

# Race influences teachers' referrals to special and gifted education

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Teacher referrals for special and gifted education testing are subjective and may be swayed by a student's race, finds research published in the journal *Social Science Research*.

The study found that teachers are more likely to see academic challenges as disabilities when white boys exhibit them than when boys of color exhibit the same difficulties. Conversely, teachers are more likely to perceive [behavioral challenges](#) as disabilities among boys of color than when white boys have the same behavioral difficulties.

"Previous research tends to be polarized between the argument that students of color are overrepresented in special education due to racial bias in schools, and the argument that they are actually underrepresented in special education once you account for socioeconomic status and other related factors. This research finds racial bias, but it's more complicated, with both underrepresentation and overrepresentation of students of color," said Rachel Fish, assistant professor of special education at NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development and the study's author.

Teachers play an important role in identifying students who may benefit from special and gifted education. Earlier research found that 75 percent of referrals originate from teachers (as opposed to parents or medical professionals), and teachers' referrals are generally confirmed through additional testing.

Because students of color are overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in gifted education, it has been assumed that teachers may be making biased decisions when referring students for testing. But existing research on teacher bias has been inconclusive.

In this study, Fish examined the role of [student](#) race and ethnicity in teachers categorizing student needs as exceptional and in need of either special or gifted education services. She conducted an experiment involving 70 third grade teachers from 14 public elementary schools in one district.

Teachers were asked to read case studies that each described a fictional male student. In different versions of the case studies, Fish changed certain factors about the student: his race and ethnicity, whether he was an English learner, and factors that might suggest he was exceptional. The factors included academic challenges, suggesting a learning disability; behavioral challenges, suggesting an emotional disorder; or academic strengths with emotional sensitivity, suggesting that he is gifted and talented. After reading a case study, teachers were asked the likelihood that they would refer each student for special education or gifted testing.

When teachers read a case study of a boy with academic challenges, meant to suggest learning disabilities, they were more likely to refer white boys than black and Latino boys for testing. This suggests that teachers believe the white student is performing at a lower level than he is able to and should be referred for additional services, whereas for students of color, low academic performance is expected and seen as normal - and not a problem to remediate. This pattern held true when looking at white English learners and English learners of color, with more white English learners referred for testing.

Conversely, when case studies portrayed boys with behavioral

challenges, teachers were more likely to refer black and Latino boys than white boys for testing. Here, a referral suggests that the teacher perceives the student as having social, emotional, or behavioral skills that are problematic enough to warrant outside help, reaffirming earlier research showing that teachers perceive misbehavior by black boys as more aggressive and problematic than misbehavior by white boys.

"Moreover, a referral for behavioral challenges could result in a label of an 'emotional disorder,' which carries a high degree of stigma and could put students of color at a disadvantage," said Fish.

In case studies where teachers read about boys with academic strength and emotional sensitivity, clues for good candidates for [gifted education](#), teachers were more likely to refer white students for gifted testing. In other words, teachers may perceive high ability as a natural characteristic of white students, while they may fail to recognize high ability among students of color.

"This subjectivity has implications for inequalities in education by race and ethnicity: students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are perceived and treated differently in schools. If students are placed in [special education](#) and gifted programs differentially because of racial bias among teachers, then students are likely receiving inappropriate educational services," said Fish.

"It is important to note, however, that these findings are not about blaming teachers for being racist. Rather, this research reveals how racism in our society affects the everyday work of teachers. I believe [teachers](#) are doing their best to support all students in their classrooms, yet [racial bias](#) affects everyone, often in ways that we're unaware."

Provided by New York University

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