

The African-American History Requirement for Students in the School District of Philadelphia: Is it Worth the Controversy?

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Abstract

In 2005, Philadelphia's School Reform Commission enacted a policy that requires all students in the School District of Philadelphia to take a year-long course in African-American history in order to graduate. This policy was designed to make the school curriculum more culturally relevant for black students (who make up the majority of the student body in Philadelphia), as well as to give all students a new perspective on the American experience. Critics, however, have argued that the policy promoted the interests of the African-American community at the expense of other racial and cultural groups. This study seeks to examine the effectiveness of the policy by soliciting the thoughts and opinions of Philadelphia high school students. The findings suggest that students tend to enjoy their African-American history classes, and that there is no substantial difference in enjoyment between black and non-black students. However, the data show that black students find African-American history classes much more meaningful and relevant than non-black students do. The data also suggest that the race of the teacher of the African-American history course may affect how enjoyable, meaningful, and/or relevant students find their African-American history class.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant Curriculum, Critical Race Theory, Urban Education

1. The Importance of Cultural Relevancy

It is no secret that black students, on average, demonstrate poorer performance in American schools than their non-black counterparts. The achievement gap between black and non-black students can be seen throughout the American public education system, from kindergarten through high school.¹ Black students tend to score substantially lower on national standardized tests such as the SAT and NAEP, and this has been the case for decades.^{2,3} Furthermore, only about 63.5% of black students – less than two out of three – graduate high school on time (i.e. four years after entering high school) in the United States. To put this figure in perspective, 82% of white students, and 75.5% of students overall, graduate on time.⁴

There are a number of explanatory factors that account for these differences in school achievement between black and white students. For decades, one of the most popular explanations has been the Cultural Discontinuity Hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that some groups do well in school because their culture is similar to, or compatible with, the school's culture.⁵ But other students – especially students of minority racial and ethnic backgrounds – grow up in a culture different from the one that predominates in the school's environment, curriculum, and teaching styles.⁶ As the theory suggests, that the American education system is inherently *Eurocentric* – that is, geared toward the dominant European-American culture. As a result, minority students – even those in schools which are predominantly comprised of racial or ethnic minorities – are at a substantial disadvantage within the American school system. Thus, minority students are more likely to demonstrate lower performance in

school, not because their culture is inferior, but because their culture does not conform to their education as well as other students' cultures do. In other words, their education is not relevant to their cultural background, and vice-versa. Schools, therefore, must become more accommodating of students from other cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds if they are to combat racial inequality in American education.

Throughout the past decade or two, cultural relevancy has become more prominent in American classrooms, with schools making a more concentrated effort to make education more culturally relevant to a wide range of students. This effort, however, often takes the form of a "Contributions Approach" – that is, a celebration of holidays and notable figures from different cultures, without seeking to gain a comprehensive understanding of group's development within, and influence on, American society.^{7,8} So while aspects of other cultures have become more effectively integrated into school curricula, many proponents of cultural relevancy have argued that the structure of American education remains Eurocentric. Consequently, there have been movements to further infuse cultural relevancy into both subject material and pedagogy.⁹ In inner-city schools, cultural relevancy tends to take the form of Afrocentrism, as opposed to Eurocentrism, because urban areas tend to have very high African-American populations, both in the city as a whole and in the respective public school systems.

Culturally relevant education generally has two aspects to it: curriculum and pedagogy. A culturally relevant curriculum (more specifically, an Afrocentric one) goes beyond the "Contributions Approach" to teach about the culture and history of Africa and African-Americans, especially since the history and experiences of both Africans and African-Americans is very different than that of Europeans and European-Americans. As far as a culturally relevant or Afrocentric pedagogy is concerned, studies have shown that black students, due to cultural differences, learn differently than white students. White students benefit from an atomistic-objective pedagogy, which is characterized by uniformity, distinction between subjects, and independent learning. Black students, on the other hand, tend to learn best through a synthetic-personal pedagogy, which emphasizes more active learning (experimentation, interpersonal interaction, etc.). It is the atomistic-objective pedagogy, however, that is the standard in most American schools.^{10, 11}

Proponents of cultural relevancy argue that it helps engage students, which in turn bolsters academic performance.^{12, 13} Some experts suggest that because students who feel culturally connected to their education tend to perform better, a more Afro-centric curriculum will alleviate some of the problems common among many African-American students, such as poor academic achievement, unruly or criminal behavior, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out.^{14, 15} And while studies do suggest that an Afrocentric curriculum or pedagogy does not yield improved quantitative results, qualitative research indicates that many black students, especially those characterized as low achievers, became more enthusiastic about their schoolwork when it was taught through an Afrocentric pedagogy. Of course, it must also be remembered that the quantitative measures have limited validity in that they are often Eurocentric by design; it should come as no surprise, then, that students show little quantitative improvements by these standards when shifting to a more Afrocentric learning experience.¹⁶ As far as the students themselves are concerned, many African-American students seem to prefer, enjoy, and appreciate culturally relevant lessons more than non-culturally relevant ones.¹⁷ Longer-term, cultural relevancy in schools aims to eliminate the racial inequality in student outcomes by engaging black students in class with issues that matter to them, and preparing them to become critical thinkers (as opposed to the current model, which allows the dominant white culture to decide which issues are "important," and assumes that black students' education can sacrifice critical thinking in exchange for a perceived need for structure and stability).¹⁸

2. The African-American History Policy in Philadelphia

Philadelphia has long been a hotbed for discussions of cultural relevancy. For one, the city has a very high African-American population; 54.5% of students in the School District of Philadelphia are black, as opposed to 17% of K-12 students nationally.^{19,20} With high numbers of black students come many of the problems that tend to disproportionately impact black students (especially poor, urban black students) and the black community in general. High school dropout rates, for instance, are a major concern. In 2011, only 61% of students in the School District of Philadelphia graduated on time – and this is the highest graduation rate the city has seen in recent memory.²¹ Non-white Philadelphia students, especially males, generally have graduation rates below 50%.²² For the students who remain in school, poor levels of academic performance remain rampant in Philadelphia schools. In the School District of Philadelphia, nearly 40% of black 11th graders scored Below Basic on the PSSA reading section in 2011, and 53.6% - over half – of black 11th graders score Below Basic on the math section. White students in the

School District of Philadelphia fare much better, with 54.6% scoring Advanced or Proficient on math, and 62.7% scoring Advanced or Proficient on reading, on the 2011 PSSA.²³

Because minority students have struggled so severely in Philadelphia schools, there have been numerous calls over the years for greater cultural relevancy for students, especially black students. Parents and students, particularly (though not exclusively) African-Americans, had been fighting the battle for more culturally relevant schools with the school district since the 1960s. In November 1967, 3,500 Philadelphia students staged a walk-out in protest of what they perceived cultural exclusion of blacks by the district.²⁴ In 1970, the district made a major step toward cultural relevancy with the creation of the Office of African American Studies, which was designed to facilitate an incorporation of Afrocentric content (and associated professional development for teachers and staff) into Philadelphia schools. But teachers did not have a tangible curriculum plan for Afrocentric curricular infusion at their disposal until 1986, and a study conducted by the district in 1995 suggested that students' knowledge of Afrocentric content (and teachers' and administrators' understanding of the policy) left much to be desired.²⁵

In February 2005, Philadelphia's School Reform Commission took a revolutionary step toward Afrocentrism in its schools by implementing a policy requiring all students in the School District of Philadelphia to take a year-long course in African-American history in order to graduate. The policy was enacted beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, and applies to students graduating from Philadelphia high schools in 2009 or later.²⁶ Philadelphia is the first major city to make African-American history a requirement for graduation.²⁷ The policy was driven mainly by African-American parents, who were upset that the School District of Philadelphia was providing what they viewed as a Eurocentric education to their children. It was also heavily favored by then-chief executive of the district Paul G. Vallas, who, incidentally, is white. The School Reform Commission (a body which, at the time, consisted of three white members and two black members) passed the measure by a unanimous 5-0 vote.²⁸

Proponents of the African-American history requirement, led by School Reform Commission member Sandra Dungee Glenn, claim that support for the policy has far outweighed opposition. African-American history, they argue, is an invaluable aspect of American history – an aspect that has largely been looked over by the American history curricula being taught in Philadelphia high schools. In regular American history classes, the argument goes, African-Americans are often portrayed as having little culture prior to coming to America as slaves, and notable African-American figures such as Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass often garner little more than a mention in contemporary high school social studies curricula.^{29, 30} This has allowed misconceptions about the culture and history of Africans and African-Americans to flourish, especially because, as proponents argue, the media often portrays a negative image of African-Americans. The policy's advocates suggest that African-American history is not just the study of African-Americans, nor is it beneficial solely to black students; instead, it serves as a reflection of the growth of American society as a whole, and that all students can be intellectually and culturally enriched by an African-American history course.³¹

The policy, of course, was not passed without controversy, and has been subject to criticism since its implementation. Among the most vocal opponents of the policy has been then-Speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives John Perzel, who represented a majority-white district in Philadelphia. He and other critics have pointed to the fact that not all students in the School District of Philadelphia are black; on the contrary, nearly half (45.5%) of the city's student population for the 2011-2012 school year did not identify as African-American.³² There are many other cultures that students in Philadelphia belong to, but are not required to learn the history of. Critics argue that these cultures are further marginalized by the new policy.^{33, 34} Opponents also suggest that the policy encourages black students to identify as African-Americans, rather than Americans, which serves to perpetuate the divide between blacks and non-blacks (especially whites) in the United States. This could compromise interracial communication, cooperation, and integration, all of which still have a lot of room for improvement in American society. And while black students have generally responded positively to the new requirement, a number of white students have spoken out against it, making statements such as "It's not our history to learn" and "I'm more interested in learning our [white] history".³⁵ There is also the argument to be made that the African-American history course is a superficial policy. As discussed previously, an Afrocentric education goes beyond content matter, and it is unclear to what extent the new policy takes into account pedagogical adjustments that would make content more accessible and culturally relevant to black students. At best, critics would argue, the policy is incomplete, given that the policy is designed to achieve cultural relevancy in Philadelphia schools.

2.1 Analysis of the Philadelphia policy

An analysis of any policy must consider the different frameworks through which the policy, and those affected by the policy, can or should be viewed. Education policies generally seek to benefit one or more of the following:

individuals, the collective good, and special groups.³⁶ Proponents would argue that Philadelphia's African-American History policy benefits all three classifications; it helps individual students get more in touch with their culture (or, at the very least, view the American experience from a new perspective), it counters the Eurocentrism and marginalization of African and African-American culture in regular school curricula (thus promoting the interest of minority groups, especially African-Americans), and it gives all students a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, African-American history and culture. But, of these three classifications (the individual, the collective, and special groups), it is clear that the policy is primarily intended to benefit special groups, particularly African-Americans. The bulk of the policy's criticism has been based around its goal of benefitting special groups (supposedly, at the expense of other groups), and even the policy's supporters have made it no secret that one of the policy's greatest objectives is to provide a more culturally relevant curriculum to the city's black students.

The African-American History policy takes the form of a mandate; all students must take an African-American History course in order to graduate.^{37, 38} This choice of tool by the School Reform Commission is interesting in that the arguments put forward by advocates in support of the policy seem to suggest that an African-American History course has its own intrinsic value, and that it is a policy so demanded by the students and by the community that it is in little need of a coercive element in order to be effective. The policy is also symbolic and hortatory in that it represents, in many ways, a pushback against traditional, Eurocentric American history classes. The policy has a strong capacity-building element to it as well, since it gives students in the School District of Philadelphia a greater understanding of African-American culture and heritage. This is crucial in that the majority of Philadelphia student population is black, and even those students who are not black are still surrounded by African-American culture, and could therefore still benefit from an concentrated study of African-American history.

Another aspect of the policy that warrants examination is the way in which its target populations are framed by the policy and its creators. The policy's primary targets, students (especially African-American students) in the School District of Philadelphia, are framed as *dependents*, a positive force lacking in political strength. In contrast, the *contenders* – the politically powerful yet undesirable force in the equation – are those who seek to maintain the status quo of a Eurocentric curriculum. By extension, the American education system (and perhaps even all of white America) is framed as contenders by the Philadelphia policy, because the white establishment has implemented (or, as advocates of Afrocentrism would claim, imposed) its Eurocentric curricula and pedagogies upon black students for decades. The community is also a factor in this policy, and members of the community – more specifically, the black community, especially in Philadelphia – are framed as the *advantaged*; they have substantial political power, as well as agendas that are viewed as desirable.³⁹ It was the black community, after all, that for nearly forty years served as the driving force behind the implementation of Afro-centric policies.

These policy frameworks are essential in that they help establish how the Theory of Change applies to the African-American History requirement in the School District of Philadelphia. The following is a model for the Theory of Change, shown in Figure 1:^{40, 41}

Problem → Solution → Short-term Goals/Consequences → Long-term Goals/Consequences (1)

The problem at hand, as discussed previously, was the perceived lack of cultural relevancy for black students in Philadelphia's public schools. The solution, of course, is the African-American history requirement passed by Philadelphia's School Reform Commission in 2005. Among the policy's short-term goals, as established by the literature, are greater understanding and appreciation of the African-American experience for all Philadelphia students, increased cultural relevancy of the high school curriculum, and improved engagement in school by African-American students. These short-term goals, in turn, are designed to foster the long-term goals of ending racial inequality in education and making education more accessible to African-American students by allowing for more Afrocentric, rather than Eurocentric, curricula and pedagogies to flourish in Philadelphia's schools.

While the Theory of Change is certainly a useful model for policy analysis and policy design, it also carries with it a fatal flaw: its usefulness relies on *assumptions* about the policy and the target population, and if these assumptions are flawed, the entire policy could wind up being a drastic failure. The African-American history policy makes a number of assumptions; perhaps the most glaring of these, relative to the goals sought by the policy, is that the target population consists of black students. While the majority of Philadelphia public school students are black, over 45% are not, and Philadelphia is currently home to rapidly-growing Asian and Hispanic communities as well as a sizeable white population. In addition to the assumptions made about the policy's ability to reach its goals, the assumption that the policy's goals themselves are desirable must also be looked at. The African-American history policy assumes that it is desirable for black students to identify with their African-American heritage and culture, rather than assimilate into mainstream American society. But, as the policy's critics argue, this sort of attitude only serves

to divide blacks and non-blacks in the United States. This could compromise interracial communication, cooperation, and integration, all of which still have a lot of room for improvement within American society.

3. Research Methods

The students who participated in this study attended either Julia R. Masterman High School, High School of the Future, or Camelot Academy at the time research was conducted; all three of these schools are governed by the School District of Philadelphia. These three schools were selected because they are very different from one another, thus allowing for greater diversity of the sample, and because these schools were easily accessible to the researcher. Masterman is a highly-competitive, selective-admission magnet school that is among the most elite public high schools in the region; in fact, in its 2012 review, US News & World Report ranked Masterman as the top public high school in all of Pennsylvania.⁴² Masterman is also very racially and ethnically diverse; 40.9% of its student body is white, 25.5% is black, 23.2% is Asian, 6% is Hispanic/Latino, and the rest consists of students of other racial/ethnic groups. Less than half of its students – 49.1% – are economically disadvantaged.⁴³ High School of the Future, on the other hand, is 84.8% black, and 93.7% of its students are economically disadvantaged. While not as academically prestigious as Masterman, High School of the Future is a Citywide Admission high school, meaning that it is semi-selective in that students must qualify for a lottery in order to be admitted. Yet, its standardized test scores leave something to be desired, and the school has consistently struggled to meet the Annual Yearly Progress mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act.⁴⁴ Camelot Academy differs from the other two schools substantially in that it is a Transitional School – a school for students who have committed severe infractions of the school district’s code of conduct (and who, in many cases, have also broken the law and spent time incarcerated). The school provides students with resources that will help them develop the intellectual, social and/or behavioral skills that will allow them to transition back into the regular public school system.⁴⁵ The vast majority of Camelot Academy students, like those at High School of the Future, are African-American, and most are academically and/or economically disadvantaged. Precise statistics, however, are not available, due to the fact that the student population at Camelot is constantly shifting.

This study was conducted via a voluntary-response survey that was administered to participants with the help of their classroom teachers. A total of 69 students participated in this study: 18 from Masterman, 23 from High School of the Future, and 28 from Camelot Academy. Fifty of these students were black; the other 19 identified as “non-black.” The students who participated were all sophomores, juniors, and/or seniors in their respective high schools, as Philadelphia students generally take African-American history during their sophomore year. The survey was nine questions in length, with the final question serving as an opportunity for students to provide qualitative data if they so desired. The survey was designed to obtain necessary demographic information, as well as to gather answers to the following research questions:

- Do students enjoy their African-American history class?
- How do students enjoy their African-American history class, relative to their other social studies classes?
- Do students find their African-American history class meaningful and/or relevant?
- How meaningful and/or relevant do students find their African-American history class, relative to their other social studies classes?
- Does a student’s race affect his/her answers to the above questions?
- Does the race of a student’s African-American history teacher affect the student’s answers to the above questions?

The survey questions were given in statement form, and students were essentially asked if they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, were neutral toward, somewhat disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each statement. Each answer was coded numerically as 2, 1, 0, -1, and -2, respectively, and conclusions were drawn accordingly.

4. Data:

Table 1. mean values for student survey responses

| Question | All Students | Non-Black Students | Black Students | Students with Non-Black Teacher | Students with Black Teacher |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| For the most part, I enjoy(ed) my African-American History Class | .797** | .684* | .840** | .455* | 1.086** |
| For the most part, I enjoyed my African-American History Class more than other Social Studies classes I've had | .493* | .158 | .620** | .061 | .914** |
| For the most part, I think my African-American History Class is/was meaningful and/or relevant to me | .768** | .211 | .980** | .485* | 1.000** |
| For the most part, I think my African-American History Class is/was more meaningful and/or relevant to me than other Social Studies classes I've had | .609** | .526* | .640** | .364* | .857** |

Notes on Data:

- Values shown are the mean values for the coded responses
- *Indicates statistical significance with a 95% confidence interval ($p \leq .05$)
- **Indicates high statistical significance ($p \leq .001$)
- Students were also prompted to give qualitative data by being prompted, "Please share any additional thoughts you have about your African-American history class. These will be kept anonymous."

5. Data Analysis

To determine whether students found their African-American history classes enjoyable, students' survey results were tested using a single-mean t -test with a null hypothesis that students would be indifferent toward their African American history class ($H_0: \mu = 0$). A null hypothesis of 0, rather than -2 (which would suggest disdain toward the class), was utilized because a mean of 0 would suggest indifference, meaning that students found the African-American history class no more enjoyable than their other social studies classes. This, in turn, would suggest that the African-American history policy has failed to engage students the way advocates claimed it would, and is thus worth neither the investment of school resources it has required nor the controversy that it has brewed. The findings, however, suggest that students *do* enjoy their African-American history classes; both black and non-black students, as a whole, indicated statistically significant positive mean values. Interestingly, the findings were *not* statistically significantly different when racial groups were compared to one another; black and non-black students enjoy their African-American history classes to similar extents. The results *are* statistically significantly different when the race of the African-American history teacher is the variable, with students of black teachers reporting greater enjoyment of their African-American history class than students of non-black teachers. This phenomenon, however, is probably influenced by the fact that many of the students who had a black teacher had one particular teacher, and her students enjoyed being in her class because of who she was as a person. A number of students indicated on their surveys that this teacher was "absolutely amazing" and "a wonderful teacher" who "taught me alot (*sic*) while having fun." Another student, in a personal conversation with the researcher, recalled how this teacher was "like a mom." The teacher in question taught at High School of the Future, and High School of the Future students appear to have a much higher mean value for enjoyment of their African-American history class than the students of Camelot

Academy or Masterman do; indeed, a t-test between High School of the Future students and non-High School of the Future students yields a p -value of .0837, and while this is not statistically significant, it demonstrates a strong trend that warrants future research, perhaps with a greater n -value.

When asked to compare their African-American history class to their other social studies classes, however, students' responses begin to paint a rather different picture. Keeping with the same null hypothesis ($\mu = 0$), there is *no* statistically significant evidence that non-black students generally find their African-American history course any more (or, for that matter, any less) enjoyable than any other social studies course. Yet, black students *do* find their African-American history class more enjoyable than their other social studies classes, and the evidence supporting this claim is highly statistically significant ($p \leq .001$). The race of the teacher of the African-American history class also appears to play a role on how much students enjoyed the class relative to other social studies classes; while there is no statistically significant evidence that suggests that students of non-black teachers enjoy the class any more or less than other social studies classes, the evidence suggesting that the students of black teachers find their African-American history class more enjoyable than other social studies classes is highly significant ($p \leq .001$).

As far as the meaning and relevance of African-American history classes are concerned, the evidence, when compared with the null hypothesis of indifference ($\mu = 0$), shows that while there is no statistically significant evidence that non-black students (regardless of the race of their teacher) feel strongly either way regarding the meaning and relevance of their African-American history class, the evidence is highly statistically significant ($p \leq .001$) that black students (regardless of the race of their teacher) found their African-American history class meaningful and relevant. With regard to the extent of this difference, black students (and students of black teachers, regardless of race), have much higher mean values than non-blacks and students of non-black teachers, respectively. These findings are both statistically significant ($p = .01$ and $p = .05$, respectively).

When compared to other social studies classes, however, students overwhelmingly seemed to find their African-American history class more meaningful and relevant than their other social studies classes; black students, non-black students, students of non-black teachers, and students of black teachers all indicated this to a statistically significant extent ($p = .01$, $p \leq .001$, $p = .03$, and $p \leq .001$, respectively). Furthermore, not one student indicated that they "strongly disagreed" with the notion that African-American history was more meaningful/relevant to them than their other social studies classes. When student groups are compared to one another (as opposed to a null hypothesis), no statistically significant evidence arises to suggest that black and non-black students differ with regards to how they view the meaning and relevance of their African-American history class relative to other social studies classes ($p = .65$). There *is* statistically significant evidence, however, to suggest that students of black teachers find their African-American history course more meaningful and relevant, relative to their other social studies classes, than students of non-black teachers do ($p = .03$).

6. Discussion and Implications

This study's findings suggest that Philadelphia students generally enjoy their African-American history class, though black students seem to enjoy it much more than non-black students do. Black students generally find the class meaningful and/or relevant to them, while non-black students are much more in the middle on that matter. Yet, both black and non-black students tend to find the course more meaningful and/or relevant than their other social studies classes. Black students also indicated that the course helped them identify with their heritage and culture, especially when it was taught by a black teacher. In short, black students report beneficial results from the African-American history requirement more than white students do; at the same time, however, it seems that the requirement is beneficial to white students, too – at least more often than not. Furthermore, the results show that the teacher can have a substantial impact on how students view their African-American history class, and black teachers generally seem to be more successful than non-black teachers at making their African-American history classes enjoyable, meaningful, and/or relevant. Five students provided qualitative data indicating that their teacher factored significantly how enjoyable, meaningful, and/or relevant they found their African-American history class, and several others echoed this sentiment in a discussion group in the researcher.

This study was designed to be as comprehensive as possible; however, there are some weaknesses and shortcomings worth noting. Some of the data provided by the students did not make sense; for instance, a student might indicate that they "strongly agree" that they find their social studies classes enjoyable, yet only "somewhat agree" that they find their African-American history classes enjoyable; yet, the same student would indicate that they enjoyed their African-American history class *more* than their other social studies classes. Of the 69 surveys examined, 22 raised red flags in this manner. Nonetheless, the researcher found it best to take the students at their

word for this study. Another issue to consider is that while a number of factors were controlled for in this study, one that was *not* examined was the class year of each student. In a discussion group, one student pointed out that, because he and many of his classmates who had taken the survey were seniors, African-American history, which students take in their sophomore year, was not very fresh on their minds. This is not to say that seniors cannot provide valid responses; rather, it would be interesting to see if there is any difference between how students feel about their African-American history class when they take it, as opposed to years after they take it. Such a research design may allow for the comparison of the short-term versus longer-term impact of an African-American history class. This study would have also benefitted from a larger and more diverse sample size, especially one that incorporated students from more schools. This particular study was restricted to what contacts and resources the researcher had access to; a successful replication of this study would seek to go beyond these horizons.

This study could have significant implications for the African-American history policy in Philadelphia, and other policies like it, that develop in other areas of the country. The findings, while they seem to endorse this policy, do not indicate that the controversy regarding the policy is not well founded; the reality is quite the opposite. For instance, one white student, in a discussion group with the researcher, cited his whiteness as a reason why he did not see why African-American history (or even this study) was relevant to him; another white student in the room, however, immediately countered by saying that the African-American history course had “changed my life.” One particularly insightful non-black student argued that while African-American history can be “extremely beneficial to students in an urban environment,” the policy requiring students to take it can be problematic in that “African-Americans are not the only ones that contributed to the history of America besides whites,” and that “[i]t is also important to recognize that this course may come off as extremely offensive to some people.” A few students also indicated that one of the reasons that they found their African-American history course was so meaningful and relevant was that it included discussions of contemporary issues, and it hardly seems like a stretch to suggest that incorporating current events and issues could be a good strategy to make *any* class meaningful and relevant to students!

The role of the race of the African-American history teacher was interesting to examine in that it could be a factor in the success of the School District of Philadelphia’s policy. More research needs to be done in this regard, as there is a very limited number of teachers who taught the students who participated in this study. However, the data do suggest that black teachers may have more success at teaching African-American history than do non-black teachers. There are a number of explanations that could account for this. For instance, black teachers may be more well versed in African-American history, having sought to learn it upon their own initiative. It is also reasonable to suggest that black teachers may be more personally invested in the success of this particular policy, given that black teachers in Philadelphia are members of the black community that pushed for this policy for so long in the first place. It is also possible that non-black teachers are more hesitant or reluctant to go discuss matters of race, which may hinder their ability to teach the course effectively. It may also be of interest to see how the race of the teacher and race of the student interact, and examine whether black teachers are more effective at reaching black students than white students (or any other combination of the race of the teacher and the race of the student).

Another consideration to bear in mind is that much of the debate surrounding this policy is based around critical race theory, and the notion that black students have been disadvantaged by being forced to learn history through a white perspective. Yet, requiring all students to take African-American history may have the exact same effect on non-black students. The policy’s critics seem to suggest that the designers of the policy are more concerned with the interests of black students than with meaningful reform that would benefit all students. A better policy, judging by the results of this study, would mandate that African-American history be made available in schools, without necessarily requiring *all* students to take it. This way, the needs of black students would be met by ensuring that the course was available to them; the course was not always available to students prior to the 2005 policy. At the same time, the interests of non-black students would also be met in that these students would not be required to take the course, and would thus be able to pursue something more akin to their cultural or personal interests. At the same time, it is important that regular American history classes more effectively incorporate elements of the African-American experience, such as slavery, segregation, the Civil Rights movement, and the Harlem Renaissance. This way, all students would be exposed to African-American history in a manner much deeper than the “Contributions Approach” allows for. Those who find the subject enjoyable, meaningful, or relevant would be able to study it in depth via the African-American history course, while those to whom it does not appeal would be able to study something more catered to their own cultural or political interests.

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