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Beyond the “Model Minority” Mirage: How Does Positive Bias Affect Asian Students and Other Students of Color?

POLICY BRIEF #5
 July 5, 2023

Ying Shi and Maria Zhu

Asian Americans are often perceived as a “model minority” in the classroom setting, referring to the group’s perceived success in socioeconomic and educational outcomes. While this image is ostensibly positive, it may raise expectations for Asian students in schools and bolster negative stereotypes for students in other minority groups due to teacher bias.¹ Teachers’ expectations matter because they affect students’ grades and the steering of students towards academic tracks, such as gifted programs and advanced coursework.^{2,3} Therefore, it is important to understand racial biases in teachers’ assessments and their spillover effects. We evaluate this stereotype in the context of teachers’ assessments of students in grades 3-8 by examining whether teachers systematically evaluate Asian students differently than their peers in the same classroom with the same academic performance.

This brief summarizes findings from our [recently published study](#), wherein we used data from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center (NCERDC) to identify the presence of positive bias in teacher assessments towards Asian American students, and its effects on other minority groups.⁴ To do so, we compared teachers’ assessments of student achievement with standardized test assessments among students in grades 3-8 from 2007 to 2013.

KEY FINDINGS



Teachers rate Asian students’ academic skills more favorably than similar White students in the same classroom with the same performance and behavior.



Among Asian students, teachers are less likely to over-rate Southeast Asian students relative to South Asian and East Asian students.



The “model minority” stereotype negatively impacts other minority groups despite its positive connotation. Teachers respond to the presence of any Asian student in the classroom by widening Black-White and Hispanic-White assessment gaps.



Teacher assessment patterns that set Asian students apart from other groups of minority students harm all students. Strategies to combat the effects of positive bias of the stereotype are needed to prevent both short- and long-term consequences for students of color.

Teachers Display Significant Positive Bias towards Asian Students

Teachers were asked to assess students on achievement in math and reading on a scale that can be directly compared to standardized test

measures of achievement. Teachers over-rate students if they assess students as being higher achieving than what the student’s test score indicates, and vice versa for under-rating.

We found that teachers are more likely to over-rate Asian students relative to White students in the same classroom with the same standardized test scores and individual characteristics by a magnitude of nearly 12 percent of the average likelihood of being over-rated. In contrast, they are less likely to under-

rate Asian students by 14 percent of the baseline likelihood of being under-rated.

We also find that this positive bias occurs across grades and subjects. In both elementary and middle schools, teachers favor Asians over comparable White peers in math and reading. Among Asian students, we find that teachers are less likely to over-rate Southeast Asian students relative to South Asian and East Asian students.

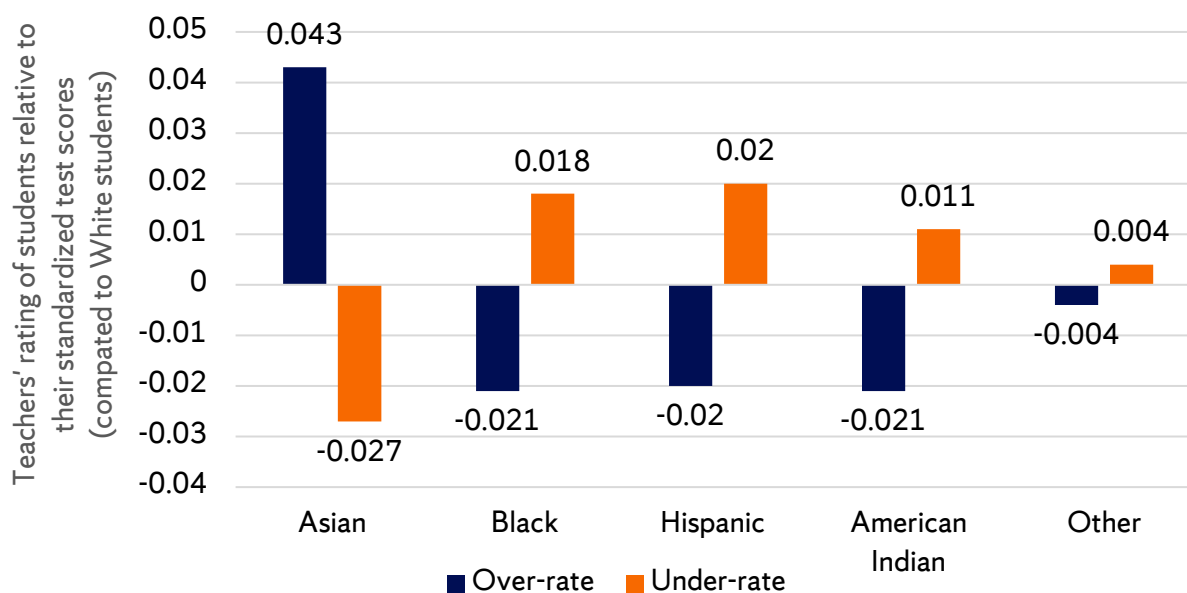


Figure 1: Racial Differentials in Teacher Assessments, North Carolina, 2007-2013

Data Source: North Carolina Education Research Data Center

Note: The figure shows an indicator of whether a teacher over-rates (or under-rates) a student relative to their standardized test-based achievement level. Racial differentials are represented as percentage point estimates. The comparison racial/ethnic student category is White students, so all coefficients can be interpreted relative to teachers’ likelihood of over-rating or under-rating White peers. For instance, the first bar from the left indicates that teachers are 4.3 percentage points more likely to over-rate Asian students relative to White students in the same class with the same standardized test scores and individual characteristics.

Teachers Give Lower Assessments of Black and Hispanic Students When an Asian Student is in the Classroom

Teachers respond to the presence of any Asian student in the classroom by decreasing their likelihood of over-rating Black and Hispanic students relative to White students, compared

to when no Asian students are present in the same teacher’s classroom. We find that teachers widen the Black-White and Black-Hispanic racial disparities in over-rating by approximately one-quarter when they have an Asian student in their classroom.

Teachers Need Professional Development to Reduce Implicit Biases in Classroom

Overall, our study shows that not only is there a positive racial bias in teacher evaluation of Asian students, but there is also a significant negative spillover effect of this bias on other racial minorities in the classroom. These negative spillovers suggest that the biases internalized by teachers are cumulatively disadvantageous for underrepresented students. The effects are especially concerning given the influence of teacher expectations on how teachers treat students, students' own behaviors, and subsequent long-term academic trajectories.^{5,6,7,8,9}

It is crucial to address the effects of positive stereotype bias on underrepresented students. This includes the ways biases affect teachers' treatment of students on a daily basis, as well as explicit points in the education system at which teacher assessments play a key role in determining student outcomes, such as recommendations for specific academic tracks or letters of recommendation. It is essential to implement practices that foster objectivity while clearly communicating expectations. One approach could involve providing professional development programs for teachers, including implicit bias training, to enhance their awareness of the potential effects of internalized biases.

Data and Methods

Our sample consists of 1,410,653 students and 50,215 teachers from grades 3-8 in math and reading classes between 2007-2013. We use statewide administrative data from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center (NCERDC) for both student-level and teacher-level observations. We use information on two measures of student achievement, standardized test assessments and teacher

evaluations. Teachers submit their evaluations of students before the students' end-of-year standardized test results are observed. We assess whether teachers differ in their assessments of students with identical standardized test scores based on student race. We further analyze teacher assessments across Asian subgroups using data for students' primary home language as a proxy for ethnicity. Further details on our methods can be found in the study published [here](#).

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