Like anyone who works with young children, I have had my fair share of surprising comments from kids who haven't yet learned societal taboos.

But one of the most striking encounters I had was with a kindergartener who has one Black parent and one white parent. As we were walking down the hall to meet with one of my fellow tutors, my student asked me, "Are they (the other tutors) dark or light?" Startled, I replied, "They're both light."

"Oh good," the boy replied. "I like light people."

"Why's that?" I asked, in as neutral a tone as I could manage.

"Because I don't like dark people," the boy replied.

As a white female literacy tutor working in a school where the majority of kids are students of color, this episode reminded me of the great need for diverse role models in our community's schools. This young boy is one of the 18 students –grades kindergarten through third –I serve every day as a Minnesota Reading Corps tutor. Minnesota Reading Corps is an AmeriCorps program that strives to help every Minnesota child become a successful reader by the end of third grade.

Minnesota Reading Corps is unique because it allows tutors to build professional skills while getting a foot in the door at a local school—all without needing a college degree. While it helps to have worked with children before, via the program, tutors receive all of the training and materials they may need.

Minnesota Reading Corps tutors see incredible success in the students we serve. Statewide, 80 percent of our students – all of whom were at significant risk for failure – passed Minnesota assessment tests. This surpassed the overall 78 percent pass rate for all Minnesota students.

Though Minnesota Reading Corps has a proven track record, I still see a need in our schools for more diverse role models. My students, including the boy with the startling question, are mostly taught by white females. While I have a good relationship with my students, I believe having a teacher and role model to connect to on an intuitive level can only increase the chance of academic success, especially for Minnesota students whose academic scores result in one of the widest achievement gaps in the nation.

Throughout this year, I have watched my students struggle, learn, and take off. I have seen a first grader go from dreading words to voluntarily reading aloud a whole book. I have watched kids who came to school without knowing a single letter sound begin reading words. Every time I look at my students' progresses, I wonder what would have happened without the daily, one-on-one tutoring the students receive from Minnesota Reading Corps? How much more effective could we be with tutors who can connect on a deeper level to students of color?

Minnesota Reading Corps is now placing tutors for the 2012-2013 school year. Learn more and or apply to become a tutor at www.minnesotareadingcorps.org.