

Biased Expectations, Unequal Opportunities: The Role of Teachers in Social Mobility

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Abstract :

Using a unique combination of administrative data, surveys, and experiments, we provide evidence of discrimination in teachers' career advice based on students' family backgrounds. Keeping students' capabilities and interests constant, teachers hold lower expectations for the academic and labor market achievements of students from economically disadvantaged families. We conducted a field experiment to address this discrimination in a scalable and cost-effective way: we provided teachers with personalized information about the gaps in their past recommendations by the socioeconomic background of students and corrected their misperceptions about the success probabilities of high-ability, low-SES students in competitive tracks. The intervention reduced the SES gap in top-track recommendations for high-ability students, illustrating how teachers' biased expectations can create a self-fulfilling prophecy of low intergenerational mobility.