Study: Class Getting-to-Know-You Exercise Can Help Close Achievement Gaps

By Madeline Will on August 5, 2016 1:03 PM

When teachers know what they have in common with their students of other races, they are more likely to have positive relationships with them, which can close the achievement gap, a new study finds.

The study, called "Creating Birds of a Feather: The Potential of Similarity to Connect Teachers and Students," was published this week by the American Enterprise Institute. In it, Hunter Gehlbach, an associate education professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Carly Robinson, a doctoral student at Harvard University, explore possible solutions to the teacher-student diversity gap.

About 82 percent of public school teachers are white, while just under half of public school students are white. "These racial mismatches between teachers and students can trigger problems of cross-cultural misunderstanding," the researchers wrote.

Since increasing teacher diversity is a long, difficult road, the researchers developed an intervention that focused on individual relationships between teachers and students.

The study included 25 teachers and their collective 315 students. Researchers administered a "get-to-know-you" survey to everyone, with about 30 questions on personal characteristics, values, and learning preferences. The researchers found five things each student had in common with their teacher—which could range from favorite sport to what type of learning they enjoy outside the classroom—and then split the students into four groups.

In the control group, neither students nor teachers received feedback. In the second group, only students were told about the five commonalities they shared with their teachers; in the third group, only the teachers were told; and in the fourth group, both students and teachers were told.

Six weeks later, the researchers administered a follow-up survey to measure the perceptions of similarity and relationships from both parties' perspectives. They also had access to the students' grades.

While there was no meaningful difference in the findings for white or Asian students, the findings were significant in connection with teachers' relationships with their black and Latino students. When teachers learned they had things in common with those students, they rated their relationships with the students more positively and those students achieved higher grades in that teacher's class. (Students' perception of their relationships with their teacher didn't change based on if they knew they had things in common.)

In fact, black and Latino students' course grades improved significantly, closing the usual racial gap in grades by about 65 percent. (See below graph—the blue bar represents the black and Latino students whose teachers did not receive a list of commonalities, the green bar represents the black and Latino students whose teachers did receive that list, and the white bar represents all white and Asian students, since there was no meaningful difference.)

![Graph showing closing of achievement gap](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2016/08/similarities_teachers_students.html?qs=closing+achievement+gap&print=1)
The difference between the blue and white bars represents the typical achievement gap at the school, and the green bar shows how much the intervention closed the gap, the researchers said, adding that they were cautiously enthusiastic about these findings. The intervention could be scaled cheaply and easily—data analytics company Panorama Education developed a free version of the get-to-know-you survey. (Gehlbach, one of the report’s authors, is the director of research at Panorama Education.)

That survey asks students questions about what their learning goals and expectations for their teachers, but it also asks questions like, "Have you ever played an instrument?" "Do you have a friend or family member who is in the military?" "What type of TV shows do you prefer to watch?"

The researchers say that they are currently trying two replications of this study to strengthen the intervention (which could include choosing better similarities to present to teachers or delivering reminders) and are seeking funding to pursue additional work.

"Given how little this intervention costs, how little time it takes, how large the initial effects were, and how easily it might be scaled with a web application, we are optimistic that it offers a promising practice for teachers and their students," they wrote. "Although a more diverse teaching force seems years away, similarity between teachers and students might be leveraged to improve student outcomes in education now."

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