

Teachers' implicit bias against black students starts in preschool, study finds

Findings reveal subconscious racial bias of teachers, who directed attention more closely to black boys when 'challenging behavior' is expected

Implicit biases take the form of subtle, sometimes subconscious stereotypes held by white teachers, which result in lower expectations and rates of gifted program referrals for black students.

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If anyone ever doubted that black children are not treated equally in the classroom, the research released this year surely proved them wrong. In June, studies stated that black students are nearly [four times as likely to be suspended](#) as white students, and nearly twice as likely to be expelled. In September, we heard that black preschoolers are [3.6 times](#) more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions.

And a few days ago, new [research](#) from the Yale Child Study Center finally pointed to clues as to why these disparities may exist: implicit bias.

Implicit biases take the form of subtle, sometimes subconscious stereotypes held by white teachers, which had been shown to result in [lower expectations and rates of gifted program referrals](#) for black students. Yale's study revealed these biases are directed at much younger children than previously thought, and are present in black and white teachers' behaviors.

Researchers led by Yale professor Walter Gilliam showed 135 educators videos of children in a classroom setting. Each video had a black boy and girl, and a white boy and girl. The teachers were told the following:

We are interested in learning about how teachers detect challenging behavior in the classroom. Sometimes this involves seeing behavior before it becomes problematic. The video segments you are about to view are of preschoolers engaging in various activities. Some clips may or may not contain challenging behaviors. Your job is to press the enter key on the external keypad every time you see a behavior that could become a potential challenge.

While the teachers were asked to detect "challenging behavior", no such behavior existed in any of the videos. Yet when asked which children required the most attention, 42% of the teachers identified the black boy.

The participants' conscious appraisal of whom they believed required the most attention closely mirrored the independent results of an eye-tracking technology used by the research team, which noted that preschool teachers "show a tendency to more closely observe black students, and especially boys, when challenging behaviors are expected".

Allison R Brown, executive director of the [Communities for Just Schools Fund](#), an organisation which seeks to combat the "[school-to-prison pipeline](#)", found the report heartbreaking but not surprising.

“Black bodies are policed in the streets and in the classroom ... [Research] demonstrates that black boys are viewed as [four and five years older](#) than they are. Research demonstrates that racial disparities in school discipline exist in the most subjective of categories – “willful defiance”, “insubordination”, “disrespect”. Those racial disparities decrease significantly for the most objective of categories: possession of alcohol on campus, possession of drugs with intent to distribute, possession of a loaded weapon.

Brown worries that the study supports what headlines suggest to her: black people are seen as less than human, less deserving of dignity and respect.

Staff tend to observe more closely black boys when challenging behaviors are expected

Yale Child Study Center

The study’s findings suggested an underpinning of Brown’s anxiety, but found that it wasn’t limited to black people. Researchers noted that when teachers were also given information about the disruptive child’s home life and family stressors, teachers only reacted more empathetically if the teacher and student were of the same race. Otherwise, teachers rated the students more severely. The report suspects this is because teachers felt powerless to improve the student’s situation.

“These findings suggest that teachers need support in understanding family struggles as they may relate to child behaviors, especially when the teacher and child are of different races,” Gilliam, the lead researcher, said.

The good news is that teachers are open and willing to do the work. Gilliam pointed out that when he gave study participants the opportunity to withdraw their data from the study, only one subject chose to do so.

To solve this dilemma, Gilliam recommends anti-bias training programs, and suggests consulting the work done by Dr Howard Stevenson of the University of Pennsylvania on racial literacy and racial climate in schools.

Lauren Owen, a white teacher and recent graduate of Harvard Graduate School of Education who wrote a compelling essay on the need for [empathy in teaching](#), says that “race is a category (though a socially constructed one) that we can see, and thereby also in some ways easier to identify with. I think it’s tough to get past visual indicators of sameness or different-ness because they are reinforced too frequently, and so it’s easier to empathize when we have similar experiences with someone who looks the same as us.”

Gilliam offers reasons to be hopeful. He reminds us that educators, who are paid very little, pursue teaching because they love young children. To the parents of black children, he offers this advice: “Don’t wait until you are worried about whether biases may impact the relationship between your child and his or her teachers. Be proactive. Get to know your child’s teachers, director and staff. In all of my years of studying this issue, I’ve never seen a case where a child was expelled or suspended from a childcare or preschool setting when the parents and teachers knew and liked each other. Not once.”