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Published Online: May 5, 2009

Study Probes Cooperative Learning and Race

By Debra Viadero

White and African-American students can perform dramatically differently in the classroom, depending on how their teachers structure their learning groups, **a new study** suggests.

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Published last month in the peer-reviewed journal *Cognition and Instruction*, the study is the latest in a growing line of research to explore the role that students' home cultures and experiences outside of school play in the classroom.

Studies also have long shown that students of all races—but African-American students, in particular—often perform better in cooperative-learning groups. What's been less clear, said Eric A. Hurley, the lead author of the new study, was whether altering the structure of those groups in ways that dovetail with students' cultures would lead to different outcomes for different racial groups.

"Even if you can form a classroom where what kids bring to school with them is valued," said Mr. Hurley, who is an assistant professor of psychology and black studies at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., "it still doesn't mean you're pitching to their strengths."

For the experiment, Mr. Hurley and his colleagues, Brenda A. Allen of Brown University in Providence, R. I., and A. Wade Boykin of Washington's Howard University, divided 132 4th and 5th graders from an urban Northeastern school into racially homogeneous groups that were given lessons on math estimation under three conditions.

One group of students, designated for the "communal" condition, first got a pep talk encouraging them to work hard and emphasizing their common ties with one another and with the community. Under the second condition, students were told that their group would earn an unspecified reward if their combined performance exceeded that of the other groups. Educators encouraged the students in the third condition to work hard so that they could have a chance eventually to win a reward for themselves.

The idea was to capitalize on the belief, long espoused by some psychologists such as Mr. Boykin, that African-American children tend to relate to others in ways that are more communally oriented than they are competitive or individualistic. Mr. Hurley said that tendency may be due in part to the large, extended families in which many black children grow up and the socialization children experience in their churches and other community institutions.

Opposite Poles

While all of the racial groups in the study by Mr. Hurley and his co-authors performed about the same, overall, on a math-estimation test taken after the group lessons, the researchers found some marked differences when students of different racial groups worked under different group conditions.

The black students scored highest—getting 9.63 out of 15 questions correct—after having taken part in the "communal" group lessons. They turned in their worst group performance following their time in the group that emphasized individual rewards, answering only 6.41 of 15 questions correctly.

The individual-reward group, on the other hand, turned out to be the most optimal setting for white students, as a group, with white students getting 10.19 of those questions correct. In comparison, the white students got only 6.72 right answers—their worst performance—following lessons in the "communal" group.

"All of these kids were capable of doing this task to a high level, but it matters how you engage them," said Mr. Hurley. "But the onus is on us to help them get there. Now, we put the onus on minority kids to try to figure out and conform to the different ways we teach."

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Students of both racial groups performed at more of a midrange level in the group that emphasized a group-reward structure, with black students scoring slightly better than their white schoolmates under that condition.

"Clearly, we're showing by these findings that social context actually matters in ways that we should be thinking about," said Edd Taylor, an assistant professor of learning sciences at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., who was not involved in the study.

Another academic observer, Robert E. Slavin, said that, while the size of the effect was stronger than the racial learning differences that have turned up in general research on cooperative learning, it's too soon to base classroom practice on the results.

"I don't think you should ever pay a great deal of attention to studies of a 15-minute intervention," said Mr. Slavin, the director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "You want to look at something that's been used in schools over a long period of time."

Not 'Acting White'

But Mr. Hurley said his aim, in bringing forth the results, was really to raise educators' consciousness about students' culture, and its importance for learning, and to stimulate a dialogue around current theories of how best to educate African-American students.

He said his findings may challenge the idea, for example, that black students purposely resist academic success to avoid being seen as "acting white."

"African-American children don't reject schooling and high achievement," he said. "They may reject the competitive and individualistic high achiever, because it's more of an issue of whether you'd like to socialize with those kids and whether you'd like to study with them."

Mr. Hurley said his study is the second one to turn up the same pattern of racial differences in differently structured cooperative-learning groups. An unpublished doctoral dissertation by the late Arnetha Albury documents similar tendencies among students receiving vocabulary lessons under different conditions.

The current study also looked at students' behaviors in the different groups, finding that black students and white students exhibited the most positive behaviors in the groups that were most optimal for them.

Vol. 28, Issue 31

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