

What's in a Name? Maybe, a Student's Grade!

By Kathleen Vail

From American School Board Journal

TWO children from the same family attend the same school. One gets good scores on reading and math tests. The other does not. What's the difference?

It could be their names, according to a University of Florida researcher. Economics professor David Figlio says children with unique or unusual sounding names do worse on standardized tests than their siblings who have more conventional names. Perhaps not surprisingly, their teachers are less likely to recommend these children for gifted education programs.

Figlio's study, funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development, comes as school districts search for ways to narrow the achievement gap

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between white and nonwhite students. It demonstrates how complex it can be to have high expectations for all children, especially in the face of subconscious perceptions and prejudices. Figlio and others say the study points to the need for additional teacher training on the danger of evaluating students based on assumptions about race and class.

According to Figlio, teachers see certain names as signals that students are from low-income homes, and, in turn, they do not expect these children to perform as well as their classmates. Those expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Keeping the Expectation, Good or Bad

"When teachers have high expectations, kids live up to them," Figlio says. "If you come in with a high expectation for someone, then it's likely you will maintain those expectations in the presence of information to the contrary. It's the same with low expectations. Teachers are human, too."

That teachers make snap judgments is not unusual, said Carlton Jordan, senior associate at the Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based group that advocates for high expectations for children in poverty. What is striking about the Figlio study, he said, is that teachers hold on to these notions throughout the school year.

"No matter what their performance, these children can't change the perceptions," Jordan said. "The larger question is, What is behind the expectation? Kids of color get less. Poor kids get less. It's another hurdle to get over."

Looking at test scores, gifted classifications, and transcript data over five years in one Florida school district, Figlio reviewed the records of 55,046 children in 24,298 families with two or more children. He concluded that up to 15% of the black-white test score gap may be the result of differences in names given across the races.

Within a family, Figlio said, a child named Dwayne is more likely to be recommended for the gifted program than his brother, Da'Quan, even if their test scores are the same. Da'Quan is more likely than Dwayne to have lower test scores, but also more likely to be promoted. Figlio concluded that teachers recommend children with distinctly African-American names for promotion more often because they don't believe the children are capable of improving or getting better scores.

"People have asked how a teacher who sees a child for 180 days could still base expectations on the name solely," Figlio said. The name is not the sole factor, he said, but it's a strong part of the instant judgment teachers make of students when they first meet.

Texas educator and author Ruby Payne holds workshops for teachers and administrators on the cultural differences among people in poverty, the middle class, and the wealthy. She said teachers often are middle class and don't understand the culture of poverty, including why parents would give their children unique names with unusual, nonstandard spellings. Instead, they rely on the obvious, such as color, name, or clothes.

"You can't teach a child you don't know," Payne said. "You can't explain things in a way they understand. It becomes, 'I don't understand them enough to teach them.'"

Figlio said four qualities are associated with a low-socioeconomic name: It begins with a number of prefixes, such as "lo," "ta," and "qua"; it ends with a number of suffixes, such as "isha" or "ious"; it includes an apostrophe; and it is long, with low-frequency consonants. Figlio describes this as a name that would get high points in a Scrabble game, with letters such as x, y, z, and q.

When a name has these attributes, it is more likely that the child's mother is a high school dropout, Figlio said. It is also more likely that the child comes from a single-parent family that is impoverished. The child also is more likely to be African American, although Figlio points out that some white families use these names, as well.

Overcoming the Stereotype

Interestingly, schools with a large number of African-American teachers do not assign the same weight to children's names, Figlio found. If teachers are using the names as stereotype shorthand, he said, schools with more African-American teachers and students tend to overcome the stereotype.

Doug Downey, an Ohio State University sociology professor, also has studied teacher expectations based on race, looking at how student behavior is evaluated. He found that white teachers say their African-American students are more disruptive and have shorter attention spans. However, he also found that African-American teachers did not assess black students in the same way, nor did white teachers rate white students as having similar behavior issues.

Downey said he doesn't believe white teachers deliberately see black students as troublemakers. "I suspect the process is more subtle than that," he said. "White teachers are not consciously aware of evaluation. They may be more comfortable with the behavior of white children than black children."

Understanding seems to be the key. "We should become more aware of the signals that a name sends to us," Figlio said, "so we do our jobs as best we can as teachers and parents." ed

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