



# Selling students short: Racial differences in teachers' evaluations of high, average, and low performing students



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## ABSTRACT

Education scholars document notable racial differences in teachers' perceptions of students' academic skills. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort, this study advances research on teacher perceptions by investigating whether racial differences in teachers' evaluations of first grade students' overall literacy skills vary for high, average, and low performing students. Results highlight both the overall accuracy of teachers' perceptions, and the extent and nature of possible inaccuracies, as demonstrated by remaining racial gaps net literacy test performance. Racial differences in teachers' perceptions of Black, non-White Latino, and Asian students (compared to White students) exist net teacher and school characteristics and vary considerably across literacy skill levels. Skill specific literacy assessments appear to explain the remaining racial gap for Asian students, but not for Black and non-White Latino students. Implications of these findings for education scholarship, gifted education, and the achievement gap are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars have directed considerable attention to racial achievement gaps, documenting huge differences in school readiness and academic growth during students' formative years of schooling (Alexander et al., 1997; Harris, 2011; Harris and Robinson, 2007). While some have focused on factors associated with lack of preparation and poor performance among minority youth (Lee and Burkam, 2002; Washington, 2001), others have documented a myriad of challenges among high achieving and gifted minority students (Ford, 1998; Ford et al., 2008). In both cases, scholars point to the teacher–student relationship as central to understanding young students' schooling experiences (Alexander et al., 1987; Crosnoe et al., 2010; Easton-Brooks and Davis, 2009; Ford et al., 2001).

The influence that teachers' perceptions and expectations have on quality teacher–student interaction (Davis, 2003), academic placement decisions (Baudson and Preckle, 2013), and students' academic performance (McKown and Weinstein, 2008) motivate the present study, which considers the relationship between race and teachers' overall assessment of first grade students' literacy skills.<sup>1</sup> As recommended by Hoge and Coladarci (1989), this study focuses on the extent to which students' cognitive ability not only mediates but also moderates the relationship between students' race and teacher assessments. The major contribution of this work is in identifying the presence and nature of unexplained racial/ethnic variance (i.e. racial/ethnic gaps) in teacher perceptions for students who demonstrate low, average, and high levels of cognitive literacy skills.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to being the first year of compulsory schooling, first grade is an ideal time to study racial variation in teachers' perceptions because student are generally excited about learning and less likely to be influenced by peers (Tyson, 2002; Harris, 2006).

A number of studies across elementary, middle, and high school contexts have documented noticeable racial/ethnic differences in teacher assessments of academic ability and social behavior (Downey and Pribesh, 2004; Ferguson, 2003; Harris, 2011; McGrady and Reynolds, 2013; McKown and Weinstein, 2008; Morris, 2005b; Ready and Wright, 2011; Rist, 1970; Tenenbaum and Ruck, 2007). Recognizing the cultural disconnect between America's teaching workforce and the diverse student populations they serve, some minority parents and teachers have challenged this narrative by encouraging academic excellence among minority youth, both as a means of social uplift and way of escaping negative stereotypes (Foster, 1990; Morris, 2005a; Tyson, 2003). Although the general consensus is that teachers' assessments are fairly accurate (Hoge and Coladarci, 1989; Jussim and Harber, 2005), this cultural disconnect also serves as a primary impetus for much of the emergent scholarship focused on fleshing out the effects of students' cognitive abilities and actions, as opposed to other demographic or contextual factors, on teacher perceptions (Bates and Glick, 2013; Downey and Pribesh, 2004; McKown and Weinstein, 2008; Ready and Wright, 2011).

To address the issue of accuracy in teacher perceptions, Ready and Wright (2011) focused on within-classroom effects on Academic Rating Scale (ARS) assessment scores, which were derived from teachers' ratings of a number of different literacy skills. Although they found evidence of unexplained racial gaps early in the school year, by spring, racial gaps were largely, if not entirely, explained by student performance. What Ready and Wright did not examine, however, was teachers' general or overall perceptions of student literacy. While skill specific assessments may inform some placement decisions, teachers' decisions to refer or nominate students are also likely influenced by their general sense of student ability and/or risk, especially in cases where specific assessments and general perceptions do not align.

The ongoing debate regarding the challenges of high and low achieving minority students highlights the importance of not only assessing whether perceptions reflect actual abilities, but also examining whether possible racial gaps in perceptions vary across levels of achievement. Because many racial stereotypes in education are tied to deficit thinking related to student intelligence (Ford et al., 2002), teachers' evaluations of students may simultaneously be informed by students' race/ethnicity and cognitive ability.<sup>2</sup> This study, which examines the extent to which students' cognitive skills both mediate and moderate the relationship between students' race/ethnicity and teacher perceptions, is guided by three research questions:

1. Are there racial gaps in teachers' perceptions of students' overall literacy skills? If so, to what extent are these differences a reflection of difference in actual abilities?
2. Is academic ability (as measured by test scores) merely a mediator of the relationship between students' race/ethnicity and teachers' perceptions or does ability also serve as a moderator of this relationship?
3. What does the relationship between students' and teachers' perceptions look like at different points on the distribution of ability, net student, teacher, and school-level characteristics?

## 2. Background and literature review

### 2.1. Teachers' perceptions and student outcomes

Scholars find that teachers' perceptions can shape student learning and social development, largely through their influence on teacher–student interaction (Chaikin et al., 1974; Hallinan, 2008; Irvine, 1988; Leacock, 1982; Montalvo et al., 2007; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). This relationship is most palpable during elementary school, because students spend most of the day interacting with a single teacher (Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Silver et al., 2005). In the early grades, individual teachers are almost solely responsible for relaying academic content, organizing physical activities, supervising social communication, providing emotional support, and teaching important social skills (Doll, 1996; Pianta, 1997), positioning them as strong socializing forces and central academic gatekeepers.

Within the elementary school context, positive perceptions can increase the likelihood of positive interpersonal interactions between teachers and their students (Davis, 2003), whereas negative perceptions may increase a student's likelihood of being criticized and decrease their likelihood of being called on or offered effective feedback (Brophy and Good, 1970; Good, 1981; Good and Brophy, 1972; Rist, 1970). Negative perceptions may also bring about or magnify teacher–student conflict, which can result in poor cooperation in the classroom (Birch and Ladd, 1997), chronic underachievement (Mandel and Marcus, 1988; McCall et al., 1992), and grade retention or dropping out (Hughes et al., 2001; Ladd et al., 1999; Pianta et al., 1995). Furthermore, through their relationship with teacher expectations, teachers' perceptions can also influence the quality of teacher instruction, as well as students' academic potential, emotional stability, sociability, interests, and motivation (Farkas et al., 1990; Jussim and Harber, 2005; McKown and Weinstein, 2008; Midgley et al., 1989; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Wong, 1980). Although studies have evaluated the influence of teachers' perceptions across many age groups, scholars often point to the early years of schooling as one of the most critical periods (Entwisle and Hayduk, 1988; Farkas, 2003; Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Rowan et al., 2002).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Because of evidence suggesting that teacher determined grades may be more susceptible to teacher bias than standardized tests (Alexander et al., 1987), the term cognitive ability refers to performance on externally administered assessments.

<sup>3</sup> While age may be a factor, Jussim and Harber (2005) propose the vulnerability of students during transitional periods as a more likely explanation for this trend.

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