

Facing Identity Conflicts, Black Students Fall Behind

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Second in a series about the minority achievement gap in schools



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Students discuss stereotypes in Melissa Cooper's sociology class at Columbia High School in Maplewood, N.J. Looking at pictures of people and guessing what they were like, students said a Latino-looking man looks like a "drug lord" and a white man in a suit looks smart.

The identity issues facing middle-class black and Latino teenagers might be a clue as to why they don't do as well academically as their white and Asian counterparts, some researchers and educators say. The teens often live in dual worlds: the suburban one they live in, and the rougher street life they see glorified in the media.

Known as the "minority achievement gap," the lower average test scores, grades and college attendance by black and Latino students have long perplexed researchers. Many have focused on the values and attitudes of students and whether black students think doing well in school

is "acting white."

Stereotypes And Students' Self-Image

Columbia High School sociology teacher Melissa Cooper begins class by projecting a collage of faces onto a screen and asking students what they would think if they saw these people walking down the street. The students say the Latino-looking guy is a drug lord. The white guy in a tweed suit is smart.

"How does he look like he's smart?" Cooper asks.

"He got glasses on," a student says. The other students laugh.

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Cooper, 32, is African-American and has been teaching for 10 years at this Maplewood, N.J., school, which is roughly 60 percent black and 40 percent white. She pushes her students to challenge stereotypes — even the ones

they have about themselves.

"Class, do I look like a sociology teacher?" Cooper asks her students. The class responds with a resounding "No!"

"If I would see you walking down the street," one student says, "I would ask you, like, how much you do perms — because you probably work at the beauty salon."

