

The Importance of Black Early Educators

By Rylie Robinson, Strategies for Children Intern, August 2023

Massachusetts is known for its high-quality education. It consistently ranks among the top states in the U.S. for its K-12 schools, and it has invested heavily in early childhood and care (EEC) over the past few years, with a historic \$1.5 billion for EEC in the FY24 state budget.¹ However, children of color do not always have the same high-quality experiences as their white peers. 1 in 3 Black and Latino fourth graders read at grade level, and less than 1 in 3 Black and Latino students who take the SAT are college-ready in reading and math.² In addition, quality nursery school and preschool programs can be expensive. Because of this, low-income children are systemically blocked from these programs and may have to attend programs of lower quality.³ Low-income children are disproportionately of color, which means this has a larger impact on them.

Research shows that one way to close the gap on the K-12 level is to match students of color — particularly Black students — with at least one teacher of the same race.⁴ This solution has received a lot of attention because the number of teachers of color in Massachusetts is disproportionate to the number of students of color; 28% of students are Black or Latino, but only 6% of teachers are Black or Latino.⁵ But what about Black preschool-age children? Could matching them with early educators of their own race improve their early education experiences? There is less research on this front for several potential reasons, including the fact that adults assume young children do not have the capacity to process race, and that the ratio of Black young children to Black early educators is more even.⁶

Despite these reasons, studies in child psychology do show that children can begin to perceive race and form racial biases in their earliest years. In addition, Black children may not always have a Black early educator even though they are proportionately represented in the field — a phenomenon, research shows, that can be particularly damaging in matters of discipline and academic expectation. Worse yet, the Covid-19 pandemic hit Black early educators particularly hard; financial, social, and emotional barriers prevented them from fully participating in the industry and forced many to leave altogether.⁷ As such, it is important that the early childhood field continues to recruit, retain, and adequately compensate Black childcare workers in the post-pandemic world, and ensure that Black children (and children of all races) have the opportunity to work with them.

¹ Strategies for Children, State Budget: http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/state_budget.html

² "Number One for Some". The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership. Accessed July 18, 2023, <https://number1forsome.org/>.

³ Patti Neighmond, "Poll: Cost Of Child Care Causes Financial Stress For Many Families," NPR, October 26, 2016, sec. How Parents View Child Care Today, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/10/26/499166418/poll-cost-of-child-care-causes-financial-stress-for-many-families>.

⁴ Jill Rosen, "Black Students Who Have at Least One Black Teacher Are More Likely to Graduate," The Hub, April 5, 2017, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2017/04/05/black-teachers-improve-student-graduation-college-access/>.

⁵ EdTrust, "Understanding the Shortage of Teachers of Color in Massachusetts" (EdTrust, March 2019), <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Understanding-the-Shortage-of-Teachers-of-Color-in-Massachusetts-March-2019.pdf>.

⁶ "Children Notice Race Several Years before Adults Want to Talk about It," American Psychological Association, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/08/children-notice-race>.

⁷ The Education Trust, "Black, Latina Child Care Providers Face Heaviest Burden in Struggling Industry," *Black, Latina Child Care Providers Face Heaviest Burden in Struggling Industry* (blog), July 20, 2023, <https://edtrust.org/press-release/black-latina-child-care-providers-face-heaviest-burden-in-struggling-industry/>.

Race Matching in K-12 Classrooms

Research shows that Black students benefit immensely from having at least one Black teacher in their K-12 years. A study by Johns Hopkins showed that “race matching” in third through fifth grade reduced the chance that a Black student would drop out of school by 29%. The effect was even greater for low-income Black boys, at 39%.⁸ Several studies taken together demonstrate that this benefit stems from two unique phenomena. The first is the positive effect of Black students seeing someone like them in an educated role. The second is the positive effect of a Black teacher’s ability to evaluate Black students with less bias. We’ll begin by exploring the former effect, and then move onto the latter.

In a country that continues to be marred by racism, it is easy for Black children to internalize negative ideas about themselves. Anti-Black ideas — like Black people aren’t meant or able to be educated people — are combated by the sight of a Black teacher. That’s why the “race match effect” is also called the “role model effect,” and according to Nicholas Papageorge at Johns Hopkins, it “can change a student’s entire future outlook.”⁹ This new outlook is well documented by the data. Low-income Black students who experienced the role model effect were 18% more likely to consider college when they graduated, and low-income Black boys were 29% more likely. The best part about these findings is that the changes necessary to reap the benefits are incredibly doable — a school would only need to design the rosters so that every Black child had at least one Black teacher.¹⁰

Just as children can adopt anti-Black ideas, teachers can as well. These ideas can manifest themselves in evaluation practices and in the subtle — and perhaps unintentional — messages that the teacher sends Black students. Another study from Johns Hopkins found that white teachers and Black students frequently viewed the same student differently; the former, along with their other non-Black counterparts, were 12% more likely to predict that a Black student wouldn’t finish high school. Researchers speculate that when a teacher holds this belief, it’s possible that they’re communicating it to the student, damaging their self-esteem and discouraging them from putting effort into school.¹¹

The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership recognizes the potential that race matching has to close persistent gaps between white students and students of color. They are currently advocating for passage of An Act relative to educator diversity (H.549 and S.311), which would require schools to employ a variety of strategies to recruit and retain diverse teachers.

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⁸ Rosen, “Black Students Who Have at Least One Black Teacher Are More Likely to Graduate.”

⁹ Rosen.

¹⁰ Rosen.

¹¹ Jill Rosen, “Teacher Expectations Reflect Racial Biases, Johns Hopkins Study Suggests,” The Hub, March 30, 2016, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2016/03/30/racial-bias-teacher-expectations-black-white/>.

Massachusetts Early Education and Care Demographics

Unlike K-12 teachers, Black early educators are proportionately represented — and sometimes overrepresented — in the field when compared to the number of Black children attending early education programs. From 2016–2021, 102,274 children in Massachusetts were enrolled in nursery or preschool.¹² In the same time period, 6,767 Black children in the state were enrolled in nursery or preschool, which made them about 6.6% of the nursery and preschool population.¹³ In comparison, Black childcare providers made up 8% of family childcare providers and 14% of center educators in 2019.¹⁴ It is important to note that this statistic includes providers who work with children ages zero to four, not just three and four. In addition, it does not include preschool teachers working in public schools. However, the overall takeaway is clear: there is not a lack of Black childcare providers in the same way that there is on the K-12 level.

But just because there is not a numerical lack of Black childcare providers does not mean that this group is unworthy of particular attention, especially after the pandemic. Nationally, Black early educators who work with preschool-age children are paid \$1.71 less per hour than their white peers.¹⁵ This trend is reflected in Massachusetts, where Black family childcare providers earn less than white family childcare providers, according to a 2019 statewide survey.¹⁶ During the pandemic, Black and Latina childcare providers across the country left the field due to these low wages, in addition to the racism and social isolation they experienced.¹⁷ In Massachusetts, this is reflected by the fact that childcare centers in communities of color have more open positions than their white counterparts.¹⁸

These statistics are concerning because research shows that Black childcare providers are beneficial to the experiences of Black children, who are already at a systemic disadvantage in their preschool years.

Race Matching in Preschool Programs

Similar to race matching at the K-12 level, research suggests that race matching in preschool is beneficial in two ways: it is beneficial for young children to see Black childcare providers, and it is beneficial for Black childcare providers to be the ones teaching and evaluating young Black children. We'll begin with the former benefit and move on to the latter.

Contrary to adult expectations, children begin to categorize people by race at six months old, and they can develop racial biases from three to five years old. This is because young children learn about the world through

¹² American Community Survey, "S1401: SCHOOL ENROLLMENT - Census Bureau Table," accessed July 22, 2023, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Massachusetts&t=School+Enrollment&tid=ACSST5Y2021.S1401>.

¹³ "B14007B: SCHOOL ENROLLMENT BY ... - Census Bureau Table," accessed July 22, 2023, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Massachusetts&t=Black+or+African+American:School+Enrollment&tid=ACSST5Y2021.B14007B>.

¹⁴ Alyssa Haywoode, "Early Childhood Workforce Challenges before — and after — the Pandemic," December 10, 2020, <https://eyeonearlychildhood.org/2020/12/10/early-childhood-workforce-challenges-before-and-after-the-pandemic/>.

¹⁵ "Early Childhood Workforce Index 2020 – CSCCE," accessed July 5, 2023, <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/>.

¹⁶ Anne Douglass et al., "The Massachusetts Early Education and Care Workforce Survey 2019" (University of Massachusetts Boston, June 30, 2020).

¹⁷ The Education Trust, "Black, Latina Child Care Providers Face Heaviest Burden in Struggling Industry." <https://edtrust.org/press-release/black-latina-child-care-providers-face-heaviest-burden-in-struggling-industry/#:~:text=Stress%20and%20strain%20are%20leading,overall%20lack%20of%20emotional%20support>.

¹⁸ Jocelyn Bowne, Amy Checkoway, and Adrienne Murphy, "EEC Workforce Council" (Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, September 8, 2022), https://zoom.us/rec/play/5r6jnuXM7PBxcP2m0_ksvfyA16Bax_oeIQD4pyeorQSy3t9ZktUMnJs9xviHbN83LambMg52WKRNCVY.UUloXJrnAaU0dWWs?autoplay=true&startTime=1662656596000.

categorization; it is an effective way to pick up on social and cultural norms and learn to follow them. However, it can also lead to intense stereotyping. For instance, children may notice that certain characteristics, like height and hair color, do not correlate with occupation, but that skin color does. As a result, they may come to believe that only people of certain races can hold certain careers. Black children can quickly internalize subtle and unsubtle racist messaging, and some eventually come to favor socially privileged groups, such as white people.¹⁹ Some researchers are particularly concerned about the subtle biases in preschool classrooms that impact the way preschoolers think about race, and therefore about themselves.²⁰

One of the best ways to combat racial bias in children is to create an environment where cross-racial group relationships are encouraged. This is an effective strategy because interacting with members of the less socially privileged group allows for greater empathy and understanding.²¹ In the context of Black children who have internalized bias, this would mean exposing them to members of their own race. Having their preschool teacher be this figure is a particularly compelling option for several reasons. One is that the adult/child interaction in a preschool setting is the cornerstone of a child's experience — it creates the foundation for their social and emotional skills.²² As such, this relationship is likely a good place to inspire racial empathy in particular. In addition, a Black preschool teacher would be particularly well-equipped to set up a multicultural environment where Black children see positive, authentic representations of themselves — another proven way to combat internalized bias in children.²³

Just as it is beneficial for Black children to see Black preschool teachers, it is also beneficial for Black preschool teachers to be the ones evaluating Black children. One reason for this is because Black teachers see Black student's academic skills in a more positive light and have higher expectations for them. One study from the University of Virginia showed that Black teachers rated Black children higher on their early language and literacy development at the beginning of the year than white teachers did. The Black teachers also reported that Black children had less development in this area throughout the year than white teachers did. Though counterintuitive, this second result is also beneficial for Black children — it indicates that Black teachers have higher expectations for Black students.

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¹⁹ Erin N Winkler, "Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race" 3, no. 3 (2009), <https://inclusions.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Children-are-Not-Colorblind.pdf>.

²⁰ Erin Karter, "Study Finds Discipline Disparities in Preschool Driven by Racial Bias," accessed June 20, 2023, <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2021/september/study-finds-discipline-disparities-in-preschool-driven-by-racial-bias/>.

²¹ "Five Ways to Reduce Racial Bias in Your Children," Greater Good, accessed July 22, 2023, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_ways_to_reduce_racial_bias_in_your_children.

²² Jocelyn Bowne, "Promoting High Quality Early Education and Care" (Board of Early Education & Care — June Meeting, Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, June 13, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtru3_7hlbs.

²³ "Chapter 27. Working Together for Racial Justice and Inclusion | Section 3. Healing from the Effects of Internalized Oppression | Main Section | Community Tool Box," 27, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/cultural-competence/healing-from-internalized-oppression/main>.

High expectations are important for children of color, and they have been linked to favorable outcomes.²⁴ This is likely because those children are more likely to believe in themselves when they see others believing in them too.

It is also beneficial for Black teachers to be the ones to discipline Black preschoolers. This is because there is a “discipline gap” across the country — Black preschool children are three times more likely to be expelled than white children. In addition, teachers tend to complain more about the behaviors of Black children, even when there is no actual difference in behavior across races.²⁵ Some factors, like a teacher knowing a student’s background and family situation, can mitigate bias — but only when the teacher and the student are of the same race. When the teacher and student were of different races, the information overwhelmed the teacher, and they perceived negative behaviors more severely.²⁶

Research shows that disciplinary measures like expulsion and suspension are ineffective and developmentally inappropriate for preschoolers. Instead of correcting their behavior, it merely causes school to feel like an unsafe place, and it causes them to miss out on valuable learning opportunities.²⁷ In addition, it makes them 10 times more likely to do poorly in and drop out of high school, hold negative attitudes about school, and face incarceration.²⁸ It is unfortunate that any child must undergo these disciplinary practices, and it is especially concerning that Black children, who already face systemic disadvantages, undergo them more frequently. Giving Black children the opportunity to work with Black preschool teachers might lower the frequency with which this occurs, boosting their confidence, ability and enthusiasm for learning, and long-term outcomes.

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Conclusion

In Massachusetts, Black children frequently receive different qualities of education. One way to remedy this on the K-12 level is by matching Black children with Black teachers. Research shows that this could be an effective strategy in the preschool years as well. Therefore, it is important that Black early educators — who were hit particularly hard by the pandemic — are recruited and retained with increased pay, benefits, and mental and emotional support. The good news is that this work has already begun. The Common Start Bill (S.362 and H.489)

²⁴ Jason T. Downer et al., “Teacher-Child Racial/Ethnic Match within Pre-Kindergarten Classrooms and Children’s Early School Adjustment,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 37 (October 1, 2016): 26–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2016.02.007>.

²⁵ Erin Karter, “Study Finds Discipline Disparities in Preschool Driven by Racial Bias.”

²⁶ Alyssa Haywoode, “Yale Looks at Implicit Biases Among Preschool Teachers,” October 12, 2016, <https://eyeonearlychildhood.org/2016/10/12/yale-looks-at-implicit-biases-among-preschool-teachers/>.

²⁷ “We Have a Discipline Problem in Early Ed. What Are We Doing to Help Educators Fix It?,” *New America*, accessed June 20, 2023, <http://newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/discipline-ece-educators-fix/>.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, “Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings,” 2014, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/07/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>.

calls for better compensation and support for childcare providers. In addition, organizations like The CAYL Institute are creating quality childcare jobs for minority groups through their Good Jobs Metro Boston Coalition Child Care Sectoral Partnership.²⁹ Another thing policy makers and advocates could call for is increased research and stratification of data on this topic. It would be useful to know more about how many Black children in Massachusetts are seeing Black childcare providers, and what effect it has on their educational experiences. All of these efforts combined will help to close the education gap between Black young children and their white peers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rylie Robinson is a junior at Yale University where she is completing the Humanities major. She is excited to apply the content she has learned in her political science and sociology classes to on-the-ground research and advocacy work. In the early childhood sphere, she is particularly interested in policy solutions that address the needs of BIPOC children, families, and early educators, who are disproportionately affected by systemic inequities. In the future, Rylie hopes to continue working in the nonprofit world and get a law degree.

²⁹ Valora Washington, Brenda Gadson, and Wayne Ysaguirre, “Good Jobs Metro Boston: Child Care” (The CAYL Institute, October 18, 2022), <https://www.cayl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/2022.10.18-Good-Jobs-Metro-Boston-Executive-Summary-2.docx-2.pdf>.