

Test Scores Go Up with Best Friends of Different Race

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Having a best friend of a different race can make a big difference in the academic achievement of black and Hispanic high school students, according to a University of Arkansas study.

Researchers led by education professor Rebecca A. Newgent used the Educational Longitudinal Study from 2002, a nationally representative database of 13,134 high school students, to examine the effects of best friends on academic achievement of minority students. The results were published in a recent issue of *Professional School Counselor*.

The researchers suggested that school counselors “could create opportunities for students to interact with other students from different racial backgrounds in the hopes that they might develop friendships over time.” Peer mentoring programs could be one way to introduce struggling students from various racial groups to academically successful students of other racial groups.

Earlier education research has looked at the importance of friendship to a sense of belonging in school, to academic achievement and to expectations of going on to college. Newgent and colleagues Sang Min Lee and Ashley F. Daniel focused on interracial friendships and academic achievement, something few studies have addressed.

“Sometimes researchers have been reluctant to ask sensitive questions,” Newgent said. “We asked the hard questions because we thought it was important to know what the data says to know what to do about it.”

After dividing student data into two groups between those whose best friends were of the same race and those of a different race, the researchers used scores in standardized tests of math and reading to determine academic achievement. Overall, test scores improved when minority students had a best friend of another race.

Black and Hispanic students with best friends from other races had significantly higher math and reading test scores than did those with best friends of the same race. For Asians, having a best friend of a different race was associated with higher reading scores. Native Americans with a best friend of a different race had higher math test scores.

“Our research confirms the understanding that every culture has something to offer,” Newgent said. “You learn more from people who are different than from people who are the same as you and echo your ideas.”

More research is needed to better understand what specific school programs might be most useful. Newgent noted that while the database used is an excellent resource, there were limitations in what information could be gleaned from the questions asked. Future research, she suggested, could investigate how the race of a best friend relates to academic achievement and the effect of peer groups or close circles of friends rather than simply individual best friends.

Newgent is an associate professor of counselor education in the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas. At the time the research was conducted, Lee was at the University of Arkansas. He is now on the faculty of Korea University. Daniel was a graduate student and has since earned a master’s degree in educational research.

Source: University of Arkansas

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