

Teachers' First Classroom Experiences and Persistent Racial Gaps in Schooling

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Overview

New research findings show that teachers' experiences during their first year in the profession impact how they assess students, particularly Black students, later in their careers.

Researchers measured the extent to which elementary-school teachers' first impressions regarding a given racial group's average scholastic performance influenced their evaluations of future students. If in a teacher's first year of teaching, White students outperform Black students, in subsequent years, those teachers view other Black students as less proficient, even when standardized testing shows no difference between their performance and that of their White classmates.¹

These data also suggest that particular periods in teachers' careers have a lasting and profound impact on how they view students. Therefore, district and school administrators may want to consider this feature when defining the timing of implicit bias or other inclusion training.

Racial disparities in academic performance are well documented in the United States. Many factors connected to national policies and historical inequity among racial groups contribute to these disparities, including larger class sizes, unequal access to well-funded schools, lack of a diverse educator workforce, and quality curricula, as well as other factors tied to social status. While individual teachers are not the main factor, teachers' beliefs and actions can contribute to racial disparities in academic outcomes.

Teachers' beliefs about students' abilities play a central role in sorting students into various academic tracks, for example. They may also influence students' own beliefs about their potential, influencing goals and effort.

This study builds on research from psychology, economics, sociology, and other disciplines that have shown how unintentional reliance on stereotypes can promote a rise in biased judgment and behavior. While prior research has focused on the role of exposure to particular racial groups, this study focuses on the nature, timing and context of that contact.

STUDY

This study focused on teachers' experiences in their first five years to assess the extent to which teachers' first impressions of students from different racial backgrounds fed into racial stereotypes and subsequent judgments toward those groups.



¹ The research focuses on Black and White students because those groups are large enough to be studied across all included classrooms.

This brief summarizes findings from: *First Impressions Matter* Marcos A. Rangel, Ying Shi *Journal of Human Resources* Nov 2023, 1121-12003R2; DOI: 10.3368/jbr.1121-12003R2

This study used data on Black and White fourth- and fifth-grade students and their teachers from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center from 2007 to 2013. By concentrating on elementary school students, the research could focus on the same group of students across different subjects (English language arts and mathematics). This data includes both standardized tests that are scored automatically by machines and individual assessments undertaken by teachers. These two different sources of data on student academic performance were used to investigate racial differences in teacher assessments and the effect of the teacher's initial classroom experience on future assessments.

FINDINGS

While not the focus of this study, the research also indicates that educators tend to assess same-race students more positively. However, the difference was not statistically significant due to sample size limitations. Among those teachers and students included in this study, 90 percent of teachers were White and 8 percent were Black, while 47 percent of students were White and 31 percent were Black. Most importantly, findings show that Black and White teachers who have initial classrooms where White students outperform Black students have disproportionately larger racial gaps in future subjective assessments,

Data from this study reveal that teachers' experiences with their first students impact how they assess the abilities of future students. When White students outperformed Black students in a first-year-teacher's classroom, those teachers negatively adjusted their future evaluations of Black students. Data show that teachers in this situation judge their future Black students at lower levels of mastery than what their standardized test performance indicates when compared to how they evaluate their academically-equivalent White students. However, data also show that early career teachers only respond in this manner when their Black students' performance in the initial classroom adheres to negative social stereotypes. In cases where Black students in a first-year teacher's classroom outperform their White peers, there is no detectable bias on teachers' future assessments of their Black or White students. Thus, Black students can be negatively impacted by a teacher's initial classroom experience based on student performance but White students are not.



IMPLICATIONS

When teachers under-assess Black students' abilities based on implicit bias rather than actual performance, their students are often profoundly impacted. It can influence how Black students see themselves as learners and how parents view their children in an academic setting. Lower teacher assessments of Black students can have far-reaching consequences for students, including school choice, gaps in accomplishments, and future academic performance, as well as more long-term effects such as occupational choices and labor market outcomes.

Teacher assessments that underestimate Black students' performance may also lead to under-investment and funding in public education, particularly in schools and programs that are predominantly comprised of Black students, increasing the achievement gap (which can be attributed to a resource/access gap) that these programs aim to fix. Teachers' under-assessment of Black students can also have a negative effect on the way schools sort their students into different academic tracks and low-level classes. This can result in increased in-school segregation, as Black students are less likely to be enrolled in gifted and high-level courses such as honors, advanced placement, and international baccalaureate.



WHAT'S NEXT

This study highlights a malleable period during which teachers are developing views about groups of students and shows that early interventions are needed. By a teacher's fifth year, the prior classroom experience is entrenched in their teaching style, and interventions at this point could have no effect. Diversity and equity interventions may be particularly impactful during the first year of teaching, given the adaptable nature of early career teachers' views of students.

Moreover, making teachers aware of this phenomenon before entering the classroom could help reduce the likelihood that they will be affected by their first classroom experience.

This research can and should help shape future assessment and professional development practices. Due to the high volume of teacher turnover and growth in the popularity of teacher training programs, there is an even greater need to create a strong intervention and training system for educators.

For full text and references, see First Impressions Matter, Marcos A. Rangel, Ying Shi, Journal of Human Resources Nov 2023, 1121-12003R2; DOI: 10.3368/jhr.1121-12003R2