



Integrating Racial Literacy in Teacher Assessment

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In all the efforts to boost students' academic performance and success, limited attention has been paid to a key barrier to progress—that teacher and student demographics do not match.

Nationwide, the student population is becoming more [racially, socioeconomically and linguistically diverse](#), but the majority of teachers still tend to be white, monolingual and middle class (NCES, 2021; Shanker Institute, 2015).

As research shows that students perform better, both academically and socially, when they have a teacher that is racially similar (Dee, 2005), the lack of a diverse workforce is hindering the growth and potential of a vast number of students.

However, while some school districts have strived to diversify their teacher workforce, there is a severe teacher shortage in the U.S. Put simply, it would take decades to recruit and train the teachers of color necessary to reflect the student body. Instead, to make more immediate progress, it is crucial to increase the racial literacy of existing teachers. Only then will they have the knowledge and resources they need to best engage with a rapidly diversifying student population.

Key Takeaways

- Teachers must be racially literate for themselves to support their students.
- To increase accountability for racial literacy, incorporate racial literacy in the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Rubric.
- There will be one standard for pre-service and in-service teachers to become racially literate.

The Needs of a Diverse Student Population

Data shows students have better outcomes when their teachers are racially similar. Students of color benefit from a shared racial understanding that can lead to stronger relationships between students and teachers which, in turn, cultivates an affirming environment in which students best learn. There tend to be fewer discipline issues, more connections to the content, and more recommendations of students of color for gifted education as compared to referrals for special education. The benefits are far-reaching, and can help combat the negative effects of experiences with racial discrimination in schools.

Knowing the advantages of increased diversity, many say to increase the number of teachers of color—yet that is not as simple as it may seem. Across the country, teachers are quitting the profession in alarming numbers, a trend that has only increased now that schools are re-opening and many districts are “returning to normal.” As noted by research and many vocal teachers, teachers are leaving because of lack of parental support, lack of respect from administrators and district leaders, school and classroom discipline issues, lack of preparedness for beginning teachers, [burnout](#), and the overwhelming oversight around what and how things are being taught. The numbers of teachers who are leaving are even worse for teachers of color. As a result, [school districts have high numbers of unfilled positions](#), and are struggling to recruit, train, and retain staff, and it would take decades to recruit a diverse teacher workforce. There is, however, an opportunity to meet the needs of students more quickly—by focusing on the racial literacy of all current teachers, and the resources and guidance they receive.

Racial Literacy and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Over the past 10 years, me and my colleagues’ research has demonstrated that teachers are having difficulty being culturally responsive. The gap we have discovered is that teachers still do not understand fully what race and racism is, and teachers cannot fully engage with students of different cultural backgrounds if they do not understand race and racism. Racial literacy, which is the knowledge, skills, and awareness needed to fully talk about race and racism, must come first if teachers are to address racism when it happens and build up young people to have a healthy racial self-identity (King, Vickery, & Caffrey, 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2018).

Racial literacy shows up in relationships, curriculum, school and classroom policies, and community engagement, and paves the way for culturally responsive teaching—a model that focuses on student learning and success, cultural competence, and building students’ critical consciousness so they can identify, analyze and solve real world problems that cause marginalization (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Culturally responsive teaching is not a checklist, or an entertainment or engagement strategy for low-motivated students. It is a way to affirm and support all students and requires a foundation of racial literacy to be made possible.

Solution: Criteria for Racial Literacy

Understanding race and racism and how it exists in our society allows teachers to see themselves as a part of the solution to our society’s issues. Giving teachers the knowledge and skills to build their own understanding of race and racism then allows them to see themselves as producers of education, and not consumers of education. Educators must be able to fully see the role they play in disrupting harm or perpetuating it.

To promote progress, the expectations for and benefits of racial literacy must be clearly communicated to teachers, and North Carolina’s leaders can start this process by revamping the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Rubric (NCTER), the assessment tool that evaluates teachers’ performance in the classroom. Currently, the criteria set out in this tool, which focuses on simply cultivating a “respectful” environment, fail to address race and its role in the classroom, leaving room for teachers to still perpetuate stereotypes, or cause harm to students by not addressing race specifically. The rubric should be revised to include the development and integration of racial literacy, encouraging its understanding and adoption by all teachers.

Teacher education programs across the state also use the NCTER as a formative way to ensure teacher candidates are being prepared for their own classrooms, so the updated rubric would also provide insight for teacher education programs to align to the criteria. Once teaching and teacher education come together as a profession, we can relay the message to all stakeholders that racial literacy is important for all educators, and we must become proficient if we want to prepare all students for a quickly growing diverse world.

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