

Are educators showing a 'positive bias' to minority students?

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Remember that teacher you grumbled about back in your school days, the really tough one who made you work so hard, insisted you could do better, and made you sweat for your A's? The one you didn't appreciate until after you graduated and realized how much you had learned?

Minority students in the U.S. might have fewer of those teachers, at least compared to white students, and as a result they might be at a significant learning disadvantage.

A major study, led by Rutgers-Newark psychology professor Kent D. Harber, indicates that public school teachers under-challenge minority students by providing them more positive feedback than they give to white students, for work of equal merit. The study, which is currently available online in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* (JEP), involved 113 white middle school and high school teachers in two public school districts located in the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut tri-state area, one [middle class](#) and white, and the other more working class and racially mixed.

Teachers read and commented on a poorly written essay which they believed was composed by a student in a writing class. Some teachers thought the student was black, some thought the student was Latino, and some thought that the student was white. Teachers believed that their feedback would be sent directly to the student, in order to see how the student would benefit from their comments and advice.

In fact, there was no actual student, and the poorly written essay was developed by Harber and his team. The real purpose was to see how teachers would respond to subpar work due to the race of the student who composed it. As Harber and his team predicted, the teachers displayed a "positive feedback bias," providing more praise and less criticism if they thought the essay was written by a minority student than by a white student.

An important aspect of the positive bias was that it depended on how much social support teachers received from their fellow teachers and administrators—but only if the student was black. In This case, teachers lacking social support showed the positive bias, while those who enjoyed support did not show the bias. Teachers who thought the student was Latino showed the bias, regardless of their school-based social support.

"The social implications of these results are important; many minority students might not be getting input from instructors that stimulates intellectual growth and fosters achievement," notes Harber. "Some education scholars believe that minorities under-perform because they are insufficiently challenged—the 'bigotry of lowered expectations,' in popular parlance," he explains. "The JEP study indicates one important way that this insufficient challenge might occur: in positively biased feedback," according to Harber.

Harber believes that the positive feedback bias might help explain the stubborn academic performance gap between minority students and white students, an enduring social problem that threatens to "reverse social successes won through legislation, jurisprudence, and changing cultural attitudes" toward minorities. Previous attempts to address the performance gap have, correctly, examined inequalities in school funding, racism, and distrust of academia in some minority communities, notes the report.

The current study suggests that the performance gap might also be due to a cause that has received relatively little attention: the nature of instructional feedback from white teachers to [minority students](#).

Harber believes the study's findings have implications not only for educational systems in the U.S. but also for businesses and in fact any organization where performance appraisals and feedback are crucial tools for training and development.

The study builds on and expands Harber's previous demonstrations of the positive feedback bias, involving college students in 1998 and in 2004, and teacher trainees in 2010. His partners on this latest study are: Jamie L. Gorman and Frank P. Gengaro, Rutgers University, Newark; Samantha Butisingh and William Tsang, Rutgers University, New Brunswick; and Rebecca Ouellette, Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Harber and his team believe their findings could have broad implications for [teachers](#), parents and students, and business leaders. He is available to explain in detail how the research was conducted, who was involved, the analysis and outcomes.

More information: *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Apr 30 , 2012.
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