

How the Role of a Teacher is more Important than We Realize in The United State's Unequal Education System

By
Liliana Birrell

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Diploma
in the
Global Studies Program

Watkinson School
January 27, 2022

Introduction

Out of all the factors that contribute to improving education throughout minority communities, the role of a teacher is more significant than recognized. A teacher's attitude, classroom environment, qualifications, and ability to believe in their students all play a pivotal role in students' long-term success. At a young age, students look for role models and teachers are often figures that students can look up to. Within predominantly minority schools, the role of a teacher has more significance than believed, and teachers should make it their goal to show that they believe in their students, support them and help them succeed.

Issues with America's Unequal Education System

The United States has created an unequal education system. Minority students receive significantly different educations due to their assumed social status. People tend to forget that up until the 1960's African-American, Latino, and Native Americans were segregated into schools that received significantly less funding compared to the white schools. There has been progress from the 1960s to the 1990s in which the National Assessment of Education Progress was able to conclude that the gap between test scores from minority students and white ones had decreased. Even though there has been progress over the years, this is still a major problem today. In the US, two-thirds of minority students attend predominantly minority schools, that are located in cities. These schools receive insufficient funding impacting their students' education. States such as New Jersey, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas concluded schools that hold more minority students have fewer resources than ones that do not. Within poorer schools, students receive lower-quality books, computers, a lack of materials, larger class sizes, and unqualified teachers. It has been shown that there are four aspects of a student's education that can help them succeed. Students have a higher chance of succeeding if they have smaller class sizes, a smaller school

environment where teachers can get to know their students, a challenging curriculum, and qualified teachers. It is clear that minority students do not receive the fundamental education they deserve and need as they are no different than any white student. Schools that hold a large number of minority students, tend to have a larger student body. There are thousands of students in these schools which makes the class sizes 15% larger and 80% larger for classes that are not non-special. UCLA professor Jeannie Oaks and Gary Orfield's research has proven that "most minority students are segregated in lower-track classes with larger class sizes, less qualified teachers, and lower-quality curriculum."¹

Teachers and their Qualifications

In the US today, the qualifications a person must meet to become a teacher have become more loose over the years in states such as Arizona, California, and Kansas. Unfortunately, this impacts minority students more than others. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future concluded that 25% of teachers that are hired do not meet the qualifications, and those teachers are placed into lower-income schools. In comparison, the teachers that meet the qualifications or exceed beyond them are hired in the wealthier school systems.² In school systems with primarily minority students are 50% less likely to have a teacher who has a degree in math or science. For example in 1994, in high-poverty schools, one-third of the teachers' did not have a minor in their field.³ It has also been shown that teachers who are unprepared to

¹ Darling-Hammond, Linda. "Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education." *The Brookings Institution*, 1 March 1998.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unequal-opportunity-race-and-education/>. Accessed 15 November 2021.

² García, Emma and Elaine Weiss. "U.S. schools struggle to hire and retain teachers." *Economic Policy Institute*, 16 April 2019.

<https://www.epi.org/publication/u-s-schools-struggle-to-hire-and-retain-teachers-the-second-report-in-the-perfect-storm-in-the-teacher-labor-market-series/>. Accessed 12 November 2021.

³ Darling-Hammond, 1.

teacher's have less of an impact on their students and struggle with classroom management, motivation, and the curriculum. This impacts the teacher's ability to connect with their students and causes teachers to struggle when it comes to connecting with their students' learning styles, potential, and needs. Studies have shown that "curriculum quality" and the skills of the teacher make a difference rather than racial backgrounds and test scores. As this is a significant problem in the country today, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future presented an outline of policies to enforce "caring, competent, and qualified teachers for every child." Since then, twelve states have already begun to put it into action.⁴

How to Help Students Feel Welcomed in the Classroom K-8

Within a classroom, a teacher must work to show that they are interested in their students and respect them as individuals. Small things like knowing how to properly pronounce students' names is important. Pronouncing names can be an innocent and easy mistake to make, but actually putting in the extra effort to correctly pronounce a student's name shows that their teacher cares. One of the many factors that play a role in students' education is what they see every day when they walk into their classroom. Teachers should be making sure that the posters, pictures, books, and decorations that they present on their walls, should be inclusive and represent a wide range of races, religions, and heritages. Even having a map in your classroom can allow students to share where they are from and feel as though they are welcomed in the classroom environment.⁵ These may seem like small and insignificant things to do, but in reality, they do make an impact on the students in years to come. It is important to keep in mind that minority students can feel as though they need to detach from their culture in order to fit in with

⁴ Darling-Hammond, 1

⁵ Watts, Ralinda. "5 Strategies to Help Black Students Feel at Home in School." *Edutopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation, 11 June 2021, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/5-strategies-help-black-students-feel-home-school>. Accessed 12 November 2021.

their peers. If this occurs, it can impact the student's relationship with the school and cause problems when it comes to social and emotional growth which can impact a student's motivation to learn and their performance in the classroom.⁶ Shanna Peeples, who was named 2015 National Teacher of the Year says that "One of the most damaging things that white teachers can say is that they don't see color in their classrooms," this erases the experiences of students. She talks about how she learned that she has privileges she did not know she had. This situation is a complicated one and he says that the difference in black and white students' graduation rates clearly shows us there is a significant problem.⁷

The Belief Gap

The belief gap is "the gap between what students can achieve and what others believe they can achieve. Undermatching, implicit bias, and talent all play a role in the belief gap that affects students. For example, a common undermatching issue is when students are smart enough to attend college but students do not even apply because they are not aware of the resources and options they have in order to further their education. In America's educational system, today teachers that are white are less likely to see students of color as "college material." Teachers rely on negative stories that represent the Black experience which can be seen as an implicit bias which over the years, can impact a student greatly.⁸ One important aspect a teacher should have in order to be a productive teacher is that they should actually believe in their students. This is a significant issue when it comes to minority school systems. Less educated and qualified teachers get hired by lower-income schools, and this places unfit and unmotivated teachers with students who have great potential. At a young age, the motivation a teacher presents day to day helps

⁶ Watts, Ralinda, 1.

⁷ Cunningham, Sylvia, Study: White Teachers More Likely to Doubt Prospects of Black Students (NBCnew),¹

⁸ Education Post. "What Is the Belief Gap." *Education Post*, <https://educationpost.org/conversation/blog/the-belief-gap/>. Accessed 10 November 2021.

encourage and motivate students. When a teacher demonstrates the fact that they believe in their student it makes a difference in a student's entire education. Nicholas Papageorge was a new teacher at Washington Heights in New York, and he is a member of Teach for America Corps. Papageorge has created a study based on what he had learned in his early stages of becoming a teacher called, *Who Believes in Me? The Effect of Student Teacher Demographic Match on Teacher Expectations*. Papageorge and his team evaluated data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 which focused on 8,400 public school students in grade 10. White and Black teachers evaluated students based on their opinion of what level of education they would receive. The American Educational Research Association, Seth Gershenson, Stephen B. Holt, and Johns Hopkins University study all played an important role in Nicholas Papageorge's research. Papageorge's research showed that white teachers are 40% less likely than Black teachers to believe that one student will graduate with a diploma and white teachers are 30% less likely to believe that their students of color will finish a four-year degree.⁹

Education in Hartford

As discussed, the challenges and setbacks minorities face in the education system in America, impact the student greatly and have long-term effects on their futures. There are many organizations that target minority students to encourage them to continue education and help them succeed. In Hartford Connecticut, there is an organization called Our Piece of the Pie which targets some of the common setbacks seen within minority communities. They have been helping the community since 1975, and they provide several services. Our Piece of the Pie goal is to help

⁹ Cunningham, Sylvia. "Study: White Teachers More Likely to Doubt Prospects of Black Students." *NBC*, 31 March 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/study-white-teachers-more-likely-doubt-prospects-black-students-n548256>. Accessed 1 December 2021.

students obtain a college degree or help people become employed for over a year. They believe they have succeeded once the person becomes economically independent.¹⁰

There are many reasons why minority students struggle. Many daily struggles include homelessness, lack of food, gang violence, and other “urban issues” work against the motivation to go to school and do not allow them to fully engage in the classroom. Historically, minorities have been told they can not succeed and that they are not worthy of an education. This poses a significant problem in the education system today because teachers feel comfortable enough to voice their opinions about their student’s success rate. In some cases, students look up to teachers as role models, people they can trust, and people who believe in them. If a parent does not play a role in a child’s life, they look for other close adults to confide in. When teachers do not react in a positive way they threaten a child’s potential and mental health. Our Piece of the Pie is targeting students who are struggling in school and work, to re-engage their students, set goals, and strategies to achieve those goals. In the last two years, Our Piece of the Pie has helped support their students to achieve their goals, which they might not have been able to do without the help of this organization. Within these programs, each youth is paired with an adult who takes the role of their mentor. These mentors help create connections and support them as they graduate highschool, postsecondary credential or find employment. In the last two years, 246 students have received a high school diploma, 674 youth have enrolled in one of the three OPP high schools, 323 youth have demonstrated career competencies through their Career Competency Development Training, 285 youth have received a postsecondary degree and 162

¹⁰ Kars4Kids. “Our Piece of the Pie: Helping Hartford Youth Succeed.” *Kars4Kids*, [https://www.kars4kidsgrants.org/our-grantees/our-piece-of-the-pie-helping-hartford-youth-succeed/#:~:text=Our%20Piece%20of%20the%20Pie,Youth%20Succeed%20%2D%20Kars4Kids%20Small%20Grants&text=Our%20Piece%20of%20the%20Pie%20\(OPP\)%20is%20mentoring%20inner%20city,break%20the%20cycle%20of%20poverty](https://www.kars4kidsgrants.org/our-grantees/our-piece-of-the-pie-helping-hartford-youth-succeed/#:~:text=Our%20Piece%20of%20the%20Pie,Youth%20Succeed%20%2D%20Kars4Kids%20Small%20Grants&text=Our%20Piece%20of%20the%20Pie%20(OPP)%20is%20mentoring%20inner%20city,break%20the%20cycle%20of%20poverty). Accessed 25 November 2021.

youth have maintained employment for one year. Our Piece of the Pie is a reliable program to confide in, in times of need and has already done so much for their surrounding community.¹¹

Conclusion

The role of a teacher plays a more significant role throughout the minority community than realized. A teacher's attitude, classroom environment, qualifications, and ability to believe in their students all play a pivotal role in students' long-term success. In America's unequal education system, minority students face the greatest setbacks which start from as early as kindergarten and into their adult lives. A teacher's role in a student's education plays a more significant role than recognized. It is important that teachers believe and support their students to the best of their ability. Whether it's the belief gap, lack of funding, old school supplies, and most importantly unqualified teachers, minority students are more susceptible to receiving a poor education and insufficient amounts of support. Fortunately, there are people who work hard to create supportive organizations to support and help students succeed. Our Piece of the Pie is a clear example of an organization that has helped students succeed and they work hard to influence the community around them. Minority students have historically been categorized as people who could not succeed and face discrimination to this day. Teachers have the ability to transform a student's life by showing they believe in them, and this helps students stay motivated throughout their entire education.

¹¹ Kars4Kids, 1.

