

I prepare aspiring teachers to educate kids of color – here’s how I help them root out their own biases

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I’m a professor who has spent the last 10 years [preparing new teachers to enter the workforce](#). I also study how race, culture and power influence education and childhood development at a time when more than half of the roughly 50 million children who attend U.S. public schools [are nonwhite](#), unlike most of their teachers. About four in five public school teachers [are white](#), according to the latest official data.

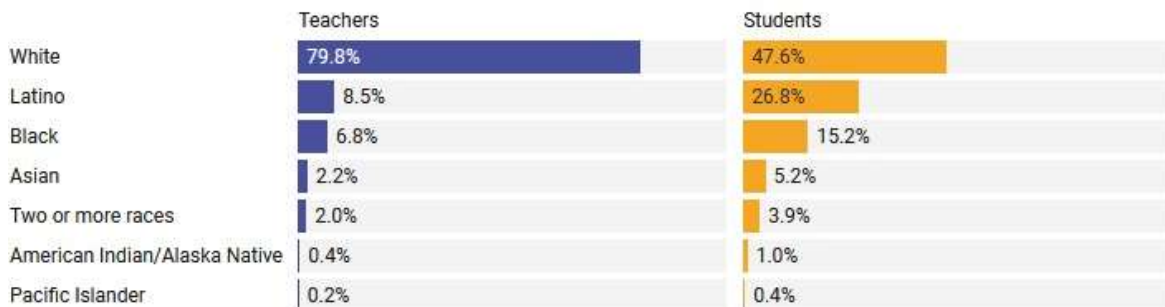
This underrepresentation is especially acute for [Black male teachers](#). While one in four teachers are men, merely 2% are Black men.

Research indicates that students of color benefit from [being taught by people who look like them](#).

One of these benefits is that students of color experience a more [positive sense of their own ethnic and racial identities](#). I think it’s essential today that all K-12 teachers develop the cultural awareness, empathy and [anti-racist disposition](#) to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds.

Fewer than half of US public school students are white

In 2017, nearly 4 in 5 U.S. public school teachers was white – while fewer than half of their students were. Latinos were 8.5% of teachers and 26.8% of students. Blacks were 6.8% of teachers and 15.2% of students.



Data are for 2017, the most recent year available. Source: [U.S. Department of Education](#).

A lack of familiarity

By and large, the aspiring teachers in my classes are white people who plan to teach in [urban schools where children of color](#) are in the majority. And based on what my colleagues and I routinely witness, they tend to possess little to no experience with or cultural knowledge of people who aren’t white.

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Many of [my students describe themselves as colorblind](#). This is the idea and practice that ignoring or overlooking racial and ethnic differences somehow makes one not racist. Those who practice colorblindness tend to feel that racial harmony can occur if they pretend to not see or acknowledge what makes us different from one another.

However, researchers have found that racial colorblindness can [actually function as a form of racism](#).

My own experience points to one reason why this occurs. I often perceive that these same students harbor [racial biases](#) and negative cultural assumptions about people of color – particularly Black people and Latinos.

Likewise, I find that most of these white students possess little to no understanding of [their own racial and ethnic identities](#). Also, I often observe that they aren't familiar with even basic aspects of U.S. history such as the contributions and experiences of Native Americans and African Americans.

But because these aspiring teachers live in a multicultural nation, I believe that it is more important than ever for them to acquire a serious understanding of racism and this nation's rich multicultural history. I also think they will become better teachers if they leverage that understanding and work to [become anti-racist](#).

I define anti-racism as the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by transforming systems, structures, policies, practices and attitudes. The goal of anti-racism is a more equitable redistribution and sharing of power.

Key findings in education research indicate that effective teachers are those who have [experienced deep learning about racism, bias and cultural diversity](#). Among white students, their perspectives on race and culture may be enhanced through [authentic experiences in ethnically diverse settings](#). Other studies have shown how white students benefit by intentionally [confronting difficult subjects such as inequity and anti-racism](#).

One of the ways that I help to broaden students' understanding is by incorporating historical content into class assignments. I also introduce content that introduces students to the history and life experiences of diverse cultures. Also, I provide opportunities for students to interact with other cultures through literature, film and music.

For example, in addition to learning about the [Brown v. Board of Education](#) Supreme Court ruling, students also learn about both its [intended benefits and some of its negative outcomes](#) – such as the more than 38,000 Black teachers and administrators who lost their jobs.

This focus on historical contexts, inequity and cultural diversity is quite common – [especially in urban teacher education programs](#). My goal is to challenge students to think more deeply about themselves, about others and about the diversity of the children they may one day teach.

These are, in my view, necessary steps to developing teachers who are more reflective, thoughtful and culturally informed.

Consequences of bias

Many studies have illustrated the dangers of racial bias among teachers, such as [lower expectations for students of color](#) and [harsher discipline](#) for them. There's also evidence that racial bias can contribute to [higher dropout rates](#), [lower academic achievement and future incarceration](#).

In their investigation of racial bias and school discipline in K-12 settings, a team of Princeton University researchers examined federal data that covered 32 million Black and white students across 96,000 K-12 schools. They found that Black students experienced [higher rates of expulsion](#) and suspension. They were, in addition, more likely to be arrested in school and subjected to law enforcement interventions than white students.

The researchers found that 13.5% of Black students received out-of-school suspensions, as opposed to only 3.5% of their white classmates. Their findings indicated that racial bias fuels disparities in school discipline, as have similar studies.

Centering equity in education

In my classes, students learn about and discuss student differences besides race and ethnicity, such as gender, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, primary language, religious beliefs and residence. They also develop skills that allow them to reflect on their own backgrounds and to understand how their personal history shapes their perspectives.

The students learn that actively embracing diversity and working toward equity are core qualities of professional educators.

What teachers understand about bias must go beyond mere knowledge of subject matter and instructional strategies. They also need to learn ways to honor and respect the history and heritage of all their students, a discipline known as "[teaching for equity](#)."

Equity-focused teacher educators are versed in [ethnic studies](#), as well as history, power and privilege.

Research shows that students benefit academically when their teachers possess cultural awareness, have [high expectations](#) for all their students and [believe that all their students have the potential](#) to learn and succeed regardless of their personal backgrounds.

However, to get there, teachers must first transform themselves.