

in brief...

Assessed by a teacher like me: the impact of race on pupils' grades in US elementary schools

The previous article explored systematic differences in pupils' test results and teachers' assessments in the UK. Here, **Amine Ouazad** looks at similar questions about possible bias in the context of US elementary schools.

Teachers in the United States tend to give better grades to pupils of their own race, even if these pupils have the same external test scores as their classmates. Most teachers are white and, on average, white pupils get higher assessments for a given ability level. Male teachers too tend to give better grades to male pupils, yet female teachers do not have significant gender-based perceptions.

These are some of the findings of research by Amine Ouazad on teachers' assessments in US elementary schools. The research compares subjective assessments by teachers and test scores from multiple choice questionnaires collected by the US Department of Education.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study is a nationally representative survey that started with about 20,000 pupils of the 1998/99 kindergarten cohort (children aged 5-6) and was followed up six times later (fall and spring of kindergarten, fall and spring of grade 1, spring of grade 3 and spring of grade 5) with assessments in English and maths.

Pupils are assessed twice each time: by their teachers and by external assessors of the US Department of Education. This makes it possible to compare subjective assessments and test scores covering the same skills. Using discrepancies between these two forms of assessments, the research establishes that teachers have substantial biases.

An African American or Hispanic pupil assessed by a white teacher is likely to be graded significantly lower than if the same pupil's ability were assessed by an African American or Hispanic teacher. (Minority teachers do not appear to be biased.) The effects of the biases are sizeable: white teachers' biases could explain up to 22% of the gap between white and minority pupils.

The research also finds that the effects of teachers'



subjective assessments are long lasting, shaping children's aspirations, their involvement in the classroom and their later performance. Ouazad argues that racial interactions are likely to explain why test score gaps between whites, African Americans and Hispanics grow between kindergarten and grade 5 (when children are aged 10-11).

Teachers also rate their pupils' behaviour and, surprisingly, this is not the main driving force behind the results. The study also provides evidence that teachers give better assessments to pupils of their own race even if they have

Teachers in the United States tend to give better grades to pupils of their own race



Policy-makers and designers of teacher training programmes should put more emphasis on diversity

the same test scores and behavioural measures as their classmates of other races. This shows that there is a racial bias over and above cognitive and behavioural differences.

Historically, before desegregation and the civil rights movement, African American pupils were more likely to be taught by a same-race teacher than nowadays. The fraction of minority teachers has fallen since then. Whites are now much more likely than African Americans and Hispanics to be taught by a teacher of the same race since a fair representation of minority teachers would require at

least tripling the number of Hispanic and African American teachers.

Trends are different for the two groups. The fraction of African American teachers has declined significantly since the 1950s: one reason is that teaching is no longer one of the best options for college-educated African Americans. But the number of Hispanic teachers has never been high: the growth of the country's Hispanic population is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has not been followed by a comparable growth in the number of Hispanic teachers.

Tripling the number of minority teachers would require more than tripling the number of recruited minority teachers. Strong political will is needed, Ouazad argues: so-called teacher 'competency' tests strongly correlate with race, even though these tests are inaccurate predictors of teaching quality.

Policy-makers should look for tests that recruit good teachers without unduly favouring any particular race. Such tests are hard to design. Quota systems are not a viable solution since they were ruled out in a 1978 decision of the US Supreme Court (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*).

What then is the way forward? We do not live in a world where racial and gender perceptions are carved in stone: experiments in psychology suggest that beliefs about race and performance can be changed. Ouazad concludes that policy-makers and designers of teacher training programmes should put more emphasis on diversity so that racial perceptions of pupils' performance become a thing of the past.

The article summarises 'Assessed by a Teacher Like Me: Race, Gender, and Subjective Evaluations' by Amine Ouazad, CEE Discussion Paper No. 98 (<http://cee.lse.ac.uk/cee%20dps/ceedp98.pdf>).

Amine Ouazad is assistant professor of economics at INSEAD and a research associate in CEP's education and skills programme.