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BOOK REVIEW

Teacher Diversity and Student Success: Why Racial Representation Matters in the Classroom

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Authors: Seth Gershenson, Michael Hansen, Constance A. Lindsay

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Teacher Diversity and Student Success: Why Racial Representation Matters in the Classroom presents an interdisciplinary approach to a longstanding problem: lack of racial diversity in the teaching workforce. Combining their expertise in public policy and educational leadership, Seth Gershenson, Michael Hansen, and Constance A. Lindsay assert that teacher diversity needs to be considered when evaluating teacher quality. They build a case for increasing student exposures to teachers of color because these lead to short- and long-term cognitive, affective, and social benefits for all students, particularly when students of color have a teacher of their same race. The authors offer a “policy roadmap” to maximize same race teacher-student matches. In many ways, Catholic schools are well-suited to meet the challenges of engaging families of color. As a white

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professor in teacher education with two mixed-raced daughters, I believe the premise that race matters as an indicator of quality teaching is laudable; yet, the authors fall short in providing clear pathways toward achieving the goals of increasing diversity in the teacher workforce.

This book presents compelling cross-disciplinary evidence that demonstrates the benefits of teacher diversity on student outcomes. The research presented extends beyond the typical focus on standardized test scores to include attendance, discipline, graduation rates, and college enrollment, as described in chapters one and two. The authors highlight how same-raced teachers can build trusting relationships with students and families. They also hold and encourage students to attain higher expectations. Chapters three and four carefully detail the history that has led to the lack of diversity in teaching, including institutionalized racism in public schools that has resulted in segregated schools, both in terms of students and teachers. White normativity is dominant in teacher education programs, even those that espouse to prepare educators for social justice. Once in the field, teachers of color are more likely to stay at schools that serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds but are also more likely to leave the profession entirely, citing school climate factors.

In making their argument about how race matters, the authors correctly identify that there is not a robust definition or adequate way to determine teacher quality. This is a challenge that must be addressed; unfortunately, readers are left with little guidance on how this should be measured beyond using race as one key consideration. For example, they dismiss teacher preparation, asserting that credentials, graduate degrees, or majors in education “are only weakly associated with actual teacher effectiveness, if at all” (p. 38). No attention is given to how to ensure teachers have mastered the content, pedagogical content knowledge, and culturally responsive teaching that leads to effective practice and increased self-efficacy that can improve retention (e.g., [Zee & Koomen, 2016](#)). Further, the book focuses on Black and Latino teachers without any acknowledgment of intersectionality or evidence on how same-raced teacher-student matches impact students of other races, particularly Asian students where Asians are often deemed the “model minority” due to their perceived academic and economic successes. Race matters, but the authors fail to address these types of complexities that can lead to greater educational equity (e.g., [Crenshaw et al., 2015](#); [Grant & Zwier, 2011](#); [Yu, 2007](#)).

To combat the lack of diversity in teaching, the authors emphasize that there are no silver bullets; rather, fixing this problem requires long-term investment that is well worth the price. They suggest three broad approaches in chapters five and six: promoting diversity in teaching, reallocating current Black and Latino teachers within and across schools to maximize same-race teacher-student matches, and training teachers in culturally responsive pedagogies. Policies that promote diversity include “removing racialized barriers” like licensure requirements, creating career ladders for paraeducators to become teachers, and using teacher residency and grow-your-own

programs to attract and support diverse educators. These alternative programs have been in place for decades (e.g., [Sleeter & Thao, 2007](#)). They certainly have moved the needle, but it would have been nice to see the authors discuss ways to identify and scale up effective programs.

To increase exposures to same-raced teachers, the authors advocate for transferring teachers of color to schools with mostly white staff and to strategically place teachers and students within schools to ensure each child has exposure to teachers of color, which could amount to teachers of color being assigned “a few extra kids” and serving as guest teachers in other classrooms (p. 137). Transferring teachers of color displaces them from communities where their talents might be more readily acknowledged. This along with additional teaching loads could lead to increased attrition rates that are already high for teachers of color. The transferring of teachers assumes that the receiving schools would welcome teachers of color and provide a supportive environment. It also robs students at schools where the majority are from disadvantaged backgrounds from teachers who tend to persist in those settings. Perhaps most importantly, it continues to place the burden of dismantling white supremacy on people of color.

The authors acknowledge that white teachers need training, particularly around culturally responsive approaches, and need experiential learning opportunities in diverse settings to increase white teacher resiliency. These could be critical to supporting all students. Unfortunately, the authors do not provide a robust description of how to train teachers in culturally responsive approaches, particularly in the wake of legislation that is hostile toward these types of efforts. They highlight research that indicates that teachers are more likely to stay in settings similar to their student teaching placements and thus advocate for white teacher candidates to be placed in schools serving diverse communities. Research also demonstrates, however, that teachers want to teach in schools similar to the ones they attended, which are most often majority white (e.g., [Boyd et al., 2005](#); [Killeen et al., 2015](#)). Teacher preparation programs often place students in settings to challenge their assumptions, but this does not always disrupt their already-formed preferences, particularly given structural racism in teacher preparation and school settings (e.g., [Chang & Viesca, 2022](#)).

The authors build a strong case for increasing teacher diversity, which is a challenge all schools must address, including Catholic schools. The policy roadmap the authors suggest is incomplete and amounts to tinkering when what is needed is a whole new approach to schooling. The system of public schools was created to get the results that we are getting: stark achievement gaps by race. While diversifying the teacher workforce is critically important, it is going to take more than the hiring of racially diverse teachers to achieve different results. Catholic schools, with their legacy of culturally responsive approaches to education (e.g., [O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009](#)), could offer insight on how to engage families from diverse backgrounds. For example, the Two-Way Immersion Network for Catholic Schools at Boston College supports efforts of member schools that emphasize students’ bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate development. Programs in the University Consortium

for Catholic Education, where candidates get housing and fill teaching positions while earning their masters' degrees, might be another solution. Despite these promising programs and history, Catholic schools have largely failed to serve Black and Hispanic communities (e.g., [Irvine & Foster, 1996](#); [Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022](#)). The majority of teachers in Catholic schools are white. With their flexibility in licensure requirements, Catholic schools could utilize inventive solutions that recruit diverse candidates while ensuring they have the skills and knowledge that set them up for success. The question is whether they are up for the challenge and documenting successful approaches.

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