

The “Representative Bureaucracy” in Education: Educator Workforce Diversity, Policy Outputs, and Outcomes for Disadvantaged Students

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Abstract

Bureaucratic representation—the idea that a governmental organization is better situated to serve its clients when its employee composition reflects that of its client population—has received vast scholarly attention in the study of public institutions in the fields of political science and public administration. In a wide variety of settings, this research has demonstrated important connections between the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the public sector workforce and how different groups—particularly traditionally underserved groups—interact with street-level bureaucrats and benefit from public services. Although scholars in those fields long ago recognized that the public school system is a large bureaucracy with diverse street-level bureaucrats (teachers) and clients (students and parents) and thus began studying bureaucratic representation in the context of schools, the concept remains largely unfamiliar to education researchers. This article aims to synthesize the main ideas from the bureaucratic representation literature and demonstrate their applicability to schooling outcomes, including discipline, gifted assignment, special education, and student achievement, with the goal of opening up new avenues for education research.

Keywords

Representation, bureaucracy, race, gender, teacher-student relationships, student outcomes

Political scientists have long recognized that traditionally disadvantaged groups have an interest in being represented in government by officials whose backgrounds mirror their own (e.g., Kingsley, 1944; Mansbridge, 1999). Much of the work on representation of underserved groups’ interests has focused on the policy decisions of elected officials. Yet unelected bureaucrats also exercise substantial policymaking power as the implementers of public policy, playing what some scholars argue is an overwhelming role in how the public experiences public policy at the street level (Elmore, 1979; Lipsky, 1980). Recognizing this importance, for half a century political scientists have been concerned with *bureaucratic representation*, the idea that

the composition of the unelected bureaucracy helps determine whose interests are reflected in the implementation of public policy (Mosher, 1968; Selden, 1997).

Initially, this research focused on *descriptive representation*, or the degree to which the demographic origins—usually race/ethnicity or gender—of the bureaucratic workforce were similar to those of the public it served (Meier, 1993). These studies were motivated not only by normative concerns that descriptive representation is necessary for institutional legitimacy but also by a presumed connection between descriptive representation and substantive policy outputs or outcomes for the disadvantaged client group. A large body of empirical work has found evidence for those connections, linking the presence of minority (or female) bureaucrats to benefits for minority (or female) clients across diverse sectors of the public service, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) (Hindera, 1993a), the Farmers Home Administration (Selden, 1997), child support enforcement agencies (Wilkins & Keiser, 2006), and local police (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). Scholars in this tradition have suggested a number of mechanisms whereby descriptive representation produces substantive benefits for minority client populations, including both direct exercise of power by minority bureaucrats and indirect effects minority bureaucrats have on the behaviors of their colleagues or the client population itself (Lim, 2006).

In terms of the size of its workforce, the public schooling system is the largest component of the public sector in the United States, and it is therefore unsurprising that research on bureaucratic representation has turned often to schools as useful arenas for applying and testing tenets of the theory (e.g., Keiser et al., 2002; Meier, 1993; Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999; Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2011). In public schools, teachers are *street-level bureaucrats*—government employees implementing policy directly with a client population

(i.e., students and parents). As with research on bureaucratic representation in other policy areas, studies of schools have found significant evidence that the racial or ethnic—and in some cases, gender—composition of the teaching staff in a school is associated with systematic differential treatment of or outcomes for students with respect to those same characteristics. Because this research has been conducted in other disciplines, however, bureaucratic representation as a concept and its applications to schooling remain largely foreign to education researchers.

The goal of this article, then, is translational. We pull together the main concepts and empirical findings from the bureaucratic representation literature, primarily from political science and public administration, as they apply to public schools. In particular, we highlight findings on four educational policy outputs and outcomes: discipline, gifted assignment, assignment to special education, and student achievement. We argue that this theoretical lens can provide education researchers with new means for understanding the micropolitics of schooling, intra-school policy dynamics, and ways in which teachers and principals help produce educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups. We conclude with potential new avenues for research that applies bureaucratic representation concepts to the study of schools.

The Representative Bureaucracy

The concept of the “representative bureaucracy” that reflects and meets the needs of a diverse population, even when elected officials do not, is an old idea among bureaucracy scholars. According to Kingsley (1944), descriptive representation in public agencies is essential to the execution of their responsibilities. Although a bureaucracy whose demographic characteristics reflects that of the public is important symbolically (e.g., Krislov, 1974), most studies have focused on its importance for how policy outputs are distributed across different

client groups. A bureaucracy is described as *actively representative* if it “produces policy outputs that benefit the individuals who are [descriptively] represented” (Meier, 1993, p. 393). In other words, if active representation takes place, client populations benefit substantively from having public services delivered by people who share characteristics with them. A diverse bureaucratic workforce is then essential for ensuring that diverse groups’ interests are addressed in policy implementation. Applied to public schooling, this perspective suggests that meeting the needs of a diverse student population requires a diverse teacher and principal workforce.

The translation from descriptive to active representation is substantiated primarily by statistical studies from numerous policy arenas that establish correlations between the proportion of minority bureaucrats in a public agency and policy outputs or outcomes for minority clients. A majority of these studies operationalize minority status in terms of race and ethnicity. For example, Hinderer’s (1993a) study of the EEOC finds that district offices with larger numbers of black investigators bring a higher proportion of charges on behalf of black complainants, and similarly for Hispanic investigators and Hispanic complainants. A smaller number of studies examine a descriptive–active link for gender as well, as in Wilkins and Keiser’s (2006) study showing that an increase in the number of female supervisors within child support enforcement agencies is associated with higher collections per case on behalf of female clients.

Mechanisms

Research showing that descriptive representation with respect to race, ethnicity, and gender is associated with benefits from government action for traditionally disadvantaged groups naturally raises the question of what mechanisms link descriptive representation with substantive effects. Mosher (1968), who first articulated the idea of active representation, thought the linkage

arose from bureaucratic partiality: minority bureaucrats making decisions and exercising authority in ways that benefit groups with whom they share backgrounds. In schools, partiality may mean that a minority teacher focuses more time and attention on the minority students in her classroom. Partiality, however, raises normative objections concerning democratic norms of neutrality and equal treatment—can more time and attention for minority students be normatively justified if it comes at the expense of nonminority students?—which has fueled a long debate about the appropriateness of active representation (see Lim, 2006; Mosher, 1968; Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2011). As the literature has evolved, however, it has recognized other potential means whereby the presence of minority bureaucrats can produce substantive differences in treatment for minority clients, many of which are normatively more palatable.

As Lim (2006) argues, even minority bureaucrats who work consciously to avoid showing partiality may still increase benefits for minority groups. Minority bureaucrats and clients often share similar values, experiences, and beliefs, which can induce consistency between minority bureaucrats' behaviors and minority clients' interests. For example, minority bureaucrats may be more likely to engage in practices that promote equity, as when a minority teacher uses culturally sensitive wording in test questions. Shared backgrounds may also facilitate better communication between minority bureaucrats and clients and thus better understanding of clients' needs, improving the service they are afforded (Hindera, 1993b; Lim, 2006). In this vein, a student may well have an easier time explaining to a minority teacher a concept he does not understand, and the teacher may be better positioned to identify the supports the student needs to promote performance.

Descriptive representation can have indirect effects on client outputs and outcomes as well through the changes it encourages in the behaviors of others. For example, a minority bureaucrat's work within the organization can change the behaviors of his or her nonminority colleagues by providing a check on behaviors that may disadvantage minority groups (e.g., by expressing disapproval) or by helping increase colleagues' understanding or beliefs about minority clients' needs (Lim, 2006). The minority teacher who not only uses more culturally sensitive test questions but *pushes her nonminority colleagues* to use more culturally sensitive question wording on tests as well exemplifies this mechanism, as does the minority teacher who advocates for school-wide professional development on classroom management techniques that better support students from diverse backgrounds.

Of perhaps greater importance, descriptive representation may change the behaviors of minority clients themselves in ways that produce substantive benefits. The presence of minority bureaucrats may lead minority clients to demand more or better services from government because they identify with and feel more comfortable with those providing the services (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006). Here one may imagine a minority parent who is more likely to contact a minority teacher to ask about resources that are available to help a struggling student or to request that a child be tested for giftedness. Minority bureaucrats may also be better able to encourage minority clients to increase effort or make other behavioral changes in ways that improve their own outcomes, a mechanism Lim (2006) terms "coproduction inducement." Coproduction inducement occurs when, for example, a minority student works harder to impress a minority teacher he considers a role model.

Research on Bureaucratic Representation in Public Schools

The applicability of these mechanisms to schools suggests that research on representation in the bureaucracy can be useful for understanding school and classroom dynamics around race, ethnicity, gender, and potentially other characteristics of students, teachers, and leaders. In fact, schools have been used extensively as arenas for studying bureaucratic representation, albeit in literatures not typically familiar to education scholars. By way of introducing this research and connecting it to related research in education, this section discusses studies applying representation theory to four educational policy outputs or outcomes: student discipline, assignment of students to gifted and talented programs, special education, and student achievement. For manageability, we limit our discussion to studies of race and ethnicity, though we note that numerous studies have examined representation in education in the context of gender as well (e.g., Keiser et al., 2002).

Student Discipline

The well-documented overrepresentation of African Americans and Hispanics among students isolated, suspended, or expelled for disciplinary infractions has both raised concerns about the fairness of school discipline policies and stimulated research into the factors that drive these disparities (Skiba, 2000; Skiba et al., 2002). Recent guidelines published jointly by the Departments of Justice and Education point out that students of color are disproportionately suspended and expelled, noting that African-Americans make up roughly 15% of the student population but 35% of suspended students (USDJ/USDE Assistance Letter, 2014). African American students are more likely to receive harsh disciplinary penalties when behavioral infractions require more subjective judgment from the referrer (e.g., referrals for “disrespect”) (Skiba et al., 2002). Teacher and administrator discretion in their interpretation of and responses

to behavioral infractions suggests that student discipline is a particularly salient area in which representation might explain treatment disparities.

Indeed, numerous studies in the representation literature document a connection between the race composition of a school's teaching faculty and the differential likelihood that students will be suspended or expelled based on their race. In a sample of 82 urban school districts, Meier (1984) finds lower suspension rates for black students in schools with more black teachers. Using administrative data from Florida, Meier and Stewart (1992) show that higher proportions of black teachers in schools are associated with lower rates of corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary measures among black students. In similar Florida data, Meier (1993) finds comparable relationships for Latino teachers and Latino student discipline. Extending this work to a national sample of schools, Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, and Nicholson-Crotty (2009) similarly uncover evidence that black students are suspended less often in schools with higher proportions of black teachers (see also Rocha & Hawes, 2009), and find an even stronger relationship in the South than elsewhere.

Research on discipline in both the representation and education literatures helps illuminate the mechanisms underlying this apparent connection between teacher race and student discipline. In interviews with administrators, Nichols, Ludwin, and Iadicola (1999) find frustration with white teachers who have more negative perceptions of minority students' behavior than did minority teachers. This evidence is consistent with Dee's (2005) finding that white teachers are more likely to describe the same black or Hispanic student as frequently disruptive or inattentive than teachers of the same ethnic background as the student. Research using Georgia data suggests that more racially representative teaching faculties choose less sanction-oriented and more learning-oriented discipline policies, suggesting one potentially

important alternative means whereby representation can positively affect disciplinary outcomes for minority students (Roch, Pitts, & Navarro, 2010).

Gifted Assignment

As with discipline, scholars have raised significant concerns about the disproportionate representation of students in gifted programs by race and ethnicity (e.g., Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Joseph & Ford, 2006). Black and Hispanic students receive gifted services at much lower rates than their white and Asian peers. The referral process has been targeted as a key barrier to more equitable representation (McBee, 2006). Teachers exercise substantial discretion in the referral process, often acting as “gatekeepers” in the sense that evaluation for gifted services typically only comes after a teacher’s referral (Donavan & Cross, 2002). This reliance on teacher referrals disadvantages minority students, who are less likely than white students to be identified as potentially gifted even when their test scores are high (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; McBee, 2006). Teachers may also play a role in the formal evaluation process, particularly in schools where the criteria for gifted services extend beyond simple aptitude tests in favor of a broadened conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 2005).

Given these discretionary roles for teachers, gifted assignment appears well suited to substantive representation effects. In particular, because of shared backgrounds, minority teachers may be more attentive to the potential for giftedness in minority students, more adept at identifying that giftedness, and better able to communicate with parents in the referral process. Research by political scientists in fact finds strong evidence of substantive representation for gifted assignments. The presence of larger proportions of black teachers is associated with a meaningfully larger presence of black students in schools’ gifted programs (Grissom, Nicholson-

Crotty, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Meier & Stewart, 1992; Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Studies show similar relationships for Hispanic students and Hispanic teachers (Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2011; Rocha & Hawes, 2009) and administrators (Polinard, Wrinkle, & Longoria, 1990). These correlations are quite large. For example, Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, and Nicholson-Crotty (2011), estimate that, when conditioning on other factors, the fraction of black students in gifted programs is 18 percentage points higher in a school with a 50% black teaching staff than in a school with no black teachers. The magnitude for Hispanics is similar.

Special Education Services

Teachers play a similar discretionary role in student referral to special education services, another area in which research has focused on the disproportionate presence of minority students. Black students in particular are more likely to be both referred for testing and found eligible for special education than other students (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2003). Of course, placement in special education services is positive if it results in students receiving necessary services. Concerns about disproportionate placement arise, however, from documented mislabeling of students, which can lead to segregation from other students, a higher incidence of dropouts, and other negative outcomes for misidentified students (Skiba et al., 2008).

As with gifted assignment, teacher discretion combines with a potential role for shared backgrounds in enabling minority teachers to more accurately identify minority students' needs for special education services in a way that makes special education an outcome of interest to representative bureaucracy scholars. If minority students are being unfairly assigned to special

education at higher rates, the presence of minority teachers is expected to reduce the number of minority students in a school's special education population.

As hypothesized, studies find a negative association between the proportion of minority teachers and the proportion of minority students in special education.¹ Research on bureaucratic representation demonstrates this relationship for African Americans in large urban school districts (Meier, 1984), a national sample of medium and large districts (Rocha & Hawes, 2009), and a sample of Florida districts (Meier & Stewart, 1992). Other work shows that Hispanic students are similarly less likely to be assigned to special education in the presence of larger numbers of Hispanic teachers (Fraga, Meier, & England, 1986; Meier, 1993) and administrators (Meier, 1993).

Student Achievement Outcomes

The connection between teacher representation and educational outputs such as special education assignment prompts the question of whether representation translates to student achievement gains among minority students. Education policy studies have considered similar questions, finding that assignment to a teacher of the same racial background tends to result in greater student achievement (e.g., Dee, 2004). Multiple studies in the representative bureaucracy literature have arrived at similar conclusions, showing that minority student pass rates on state exams increase as the proportion of minority teachers in the school increases (see for example Meier, 1993; Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999; Weiher, 2000; Meier & Bohte, 2001; Pitts, 2005). Studies examining minority student dropout rates generally also find that minority

¹ An important note on this literature is that the definition or classification of special education varies from study to study and include both general special education categories and more specific labels, such as “educable mentally retarded.”

students are less likely to drop out from schools with a larger proportion of minority teachers (Meier, 1984) and headed by minority principals (Meier & Stewart, 1992).

Importantly, the representation studies of student test scores have universally focused on score levels rather than score gains, raising concerns about omitted variables bias and other methodological difficulties. These relationships would benefit from close examination using the kinds of student growth modeling that are now common in the literature. Still, representation theory points to potential mechanisms connecting teacher race with student achievement that bear further study.

Discussion and Conclusions

Research on bureaucratic representation provides compelling evidence that descriptive representation among bureaucrats, including teachers, can lead to improved outcomes for client populations with whom they work. Yet empirical work in this area has only begun to document the pathways and mechanisms that link descriptive representation to substantive effects. These effects may be direct, whether through partiality, shared values and beliefs, or empathetic understanding on behalf of bureaucrats (teachers or principals) of the same race or gender. Yet a variety of indirect channels, including resocialization of colleagues to act more fairly or changing the behavior of clients (students), are likely to be at play as well. The applicability of representation research to schooling suggests that scholars working at this intersection have significant opportunities to contribute to our collective understanding of both representation in general and the dynamics of race, gender, and other characteristics within schools.

Understanding the role of representation at the teacher and administrator levels in schools is important in the context of the shifting composition of the U.S. student population. Table 1

provides information about descriptive representation in U.S. schools on the basis of race/ethnicity and gender. Calculations come from the 1999-2000 and 2011-2012 administrations of the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey (public schools only), showing changes over approximately a twelve-year period. The table makes two observations evident. First, the student population is much more diverse along both race and gender lines than the teacher or principal workforce. For example, as of 2012, Hispanics make up 20% of the student population but only 8% and 7% of the population of teachers and principals, respectively, in public schools. Second, the racial and ethnic composition of the public school student body is changing rapidly; the fraction of white students dropped dramatically (10 percentage points) between 2000 and 2012, while the proportion of Hispanic and “other race/ethnicity” students increased by significant margins. Yet the composition of the educator workforce is changing slowly along these same dimensions, raising concerns that schools are in fact becoming *less* descriptively representative over time. If representation contributes meaningfully to reducing disparities between minority and nonminority groups, increased attention on recruiting and retaining a diverse educator workforce may be an important policy consideration.

The framework of bureaucratic representation provides many avenues of future research that are ripe for empirical study within the field of education. The majority of prior studies on representation use aggregate data to test for relationships; data allowing direct teacher to student inputs and outcomes could provide stronger evidence for the theory. An obvious contribution is to study the effects of descriptive representation on other schooling outcomes not thoroughly examined in prior research. Many prior studies examining bureaucratic representation within schools have been largely confined to discipline, gifted and special education placement, and achievement outcomes. Other possible outcomes that bureaucratic representation can

theoretically affect include placement in advanced placement or honors courses, participation in athletics, or college enrollment. There may be other nontraditional applications as well. Recently, for example, a few studies examine relationships between principals and teachers through the representation lens, demonstrating that shared demographic backgrounds between principals and teachers translates into different teacher employment outcomes, including lower turnover propensities among teachers who share race, ethnicity, and gender with their supervisors (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Keiser, 2012). The mechanisms underlying these relationships have not been fully explicated.

Yet another contribution would be to test whether teachers or principals improve outcomes along other constructs besides race and gender. For example, research might consider how this literature can extend its inquiry to the implications of LGBTQ representation for schooling outcomes (e.g., Theilemann & Stewart, 1996). Research has also begun to ask the question of whether descriptive representation indeed is necessary for substantive representation of minority interests, moving beyond the presumption that shared backgrounds are necessary for bureaucrats to push for the interests of traditionally disadvantaged populations (Kennedy, 2013). Exploring how and under what conditions nonwhite educators can take up the mantle of equity for minority students in their classrooms and schools is indeed a worthwhile endeavor for educational research.

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TABLE 1: Descriptive Representation of the Educator Workforce, 2000–2012

	Students			Teachers			Principals		
	2000	2012	<i>Change</i>	2000	2012	<i>Change</i>	2000	2012	<i>Change</i>
Percentage white	67%	57%	-10%	84%	83%	-1%	82%	81%	-1%
Percentage African American	16%	15%	-1%	8%	7%	-1%	11%	10%	-1%
Percentage Hispanic	12%	20%	8%	6%	8%	2%	5%	7%	2%
Percentage other race/ethnicity	5%	8%	3%	2%	2%	0%	2%	2%	0%
Percentage female	49%	49%	0%	75%	76%	1%	44%	52%	8%

Percentages based on the Schools and Staffing Survey. Survey weights used. Public schools only. "2000" refers to 1999-2000 school year. "2012" refers to the 2011-2012 school year. Race/ethnicity percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.