



EDUCATING ALL OF OUR CHILDREN: Understanding and Addressing Implicit Bias

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INTRODUCTION

Every student deserves to feel cherished, celebrated, challenged, and supported in the classroom. The vast majority of educators would agree with this aspiration – for students from every racial and ethnic background. Yet, despite decades of effort, data across the nation show that student outcomes and experiences vary widely depending upon their race or ethnicity. When confronted with these continued disparities, educators often experience feelings of intractability, defensiveness, or guilt. Many feel that they are blamed for outcomes that are outside of their control.

It is true that a host of structural inequities are at play in our country's educational systems. Our neighborhoods, and thus our schools, are racially and economically segregated; and families experience different levels of challenges that affect their children's experiences. Educators also experience the outcomes of these structural inequities in their own lives and in the schools in which they teach.

Yet for our children, every day matters. While we wrestle with structural obstacles, we must use every tool at our disposal to address their present day experiences. Research reveals that students' experiences can be powerfully shaped by the fact that despite good intentions, educators are subject to the biases besetting most Americans. And most school curricula reflect a dominant cultural perspective that often makes students of color invisible. These biases, anxieties, and cultural cues undermine educators' abilities to create classroom environments in which students feel the sense of belonging and respect to flourish. Research also supports that when *educators* and other adults working with students are provided with adequate support, they are better able to serve all children, and particularly the most vulnerable. So to meet our students' needs, we also need to meet educators' needs.

What is Implicit Bias?

To understand how even educators with values of fairness and equity can treat children differently depending on race or ethnicity, we need to understand how our unconscious can prevent us from realizing our conscious values and goals.

We know what *explicit bias* is – when people consciously devalue or hold negative views of a particular group. When we refer to *implicit bias*, we are talking about the brain’s automatic, instantaneous association of stereotypes and attitudes with particular groups of people (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002). These implicit biases are often contrary to our personal values and are formed by the social environments around us (van Nunspeet et al., 2015). It can seem confounding that biases that we consciously reject can affect our behavior; however, decades of research in social psychology show that our behavior is far more often a result of unconscious than conscious processes (Greenwald & Banaji, 2012).

Explicit and implicit bias can both cause harm, but they are likely to show up differently and require different tools to address. In the context of discipline in schools, for example, explicit bias is likely to manifest in a consistent pattern of disproportionality regardless of the situation. By contrast, implicit bias in school discipline data would reflect “peaks and valleys in disproportionality from the same educators across different situations,” with equity in some situations and high disproportionality in others (Smolkowski et al., 2016, p. 180).

Implicit biases are not constructed at the individual level – but rather are based upon socially constructed stereotypes (Godsil et al., 2014). For educators, the risk is that their views of students of color are pre-constructed by the negative stereotypes so common in the media (Okonofua, J. A., & Eberhardt, J. L., 2015; Godsil et al., 2017). The media - whether news, film, television, or print media - frequently associate violence, criminality, and poverty with people who are black or Latino (Barreto, Manzano, & Segura, 2012; Dixon, 2008). Native Americans tend to be either invisible in the media or depicted as mired in poverty or as “people of few words and magical powers” (Kareen Nittle, 2017).

Implicit bias does not always mean negative bias toward particular groups – it can also mean comparatively positive preference for one group over another. Social scientists refer to this phenomenon as “in-group” bias or preference (Brewer, 1999; Tropp & Molina, 2012). While implicit bias linked to race may seem worse if it is a result of

negative stereotyping, treating a favored racial group better similarly translates into unfair outcomes (Reskin, 2000). For example, studies have shown that white people generally will not overtly rate black people negatively – they will simply rate similarly situated white people more positively (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004).

When educators see students through the lens of stereotypes, it can affect their judgments of both students' academic potential and the appropriate disciplinary response to their behavior.

How Might Implicit Bias Affect Students?

In research studies, educators have been found to hold a small but statistically significant higher level of academic expectation for Asian American students than for white students, and a small but statistically higher level of academic expectation for white students as compared to black and Latino students. A recent study also shows that black students are half as likely as white students to be assigned to "gifted" programs (Grissom & Redding, 2016). In the Early Child Education setting (see Westerberg, 2016), Yates and Marcelo found that educators rate black students who show imaginative play and negative affect in play as less well-adjusted compared to otherwise similar non-black children (2014).

Implicit bias can also affect educators' behavior. Tenenbaum and Ruck's research reveals that educators tend to ask more questions of, and give more encouragement to, white students, compared to students of color (2007). Similarly, Sadler and Zittleman concluded that educators interact more frequently with male students than female students, including asking them more questions and giving them more precise feedback (2009).

Because of the dramatic disparities in discipline, particularly in contexts involving ambiguous behavior, researchers have focused significant attention on the role bias and stereotyping may play in this context. In a series of experiments, Okonofua and Eberhardt found that teachers are more likely to label misbehaving black students as "troublemakers" than misbehaving white students (2015). They also found that in responding to scenarios, teachers rate black and white students similarly for a first infraction, but when black students misbehave two times, teachers are more likely to label students as "troublemakers," consider the misbehavior a pattern, and imagine using suspension as a disciplinary response (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

What Can Educators Do – What is Our Work?

To begin to address implicit bias in a real way is a life's journey. But because working with students and families is about relationships, reducing our biases and increasing our care and concern for people of all groups is critical. The challenge of addressing implicit bias is due in part to the fact that implicit bias is unconscious, so that those who hold these biases are wholly unaware that their behavior is inconsistent with the egalitarian values they may consciously hold.

Researchers have found, however, that engaging in a set of practices, over time, can reduce our biases, increase our concern about discrimination, and most importantly, increase our motivation and comfort with people about whom we may have had biases.

The most effective individual bias reduction strategies are a series of steps Devine and colleagues (2012) have described as "breaking the prejudice habit." In a longitudinal study, participants who engaged in these strategies showed significant reductions in implicit racial bias, which were maintained over eight weeks of follow-up (Devine et al., 2012). Critically, in a follow up study published in 2017 (Forscher et al., 2017), found that these results continued to be meaningful after two years. People who participated in the study engaged in the following strategies:

Individuation

This strategy relies on preventing stereotypic inferences by obtaining specific information about group members (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Using this strategy helps people evaluate members of the target group based on personal, rather than group-based, attributes.

Perspective Taking

This strategy involves assuming a first-person perspective of a member of a stereotyped group. Perspective taking increases psychological closeness to the stigmatized group, which ameliorates automatic group-based evaluations (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Stereotype Replacement

This strategy involves replacing stereotypical responses with non-stereotypical responses. Using this strategy involves recognizing that a response is based on stereotypes, labeling the response as stereotypical, and reflecting on why the biased response occurred. Next, one considers how the biased response could be avoided in

the future and replaces it with an unbiased response (Monteith, 1993).

Counter-Stereotypic Imaging

This strategy involves imagining in detail counter-stereotypic others (Blair et al., 2001). These can be abstract (e.g., smart black people), famous (e.g., Barack Obama), or non-famous (e.g., a personal friend). The strategy makes positive exemplars salient and accessible when challenging a stereotype's validity.

Increasing Opportunities for Contact

This strategy involves seeking opportunities to encounter and engage in positive interactions with out-group members. Increased contact can ameliorate implicit bias through a wide variety of mechanisms, including altering the cognitive representations of the group and directly improving evaluations of the group (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Devine et al., 2012).

People who engage in these practices noticed bias more in others than did students who hadn't participated, and they were more likely to label the bias they perceived as wrong. Two years later, students who took part in a public forum on race were more likely to speak out against bias if they had participated in the training.

CONCLUSION

If educators and other adults working with young people have the opportunity to learn about implicit bias and become motivated to engage in these practices, they have the opportunity to align their behaviors with their values, to support all of our children, and to be part of the hard work of ensuring that our schools effectively educate and support all children.