

Chapter 30

Creating a Sense of Belonging for Black American Students

Michelle R. Cox

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2083-3582>

Azusa Pacific University, USA

ABSTRACT

The academic achievement of Black American students can be positively impacted by the educational supports that they receive by educators in school. Black students continue to experience systemic barriers to school, such as harsher school discipline, being at risk of being raised in a single-parent household, and living in poverty, more than any other group. Therefore, it is crucial to inform teachers how to support their unique culmination of challenges. To support Black American students in school, teachers must provide a sense of belonging, which includes cultural competence, development of support systems, affirmations, and positive messages. This chapter presents obstacles for Black American students and strategies for teachers to create an educational environment in which Black American students feel a sense of belonging.

INTRODUCTION

Black American students suffer from a multitude of systemic barriers which continue to be experienced in spite of decades of literature shedding light on these disparities. There is a continued need for educators to support Black American students by recognizing the unique culmination of challenges that they endure, the negative impact of educator cultural biases in teaching, as well as the systemic barriers that impact the academic achievement of Black American students. These challenges to a thriving educational experience can be addressed by creating and sustaining a sense of belonging in schools for Black American students through the development of cultural competence of educators.

The purpose of this chapter is to reveal the value of cultural competence in creating a sense of belonging for Black American students. Literature teaches us, people thrive when they feel a sense of belonging to a group (Macoun & Miller, 2014; Mendoza, Suarez, & Bustamante, 2016; Stroope, 2011).

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All students should be expected to thrive in schools. However, nuances to learning for Black American children which are impacted by racism, oppression, and other systemic barriers that impact their sense of belonging, should be understood by educators. Students may not thrive in school if they do not feel they are valued, accepted and belong in school. A sense of belonging in school is evident when students feel valued and understood, leading to academic success and achievement (Ega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015; Tucker et al., 2010; Warren, 2014). To develop a sense of belonging for Black American students, educators should work toward developing cultural competence, which begins with self-awareness (D. W. Sue, Sue, Neville, & Smith, 2019). Increasing the cultural competency of educators about the Black experience in America and the self-identification of implicit or explicit biases may have a positive impact on the educational success of Black American students, creating an environment of belonging.

Black American students are those who are considered descendants of African slaves in America and who identify with the Black race, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The author intentionally refers to Black American students in this chapter to distinguish them from others who may identify as Black but have different experiences due to membership in a different ethnic group or nationality. The 2020 U.S. Census recognizes the subgroups of respondents who identify as Black or African American Black/African American. For example, respondents of the 2020 Census who identify as Black or African American will be asked to print their specific origin (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali; Census 2020, 2019). Those with ancestry in American slavery could experience multiple layers of discrimination, oppression, and racism due to their lineage to slavery.

Black Americans experience more discrimination, racism, and racial profiling than any other racial or ethnic group (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Nelson & Lind, 2015). For example, according to the National Institute of Justice (2013), Black people have longer stops and higher search rates in traffic stops than any other racial group. Black children have even been victims of microaggressions and discrimination through school policies from wearing their natural hair (Álvarez, 2019). These experiences of discrimination and microaggressions can cause hopelessness and frustration with Black American students who do not feel that they have equity in schools.

According to the United States Census (2018b), about 51% of students enrolled in U.S. schools were White in 2017. However, White teachers accounted for 80% of the teacher workforce in the 2015-2016 academic year compared to 20% of non-White teachers. Teachers are not representative of the diverse population of students in U.S. schools in which they are hired to teach. In fact, the percentage of minority teachers was highest (55%) in schools with 90% or more minority students in 2018 (de Brey et al, 2019), revealing either minority teachers prefer to work in high minority schools, or they are unable to gain employment in low minority schools. In comparison, in 2018 White teachers accounted for 98% of teachers with less than 10% minority students (de Brey et al., 2019) indicating that White teachers either preferred working at low minority schools or are unable to secure employment at high minority schools. Systemic oppression and racism may occur when White teachers holding negative perceptions or lack of understanding of Black children are responsible for teaching them (Joseph, Viesca, & Bianco, 2016; Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016). They may lack the cultural sensitivity and awareness to relate their Black American students. Cultural biases held by educators may be implicit or explicit. The overrepresentation of White teachers in schools can negatively impact the success of Black American students if teachers are unaware of their cultural biases in their teaching practices and classroom management. These cultural biases can create a hostile educational environment for Black American students which lead to feeling they do not belong.

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