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## Why Some Kids Are Put In Special Education And Others In Gifted Programs

**Racial stereotyping can affect kids at every stage of life.**



By [Rebecca Klein](#)



Valueline via Getty Images

When Rachel Fish was a special education teacher in New Mexico some years ago, her students didn't look the rest of the school.

Fish, who taught in an elementary school filled mostly with Navajo, Latino and white students, said the kids in her classes were "more likely to be the students of color." Even though the school staff was fiercely dedicated to the students, Fish says, she wondered if the demographics of the special ed classes were a result of more than just unequal performance.

“As a staff we were working hard to provide the best educational experience for all of our students, but I wondered if we were unintentionally treating children differently for different reasons,” said Fish, now an assistant professor of special education at New York University. “I worried: Did I push some students harder? Did I accept lower performance among some students for inappropriate reasons?”

Now, years later, Fish has conducted a study that adds credence to her fears. Her work, published last month in the journal *Social Science Research*, focuses on students who get referred for special education and students who are singled out for gifted testing.

Fish had a group of 70 third-grade teachers read fictional stories about boys who varied by academic ability, behavioral disposition and race. The characters were given names meant to signal their racial identities. In the end, the teachers were asked whether they would recommend the students for testing for special education programs or a gifted program.

The results were a mixed bag. When presented with stories of students who were struggling academically, teachers were more likely to recommend white boys for special education testing than boys of color. On the other hand, when asked to read stories about children with behavioral issues, teachers were more likely to refer black and Latino boys to special ed testing than they were white students. In cases of high-achieving students, teachers were more likely to refer white boys for testing into gifted and talented programs than they were boys of color.

Fish’s findings suggest certain patterns of implicit bias. She suspects that teachers are less likely to refer academically struggling students of color to special education because they might simply see those students’ low performance as normal.

“White boys with academic challenges are seen as requiring more help, with their academic needs seen as medicalized problems to fix, rather than the status quo,” Fish writes in the study. “Indeed, research indicates that children’s behaviors are perceived differently by their teachers depending on race/ethnicity, as teachers rate non-white students more poorly on behavioral outcomes, and perceive misbehavior by black boys as more aggressive and problematic than misbehavior by white boys.”

On the topic of gifted referrals, “we know from qualitative research, teachers tend to associate giftedness with whiteness and not see giftedness in students of color,” Fish told *The Huffington Post*. “It tends to become kind of invisible.”

Overall, Fish said, the results surprised her.

“I think going into it, I really bought into the idea that surely students of color are overrepresented in special education,” she said. “[I thought,] ‘I’m definitely going to find students of color are more likely to be placed in special education, no matter what disability it is.’”

The research speaks to a debate currently playing out in education circles. While researchers think students of color are numerically overrepresented in special education, others think that when you account for economic status and other factors, they are actually underserved.

Fish's research offers a more nuanced picture of the different sets of expectations teachers may have for students of different races — a disparity that reflects American life overall.

“Racism is something in our broader society and affects everyone, all people, no matter what their race is,” she said. “This isn't saying teachers are racist — we actually have research are saying teachers are less racist than other professionals.”

“This is really just giving us a window into biases in our entire society,” she went on. “It's not something that's unique to teachers.”

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*Rebecca Klein covers the challenges faced in school discipline, school segregation and the achievement gap in K-12 education. In particular, she is drilling down into the programs and innovations that are trying to solve these problems. Tips?*

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