educational settings (Gershenson et al., 2018b).

Creating Culturally Responsive Spaces for Students of Color

This idea of "sense of fit" is important for most people, regardless of age and culture, to engage and thrive in most spaces, but it becomes critical for young people of color in areas where they have to participate in larger groups and interact with adults. If young people don't feel as if a space was created with them in mind or the adults in the space don't "get it," they can disengage quickly which makes it

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difficult for them to benefit from the service being rendered. If this can still occur with adults of the same culture, it's even more likely to occur with adults who they do not identify with culturally. If social belonging is important to intellectual achievement, members of historically excluded ethnic groups may suffer a disadvantage (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Evaluations of British universities showed students of color seek more culturally representative spaces, often asking how they can thrive in white spaces if they don't feel accepted and celebrated for their diversity daily (Lewis, 2023). As this narrative can be applied to more groups than European students of color, the implications can be used to create global awareness and resulting initiatives.

Students of color want to feel welcomed in spaces that are created for them. Those spaces being led by same race adults cultivates that all important belonging. It can be questioned that such a practice is discriminatory against Caucasian educators and social service providers. However, it can be argued that learning institutions and community based non-profit organizations should value the effectiveness and cultural responsiveness over multiculturalism or color blindness in hiring.

Walter (2017) looked at culturally responsive curriculum versus multiculturalism through the lens of modern music education. Considered a student-centered approach to learning, culturally responsive teaching has been gaining momentum in education and in music education. Community based organizations providing out-of-school time experiences are adopting similar practices. This is another step in creating culturally responsive spaces for youth of color.

Lockhart's (2019) study method surveyed African American adults to ascertain what characteristics they felt African American youth needed to be successful as a means of creating criteria for community-based program curriculum. The study goes on to show that these criteria, when implemented in predominantly African American social programs showed high levels of success with

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their target population. This supported the theory that cultural representative teams, themes, and ideas have a clearer perspective of what minority youth need to thrive.

For this to be effective, more minorities have to choose fields in education and social service. The literature highlights the necessity for growth in the hiring pool. It's difficult to hire for cultural representation if there is a lack of minority professionals. For example, commenting on the institution's lack of progress in hiring African Americans, former president of Harvard University, Neil Rudenstine, stated that "we have to keep going back to the still really unfortunate problem of the fact that only two percent of Ph.D.s in the United States—if you exclude clinical psychology and education— awarded annually are to African Americans, and that's just a tiny number of people" (Roach, 1999, p. 37). This also exists on the community level.

It begged the question if they see black teachers and administrators early on in their educational experience, perhaps this will lead to more students entering into these fields. Then the initiative becomes creating incentives and pathways for people of color to enter into these non-minority dominated fields, which is not always easy. Especially in education. McSpadden (2016) discussed a cycle of lack of representation in teacher population as minorities earn teaching certificates at lower rates than white graduates. Which means minority students have less black and brown role models, perpetuating the cycle.

To combat this, researchers looked at ways to increase the pipeline of black and brown educators. Rodriguez (2016) discusses the creation of educator preparation and mentoring programs and the use of "intrusive advising" for students of color as an incentive toward choosing education as a field of study. Intrusive advising is the concept of school advisors and mentors creating deliberate student to foster careers in teaching for students of color (Rodriguez, 2016).

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Creating culturally responsive spaces may not solely depend on increased hiring of multicultural teachers, but rather supporting all teachers in developing processes which allow them to engage students of color regardless of teacher race. If Black teachers are more effective teachers for Black students, the focus should be on evaluating what particular practices and attitudes make them so and assessing whether these could be adopted by non-Black teachers (Gershenson et al., 2018). With the number of people of color choosing teaching as a profession declining annually, culturally responsive practices in teaching and curriculum may be the solution to creating a sense of belonging for students of color. A culturally responsive program will include a variety of books about diversity and will not be limited to one type of diversity, such as gender, race or ethnicity (*Culturally Responsive Teaching in Practice* | *Virtual Lab School*, n.d.).

Hiring for Cultural Sameness Over Diversity

Understanding the effects of cultural mirroring in the classroom and long-run student outcomes is crucial to assessing the costs and benefits of diversifying the teaching workforce. As US labor statistics show, only one in five teachers are people of color, while students of color represent more than half of public-school students (Rodriguez, 2021). The need for more teachers of color in the classroom opens the conversation around shifting hiring practices in organizations that serve a high volume of minorities to prioritize hiring for cultural representation over multiculturalism. This does not necessarily align with traditional Diversity standards or practices in hiring.

Diversity is a broad term and encompasses a wide range of traits beyond race or gender. A diverse workforce has a range of origins, education, experience, personalities, physical abilities, lifestyles, and skills. When we talk about diversity hiring, we're referring to a recruiting process that values merit and offers a fair assessment of all candidates (Heaslip, 2022). While this approach may be

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sufficient for institutions and organizations which serve predominantly white populations, practices need to be more focused on diversification in other areas beside race. Although groups may share racial backgrounds the sum of their experiences and viewpoints diversify from one individual to the next.

This means intentionally hiring black and brown teams to work with black and brown students exclusively as diversity does not always equal representation. Schreiber-Shearer (2023) found business who hire people from all walks of life might be diverse, but if employees with similar backgrounds are segmented within a few functions or departments, then the level of representation at this organization may still be lacking (Schreiber-Shearer, 2023.) According to their research, the creation of a genuinely inclusive and equitable workforce, involves the prioritization of both representation and diversity.

How did this knock against the multicultural and colorblind contexts of diversity, equity and inclusion standards when research shows cultural mirroring is more effective in engaging and sustaining learning and achievement in students of color? Kirby and Kaiser (2020) cite the findings of Schmader and Sedikides (2018) which points to achieve the matching of characteristics of the environment with internal characteristics of the self being crucial to achieving state authenticity and sense of “fit.”

However, some research pointed to how prioritizing cultural representation over diversity can be problematic in allowing that it overlooks the complete spectrum of diversity and the benefits of multiculturalism in teams. Focusing solely on cultural representation may lead to limited diversity and tokenism, among other things. Tokenism refers to the practice of making only a symbolic effort to include members of underrepresented groups in a particular setting, such as employment, politics, or media, without making substantive changes to address systemic inequalities or discrimination (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). Essentially, tokenism involves giving the appearance of diversity or inclusivity without truly addressing the underlying issues of inequality or lack of representation. This can lead to

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individuals from underrepresented groups feeling marginalized or used for appearances rather than valued for their contributions or perspectives.

Film Critic, Bilal Qureshi talked about being a “diversity hire,” which morphed into and how that resulted in his contributions being stereotyped in his 2022 article for Film Quarterly, “From Diversity Hire to Diversity Critic.” Recognizing firsthand the absence of people who looked like him in the authoritative and non-diverse core coverage of art, books, and cinema, he shares how his career became an ambassadorship for his community rather than allowing him to affect projects as a creative being (Quershi, 2022). In other words, he only mattered when they wanted the perspective of an Islamic character, instead of allowing a writer with an Islamic understanding to affect the whole.

Gray (2018) argued representation cannot be enough and solely focusing on representation can become a loophole for organizations to avoid dealing with deep seated discrimination and marginalization on a greater scale. This is the worry with prioritizing cultural representation of diversity. Encouraging diversity, equity, and inclusion — is ensuring that employees aren’t called upon to be the lone representative for their entire group (Sherrer & Sherrer, 2018).

Other research suggested representation is not a threat to diversity, but a crucial part of the equation in order to fully reap these benefits (Schreiber-Shearer, 2023). Napilay (2023) views representation as essential to inclusion, promoting diversity and equality, eventually leading to more informed decisions and a stronger community. As earlier literature suggested, community is important to promoting cultural identity and belonging in spaces serving students of color.

Perhaps institutions and organizations can prioritize cultural representation and diversity, by developing initiatives and methods to combine cultural identity into diversity, equity and inclusion methods. Combining representation and diversity in academia involves ensuring that the individuals and

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perspectives present within educational institutions reflect the full spectrum of human diversity. Connecting viewpoints shared by McSpadden (2016) and Walter (2017) search committees and human resource leaders can seek to combine representation and diversity in academia may involve implementing inclusive recruitment and retention practices, promoting diverse perspectives in curriculum and pedagogy, fostering a culture of belonging and respect, and actively addressing systemic barriers to inclusion and equity. The benefits of a representative and inclusive community are numerous, including better decision-making, increased civic engagement, and a stronger sense of community (Napilay, 2023).

Conclusion

Hiring inside learning institutions and community-based organizations which serve predominantly minority populations should value cultural representation over racial diversity to increase the success of youth in urban communities. According to Gershenson et al. (2018b,) identifying all the channels through which teachers affect long-run outcomes remain unclear, but teacher race is an interesting exception in that it is an observable characteristic that has potentially large impacts on student outcomes.

This is seen as much of the literature which points to recorded impact for students of color after experiencing connectivity with adults who share their cultural identity in spaces of education and influence. Studies also reflect success and awareness among predominantly Caucasian teams in dealing with minority groups and that all cultural representation isn't a one size fits all category. According to Ayers (1995) and Khol (1998,) little is known about the effectiveness of White teachers with Black student achievement (Douglas et al., 2008). Future research can study developing culturally responsive

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curriculum to close the minority achievement gap, exploring cultural representation beyond race in fostering a sense of belonging for diverse student bodies, as well as implications on achievement among Caucasian students in academic and mentoring spaces who prescribe to race-matching as a method of diversifying the workforce.

The literature is a combination of scholarly writings, books, magazines, government publications, tertiary sources, dissertations, organizational guidebooks, journal articles, primary sources and more. Due to the varied nature of the methods involved in creating these selected works, the methodology for this research mirrored that employing a Mixed Methodology, which emphasizes that monomethod research can be improved through the use of multiple data sources, methods, research methodologies, perspectives, standpoints, and paradigms (Wikipedia contributors, 2023). The next chapter will discuss the chosen methodology for this study in detail, its innovation as a method of research, history of effectiveness, how it was applied to synthesizing the data, and any barriers or gaps its use may have created.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Further consideration of the scope of a new survey showed a requirement of resources and expertise to design and implement effectively. Therefore, the decision was made to employ a qualitative research method utilizing secondary data to study the effects of cultural representation on the achievement gap. Having provided a solid foundation of knowledge tested and reviewed by experts in the field, the four featured studies adequately explored the topic and yielded a comprehensive case for this study's chosen problem.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the topic of teacher race and student achievement, specifically when minority students encounter cultural sameness in educators. The secondary data used in this study examined variables such as academic achievement and classroom behaviors of minority students who encountered teachers of the same culture as opposed to those who did not. The studies chosen for review for this paper covered learning institutions across the United States in significant studies published in 2004, 2013 and 2017, and the most recent data from 2022.

1. Teachers, Race, and Student Achievement in Randomized Experiment (2004)

Dee (2004) uses a 4-year study conducted in Tennessee that followed students beginning kindergarten in the fall of 1985 to classify teacher race and student achievement in a public school with roughly 11,600 students participating. The study paired students and teachers randomly to provide a unique opportunity to identify the possible links between student and teacher race and student outcomes (Dee, 2004). This study was chosen as it adds to some of the earliest research on the topic, the Tennessee STAR Project. Nearly all subsequent studies and articles on this topic reference that 1985 study.

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1. Effects of Teacher Diversity and Student-Teacher Racial/Ethnic Matching in Elementary Schools on Educational Outcomes (2013)

In this approved dissertation from a University of North Carolina PhD student, the implications of cultural sameness in the classroom on academic achievement. This study covers three years, following kindergarten students through third grade. This study was chosen as a viable source as it uses a data set which covers a national sample of students, which addresses the probability of bias introduced through the Tennessee data from having such a focused sample size.

2. Student-Teacher Racial Match and Its Association with Black Student Achievement (2017)

Published in the American Educational Research Journal, this study also utilized a national database to research the connection between student/teacher race matching for African American males. This study was chosen as it brings up the question of gender matching, as well, which is highlighted as a benchmark for future research.

3. The Impact of Teacher and Student Racial and Ethnic Matching on Student Outcomes (2022)

Another approved dissertation from Seaton Hall looks at the impact of student/teacher race matching in New Jersey public schools. This study was chosen as it was among the most recent information introduced on this topic and because it samples students from an urban environment as opposed to the Tennessee study which had a rural demographic. This brings in the possibility of variations due to economic and social factors which may dictate if teachers attempt to relate to their students.

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Searching for and accessing relevant information included keyword searches in databases. The data was collected through digital copies. Some challenges faced in retrieving the data was finding accessible and completed copies of the studies which fit the criteria. There were sources which may have proved to be relevant, but were not accessible and therefore could not be used in this study. This study analyzes the collected data to uncover meaningful findings and any biases through content analysis and statistical analysis.

To ensure the quality and reliability of the research, only published studies and approved academic writings were chosen as secondary sources. However, biases did exist in the selected sources such as limited sample sizes, some minority groups not clearly identifying as African American nor Hispanic which excluded some data, and the selected sources having been generated from specific keyword searches which may lean toward this researcher's ideas around the topic. The research will be presented through narrative summaries.

Chapter Four: Data and Findings

Data

Findings on teacher race and student outcomes can vary based on location, demographics, and the specific outcomes being measured, which is why studies were selected that looked at national outcomes, as well as rural and urban demographics more closely to develop as well rounded a picture of the data as possible. Even in the face of marked differences, there are some general trends and outcomes seen in the existing data on this topic.

Beginning with Dee (2004,) which presents new evidence on the question of the association between exposure to an own-race teacher and student achievement question by examining the test score data from Tennessee’s Project STAR class-size experiment, which randomly matched students and teachers within participating schools. The original research, conducted in 1985 indicates that assignment to an own-race teacher significantly increased the math and reading achievement of both black and white students (Dee, 2004).

Dee (2004) concedes the STAR results may be skewed due to the study covering a small sample size where not many black teachers worked. Still the sample size of the STAR study aligns with national data collected nearly 30 years later, which showed many students of color may only have a same-race teacher once, if at all (Egalite, 2024). Among U.S. 5th graders in 2015–16, 55 percent of Black and Hispanic students had never had a same-race teacher in elementary school, federal data show, while 55 percent of white students had had a same-race teacher five or six times (Egalite, 2024). This points toward a continuing lack of diversity in graduates entering the classroom to teach or lax efforts in recruiting and retaining teachers of color.

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This connected with Dee's (2004) observation that the true takeaway from both his and the STAR study is the need for a better understanding of what factors actually contributed to the increased success of minority students who did encounter same race/culture teachers. Understanding these elements can better inform recommendations made to hiring managers around recruiting and retaining minority teachers.

What Dee (2004) saw as an opening for further study, Banerjee (2013) indicated as the biggest flaw in the study's findings concluding while Dee's study is methodologically sophisticated, it indicative to a population that is specific to the schools located in the state of Tennessee and, therefore, cannot be applied to the entire nation. To avoid this bias, Banerjee (2013) analyzes data from the Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K,) a nationally representative sample of 19,680 kindergarteners. With this wider sample, Banerjee (2013) could not find evidence to support the idea that minority students are more likely to experience higher achievement when assigned to same-race teachers' classrooms. The findings from Banerjee (2014) looked for improvements in both math and reading achievement growth by third grade among black and brown students when they are placed with teachers not of their same race. Another test group analyzed these numbers when this same demographic was placed with same-race teachers. Ultimately, the study concluded minority students experience "marginal improvements" when placed with teachers not of their same race, suggesting that more than race matching can contribute to student achievement.

While all of these factors may be true at once, there is still significant evidence that race-matching in the classroom does benefit minority students. Both of those studies looked at

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academic pursuits, when other research suggests student attendance rises and frequency of discipline goes down in students who are instructed by teachers with whom they can identify culturally. This furthered the idea that representation empowers students by affirming their identities and instilling confidence in their abilities. These students are then more likely to believe in their own potential and pursue their academic goals. The dissertation from Minus-Vincent (2022,) “The Impact of Teacher and Student Racial and Ethnic Matching on Student Outcomes” supports this idea and the implication that more minority teachers are needed in the classroom. Minus-Vincent (2022,) looked beyond academic achievement as a lynchpin of student achievement, examining the connection between the percentage of Black teachers and Black students by measuring student growth and absenteeism in New Jersey schools.

Yes, this is a focused sample, but it presented a snapshot of an urban demographic as the Project STAR looked at a more rural area, providing a more diverse sample population. It also played a part in what recommendations can be made to address the issue from different perspectives. While the national data gives us a bigger picture of the success of race-matching in the classroom, approaches to driving diversity and retention of minority teachers requires a geographical approach. Studying urban demographics in comparison to rural areas offers a fascinating lens into the dynamics of human settlement patterns, societal structures, and resource distribution which plays a part in how local governments are able to address education standards and resources in a sustainable way.

Using a quantitative research method, Minus-Vincent (2022) used a regression analysis to predict the relationship between independent variables of student/teacher race matching

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and the dependent variable of chronic absenteeism. Regression analysis is a way of mathematically sorting out which of those variables does indeed have an impact, answering the questions such as: Which factors matter most? And how do those factors interact with one another? (Gallo, 2022). Minus-Vincent (2022,) found race matching could predict a reduction in chronic absenteeism in black students. Race matching was also found to be an indicator of improved Black student graduation rates where all variables were included. Schoolwide data were used to create a race matching variable, which served as the main independent variable, using a sample of 2,510 schools (Minus-Vincent, 2022). Although student achievement does refer to the extent to which a student has attained their short or long-term educational goals, students' levels of self-efficacy, self-control and motivation also impact levels of achievement (Top Hat, 2019). This all supports a broader conversation for the need to recruit and retain minority teachers as a means to holistically support minority student achievement. Success is not only measured in the academic achievement, but in the personal growth and social adjustment of students, as well, which may lend itself to ideas around minority students benefiting from not only same-race teachers, but same race and gender, as well.

As in the data collected by Yarnell and Bornshedt (2017), which examined national reading assessments of black fourth graders when paired with male and female same-race teachers. Using a multilevel structural model, their study sampled 165,410 students, taught by 23,710 teachers in 7,130 schools. Utilizing data from the 2013 NAEP Grade 4 Reading Assessment and the 2012–2013 NCES Common Core of Data Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Study (CCD,) this data measured demographic variables such as race, gender,

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and economic status against the NEAP's values of reading achievement. Teacher variables included race and experience. Effects suggested the match of black male students with black teachers and of black female students with black or Hispanic teachers were associated with higher reading levels (Yarnell & Bornshedt, 2017). According to these results, the positive association of racial match with achievement among Black students suggested by prior research, suggested that both student and classroom level processes may be involved, and showed unique associations for Black male and Black female students and various classroom contexts. This highlighted gender as a contributing factor in same race student/teacher matching and informs recommendations on school systems prioritizing recruiting one gender over another according to their population, as differences in gender suggest matching for black males over females.

Findings

All of the data comes together to ask what defines achievement in students and what factors contribute to that as far as teacher demographics. Some elements these studies do not discuss are teacher quality, classroom environment, teacher expectations, and teacher bias which all play a part in how a teacher connects to and is able to successfully instruct students. All of these contributing factors are not synonymous with race or gender. Without a closer look at such variables as these data supporting race matching in the classroom cannot be absolutely supported as the absolute answer to the problem of closing the minority achievement gap. Although there is enough evidence to support that race matching makes a difference and prioritizing hiring and retaining minority teachers is necessary. Various studies confirm the troubling racial dynamics found in past research: Black students evaluated by white teachers

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often receive more negative ratings than white students evaluated by white teachers, controlling for racial differences in students' test scores, family socioeconomic status, and a range of school characteristics (McGrady & Reynolds, 2012).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This study addressed the problem of the lack of cultural representation for students of color in classroom environments and what effects that may have on the long-term success or engagement of minority children. Through secondary research analysis, a case was made for the need for increased recruitment of minority educators even if the gains in closing the achievement gap between races seemed minimal. Minority teachers not only are likely to be well suited to teach minority students, this view holds, but they are also likely to be motivated by a “humanistic commitment” to making a difference in the lives of disadvantaged students (Ingersoll et al., 2011). Recruiting and retaining a more diverse population in communities with high minority demographics lends itself to increased opportunities for minority student success and increased engagement in learning.

The process of selecting viable studies to review for the data portion presented the most challenges. This research tried to include studies which looked at the problem from various angles in order to eliminate bias and provide multiple viewpoints. The studies ranged from state to national studies, spanning 3- 4 years, and looked at answering the question of the effect of same race student/teacher relationships on student achievement through study academic, behavioral, and engagement trends of black and brown students paired with male and female minority teachers.

Although some gaps existed, the data pointing to the disproportionate percentage of Caucasian educators as supposed to minority educators and the widening gap between minority student achievement, this study recommends academic recruitment and retention policies focus on increasing the minority teacher pipeline and incentives for current minority teachers. These results complemented mounting evidence that same-race teachers are beneficial to underrepresented

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minority students on a number of contemporaneous dimensions, such as test scores, attendance, course grades, disciplinary outcomes, and expectations in a variety of educational settings (Dee, 2004, 2005; Fairlie et al., 2014; Gershenson et al., 2016; Lindsay and Hart, 2017; Holt and Gershenson, 2019).

Recommendations

Future research connected to hiring for cultural representation could explore several areas to expand knowledge and thinking around the topic. For example, some studies may want to explore the level of impact where non-minority teams implement culturally responsive programs and curriculums to see if it is what is taught rather than who is teaching it which is most impactful. Coined by researcher Geneva Gay in 2000, culturally responsive teaching means using students' customs, characteristics, experience, and perspectives as tools for better classroom instruction (Najarro, 2023) Guided by Gay, Najarro (2023) maintains using lived experiences and frames of reference as context for academic knowledge, students will see certain concepts as more personally meaningful, appealing, and easily learned.

Researchers broadened the scope of the topic past race-matching to the full definition of cultural identity which can include religion, sexual orientation, and disability status as it pertains to student learning, which was not covered in any of the data. Culturally responsive teaching should look beyond racial identity and consider the other aspects of culture children and youth carry with them, including age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and the geographic location of their home (*Culturally Responsive Teaching in Practice | Virtual Lab School, n.d.*). A study into how same-race students still require diversity in curriculum and instruction would be important to teachers, leaders who

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develop programs, affect legislation regarding what is taught in schools, as well as non-profit leaders who develop and implement community facing programming for youth.

There can also be studies conducted on the implications of teachers and mentors of color in relation to the achievement of Caucasian students. If this research supports creating multicultural teams in academic and non-profit organizations, the percentage of teachers and mentors of color instructing and advising Caucasian students may increase, as a result. It's important to note that while culturally responsive teaching is meant to make learning more relevant and effective for ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2018), all children benefit from culturally responsive teaching. It is also important to remember that all White children do not have the same ethnic background or experiences (*Culturally Responsive Teaching in Practice | Virtual Lab School*, n.d.). By expanding into these possible perspectives, researchers can increase knowledge around promoting prioritizing cultural representation in hiring processes to create a truly diverse academic and nonprofit workforce, while creating a sense of community and belonging for minority students.

Policy Implications

In a report prepared by the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, Torres et al. (2004) identifies effective programs and practices towards minority teacher recruitment, retention, and development. Aptly named *Minority Teacher Recruitment, Development, and Retention*, the study recommends offering teaching related clubs, career awareness activities and visits to college campuses with education programs, created specifically for minorities.

The data shared in this study wholeheartedly supports the need for more minority teachers. Even if some data shows only a marginal gain for minorities in closing the achievement gap, some progress is

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better than none. If focused recruitment of minority students into the teaching pipeline and retention of existing minority teachers is the pathway then policy makers should be encouraged to respond. Creating strong marketing campaigns and financial incentives may be a way forward, as well.

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