

Bowdon, J. (2013). The Origins, Growth, and Implications of Black-White Non-Cognitive Skill Gaps during Elementary School

Teachers report that black kindergartners are more likely to have problems paying attention, staying focused, and getting along with peers than whites. These early black-white gaps in noncognitive skills are concerning because children's social and behavioral skills at school entry have long-term impacts for academic achievement and educational attainment in two main ways. Lower attentiveness and task persistence can influence the amount of time spent learning and, ultimately, academic growth. In addition, noncognitive skills affect social processes within schools. Teachers expect less from children with worse behavior and these lower expectations can negatively influence the amount and types of instruction and discipline these students receive.

In this dissertation, I investigate the origins, growth, and implications of black-white gaps in noncognitive skills using the birth and kindergarten cohorts of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. Together, these papers contribute to our understanding of how racial stratification is perpetuated both within and across generations. I find that the higher prevalence of absent fathers for blacks during early childhood plays a significant role in the production of the sizable black-white gaps in kindergarten noncognitive skill. Children are more ready for kindergarten when they have two parents who are continuously cohabiting or married from birth through school entry, regardless of their parents' education level.

Over the course of elementary school, black disadvantage in behavioral ratings expands and becomes more extreme. Strikingly, even among children who start kindergarten with excellent behavioral ratings, blacks are more likely to experience downward mobility in the ratings' distribution by fifth grade than whites. This expanding and extreme behavioral disadvantage has consequences for academic success: black-white gaps in positive classroom behavior—like attentiveness and self-control-- explain at least 12% of the test score gap and 27% of the gap in teachers' academic ratings of students in kindergarten and first grade. These results imply that to close the achievement gap, we must close black-white gaps in noncognitive skills as well.