

# Black students more likely to be identified as gifted if teachers are black

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African-American children are three times as likely to be placed in gifted-education programs if they have a black teacher rather than a white teacher, according to research conducted by faculty members at the Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs and Vanderbilt University.

The research also finds that [black students](#) are 54 percent less likely than white students to be identified as eligible for gifted-education services after adjusting for the students' previous scores on standardized tests, demographic factors, and school and teacher characteristics.

The results suggest the key factor is that [black teachers](#) are more likely than white teachers to see black students as gifted—and not that the students or their parents are doing anything differently to gain one of the limited seats in programs for [gifted students](#).

The article, "Disentangling the Causal Mechanisms of Representative Bureaucracy: Evidence from Assignment of Students to Gifted Programs," appears in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. Authors are Sean Nicholson-Crotty and Jill Nicholson-Crotty, associate professors in SPEA at IU Bloomington, and Jason Grissom and Christopher Redding of Vanderbilt University.

"We find that African-American students are under-represented in gifted programs," Sean Nicholson-Crotty said. "And we find that having a black teacher dramatically increases the likelihood that a black student

will be placed in a gifted program, relative to having a white teacher."

Previous studies had shown that African-American students are underrepresented in gifted programs, but the studies were based on organizational-level data and could not determine what caused the underrepresentation. The current study makes use of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, kindergarten cohort, a federal program that tracks information about students from kindergarten through eighth grade.

These data make it possible to measure the odds that black and white students will be placed in gifted programs, with adjustments made for student, teacher and school characteristics, test scores and other factors. These data also allow the researchers to draw conclusions about a causal mechanism that can explain the observation that black students are more likely to be identified as gifted with black classroom teachers.

Specifically, the study shows that black teachers' perceptions of black students are more positive than are white teachers' perceptions, and these perceptions drive assignment differences. Black teachers more positively assess black students' approaches to learning, self-control and other behaviors that may be important in identifying giftedness.

"It's that teacher-student match, independent of your test score," Jill Nicholson-Crotty said. "It's the relationship between the teacher and the student."

These findings accord with those from another recently published study, by researchers at American University and Johns Hopkins University, which found that black teachers had higher expectations than white teachers that black students would succeed in school.

The authors did not find support for another possible outcome suggested

in the academic literature: that black students are more likely to be recommended for gifted programs by both black and white teachers when those teachers are part of a racially diverse teaching force. They also found no evidence of two other potential explanations for the results. One is that black students perform better on [standardized tests](#) and other objective measures of giftedness if they have black teachers. Another is that parents of black students are more likely to engage with teachers and lobby to have their children evaluated for giftedness if their teachers are black.

Gifted education programs have long been subject to criticism that their selection criteria, which often rely on IQ testing and other measures of cognitive ability, are biased against students of color and poor children. But the current study suggests African-American students can also be left behind in the referral process, when teachers recommend students to be evaluated for gifted programs.

The researchers say the findings point to the value for schools of recruiting and hiring more teachers of color. While teachers and students should not be matched by race, they say, having a more diverse teaching force would raise the odds that black students would have a black teacher in the early grades when students are typically identified for gifted programs.

Another policy response, they said, would be to screen all students for giftedness, not just those who are referred by [teachers](#) or parents, and to provide outreach to parents so they have the information and skills to help schools identify their children as gifted.

**More information:** Sean Nicholson-Crotty et al, Disentangling the Causal Mechanisms of Representative Bureaucracy: Evidence From Assignment of Students to Gifted Programs, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (2016). [DOI:](#)

[10.1093/jopart/muw024](https://arxiv.org/abs/10.1093/jopart/muw024)

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