

Teacher-Child Racial Match and Parental Engagement in Head Start

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This work explores if parents are more involved in their children's early schooling when there is a racial match between children and teachers.

The 1998 and 2007 Head Start reauthorizations each mandated that Head Start programs raise the educational levels of their teachers. In the years since, the Head Start workforce has changed substantially; between 1999 and the present, the percentage of Head Start teachers with a Bachelor's degree more than tripled from 23 to 73 percent (Bassok, 2013; Whitebrook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). Over the same time, the racial composition of Head Start has also shifted; the percentage of white lead teachers increased by 10% from 2006 to 2011, with no corresponding increase in white Head Start enrollees, resulting in increased racial mismatch between teachers and students (Bassok, 2013).

This whitening of the teacher labor force is a potentially important unintended consequence of efforts to raise quality in Head Start. Previous research suggests that there may be a benefit to child-teacher racial match in early care settings, both in terms of academic achievement (Dee, 2004; Downer et al., 2016), and teacher ratings of children's academic and social development (Bates & Glick, 2013; Downer et al., 2016; Downey & Pribesh, 2004). Moreover, some argue that the educational system's inability to close achievement gaps draws, in part, from cultural mismatch between educators and families of color (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

To date, however, we have not had good evidence on whether this heightened lack of alignment in the demographic composition of Head Start families and teachers might matter for children and families. In response to recent evidence that parental involvement in Head Start centers is an important driver of children's developmental gains (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016), the present study provides new evidence regarding racial match between Head Start families and

teachers and its relationship to parental involvement. Using data from the 2006, 2009 and soon-to-be-released 2014 cohorts of the nationally representative Head Start Family and Child Experiences Surveys, we leverage within center differences in child-teacher racial match to estimate the association between racial match and a suite of parental engagement measures, including parent volunteering at Head Start, classroom visits, and attendance at Head Start workshops ($N \approx 3800$). We also explore the direct relationship between child-teacher racial match and children's math and reading outcomes.

We find statistically significant associations between child-teacher racial match and parent-teacher conferences, classroom volunteering, and overall parental involvement. We find particular benefits for Hispanic families, who report greater attendance at Head Start workshops and less discomfort at Head Start. However, we find no relationship between racial match and direct assessments of academic outcomes. Findings suggest that compositional changes to the Head Start workforce could have unintended consequences for Head Start's two-generational initiatives and for children's development, and suggest that continued exploration into the impacts of the 2007 Head Start reauthorization is warranted.