

“The Role Model Effect:”

Investing in At-Risk Native Youth and Diversifying Educator Demographics

Native students, including many at-risk of educational failure, will benefit from an educator solely focused on their needs as they embark on a new high school model. Moreover, Native students will benefit from having an educator exclusively focused on their needs and who reflects their ethnic and cultural background. Teacher and educator diversity matters and has been shown to impact student learning, motivation, achievement, and college aspirations (Egalite & Kisida, 2017; Boisrond, 2017; Gershenson et al., 2017; Kamenetz, 2017; LPI, 2018; Texas A&M International University, 2019; Rix, 2021).

According to NPR writer Boisrond, “if your teacher looks like you, you may do better in school (2017, paragraph 1).” Researchers Anna J. Egalite and Brian Kisida (2017) reported after surveying six US school districts (including more than 80,000 public school students in grades four through eight) that data showed that “students assigned to a teacher with similar demographic characteristics experience positive benefits in terms of academic perceptions and attitudes (2017, p. 59).” More specifically, the study claims that students reported that they experienced better quality learner-teacher communication, felt more cared for and happier in school, were motivated and put in more personal effort towards academics, and aspired to attend college after having had an instructor who reflected them demographically. The most consistent benefits reports were when a student-educator matched gender and racial/ethnic demographics and when students viewed teachers as role models (2017).

Growing research connects educator demographics and having a “same-race teacher” to minority student success; in fact, NPR education correspondent Anya Kamenetz claims that role models are essential; arguing that even “having just one black teacher can keep black kids in school (2017).” Kamenetz cites a study (by Gershenson, Lindsay, Hart, and Papageorge) that five showed having one black teacher in elementary school reduced low-income black male probability “of dropping out of high school by 39 percent,” adding that those students, both female and male, who had had at least one African American educator (several years prior) then reported as high-school-students “stronger expectations of going to college (2017, paragraph 3).”

The cited research looked at the impact and “causal effect of exposure to a same-race teacher” after collecting data from North Carolina and Tennessee and publishing their findings in the IZA Institute of Labor Economics, claiming that “black primary-school students matched to a same-race teacher perform better on standardized tests and face more favorable teacher perceptions (2017, pgs. 1 and 30-31).” The research findings include a discussion of the study and what it shows about “role model effects.” According to Gershenson et al., some mechanisms of why this is occurring remain elusive, yet it does support the claim that investing in “same race, educated role models” may encourage minority at-risk low-income youth to better invest in themselves because of improved motivation and attitudes (2017, p. 5). Furthermore, the “role model effects” are “especially important for the most at-risk students. (2017, p. 16).”

More k-12 school districts recognize the importance and benefits of having teacher and educator demographics that reflect their student populations. For some schools, this is causing an additional challenge, as evident from the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) report entitled, “Teachers of Color: In High Demand and Short Supply” (2018). LPI claims that research shows teachers of color help close achievement gaps for students of color and students from low-income families and are highly rated by students of all races. According to LPI, “teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color,” and “they have been linked to improving reading and math test scores, improved graduation rates, and increases in aspirations to attend college (2018, paragraph 6).” Therefore, districts and programs seek to increase teacher diversity and hire educators that reflect their student populations. Connected to the high demand for diverse educators is an effort to encourage Native American students to become educators while concurrently fostering a more diverse educator workforce.

Recognizing the importance of investing in Native youth, a central objective is to increase Native American advisor, counselor, and teacher positions across the country. This main objective is supported by research; as one author from the aforementioned study argues, “having one teacher” that reflected the student population “made all the difference to students; having two or three didn’t increase the effect significantly.” To respond to the challenge of teacher shortages, Papageorge recommends hiring more diverse teachers and immediately benefitting students by modifying student groupings so that every student works with at least one same-race teacher (Kamenetz, paragraphs 14-15).

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