Understanding Unconscious Bias as One More Tool in the Committed White Teacher’s Equity Toolkit

Diane Finnerty

What if, in spite of good intentions and explicit statements supportive of diversity, you learn that you are susceptible to treating Black children more negatively than White children? Learning more about unconscious bias and its influence on our behaviors can be a useful tool in understanding how “good” people may still be contributing to racially disparate treatment.

Unconscious bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (Staats, 2015). Unconscious bias is different than conscious or explicit bias in that a person often does not endorse the bias and may, in fact, hold beliefs starkly in contrast. For example, a White teacher may serve on a school diversity committee because she is committed to racial equity, but she may still harbor unexplored, unconscious biases that cause her to mete out more punitive discipline to Black children than to White children engaged in similar behaviors.
Unconscious bias grows out of everyday functions of human cognition. The human brain receives over eleven million bits of information per second, but it is only able to process consciously about forty bits per second of what it receives, leaving us “99.999996% unconscious” (Comaford, 2016). To function efficiently, our brains create “mental shortcuts” to automatically sort specific details about objects, people, events, places, and so on into broader categories (Kang, 2009). For example, if I see a flat surface held up by four wooden columns, I automatically categorize it as a “table” and make decisions about how to interact with it without spending excessive energy looking at every detail of the object’s design.

Categorization is a necessary part of human cognition, but it can go too far when we sort humans into categories and use preconceived ideas or implicit associations in our interactions. For example, when school-age children were asked to “draw a scientist,” 92 percent of boys and 86 percent of girls drew a male scientist and almost 99 percent of the children depicted the scientist’s race as white (Fort & Varney, 1989). This kind of stereotype about a category of people unconsciously influences our expectations of members of that group—positively or negatively—and causes us to more critically regard someone who is incongruent with our expectations (e.g., a Black female scientist). Studies have shown that unconscious bias is more predictive of a person’s behaviors than their expressed beliefs. Unconscious bias has been identified in men and women across all racial and ethnic groups, sexualities, and other social groups. Although levels of bias may differ among individuals, no one is immune.

**EXAMPLES OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN EDUCATION**

Walter Gillam, a scholar who studies implicit bias in preschool settings, asserts that “implicit bias is like the wind—you can’t see it, but you can sure see its effects” (Toppo, 2016). The following studies identify the potential effects of unconscious bias when White teachers interact with Black boys.

**Expectations of classroom behavior.** In a recent study, early childhood teachers were asked to watch video clips of four preschool children—a Black boy, Black girl, White boy, and White girl—engaged in typical preschool classroom activities. The teachers were told to look for “challenging behaviors” (even though no such behaviors were in the video), and their gaze while watching the video was monitored using eye-tracking equipment. The study showed that when expecting to find “challenging behaviors,” the teachers watched the Black boys 42 percent of the time, more than any of the other children (Gillam, Maupin,
Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). This may in part explain why Black children represent 18 percent of national preschool enrollment but 42 percent of preschool children who are suspended and 48 percent of those suspended more than once (US DOE OCR, 2014).

**Perceptions of hostility and violence.** In another study, subjects were shown a photo of a gun or a toy and asked to categorize the objects quickly and accurately by pressing a computer key (i.e., press one key if the image is a gun and a different key if it is a toy). The images of the gun or toy were shown immediately after the subjects were briefly shown a photo of either a Black or a White five-year-old boy. After seeing the brief image of a Black boy, the subjects more quickly and accurately identified the gun as a gun and more frequently mistook the toy for a gun. Conversely, after seeing a White child’s face, the subjects more frequently mistakenly categorized the gun as a toy but accurately identified the toy as a toy (Todd, Thiem, & Neel, 2016). In a related experiment, subjects more quickly and accurately categorized “threatening” words (e.g., violent, dangerous, hostile, aggressive, criminal, threatening) and miscategorized “safe” words (e.g., innocent, harmless, friendly, trustworthy, peaceful, safe) after seeing the image of a Black child (Todd et al., 2016).

Previous studies have shown that Black men are perceived as more hostile (Devine, 1989), uncooperative (Greene et al., 2007), criminal (Dixon & Linz, 2000), and athletic (Biernat & Manis, 1994) than White men. Todd et al. (2016) conducted several tests to see if a different outcome could be reached when testing perceptions of Black children rather than Black adults. In other words, do Black boys receive the benefit of presumed innocence typically afforded children in our society? The studies showed that this was not the case.

**Assumptions of innocence and accountability.** Studies have shown that Black boys are generally perceived as older than their White peers, with an average overestimation of 4.5 years (i.e., a nine-year-old is perceived and treated as a teenager; a fourteen-year-old as an adult) (Goff et al., 2014). This assumption of adulthood can result in Black boys being held more accountable for their actions and more severely punished than White boys whose same behaviors might be more readily attributed to “youthful indiscretions” in need of a developmentally appropriate, rather than punitive intervention (Goff et al., 2014). This may be in part why Black children are eighteen times more likely than White children to be sentenced as adults in criminal justice courts and represent 58 percent of children sentenced to adult incarceration facilities (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2007, as cited in Goff et al., 2014). Research further suggests that teachers and school administrators often choose more severe punishment for Black students who commit a relatively minor offense than for White students for the same offense (Rudd, 2014).
Expectations of intelligence and academic performance. In a study assessing bias and expectations of intelligence, senior attorneys were asked to evaluate the writing competencies of a young attorney (Reeves, 2014). The senior attorneys were given legal memos written by someone identified as “Thomas Meyer,” a third-year associate and graduate from New York University (NYU). Twenty-two errors were imbedded in each memo (e.g., spelling, grammar, facts, technical writing errors), but they were otherwise identical except that “Thomas Meyer” was randomly identified as either African American or White. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being excellent), the memo written by the White Thomas Meyer received an average of 4.1 points for overall quality, compared to an average of 3.2 points for the Black Thomas Meyer; 2.9 of the 7 imbedded spelling errors were found in the White author’s memo, while 5.8 out of 7 were found in the Black author’s memo. Furthermore, the White author received encouraging, strength-based comments such as “generally good writer, but needs to work on,” “has potential,” and “good analytical skills.” The Black author received negative, deficit-based comments such as “needs lots of work,” “average at best,” and “can’t believe he went to NYU.” Unconscious bias predisposes us to see what we expect to see, rather than what is objectively in front of our eyes.

Another study showed that teachers perceived students who displayed a “Black walking style” as having lower academic achievement, being highly aggressive, and being more likely to need special education services (Neal et al., 2003, as cited in Rudd, 2014). Much attention has been paid to the Pygmalion effect, which shows how teacher expectations influence a student’s performance, and also to stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), in which a student perceives and internalizes negative stereotypes about his/her social identities, which can then induce anxiety and decrease academic performance. Unconscious bias can manifest in verbal and nonverbal behaviors that communicate lowered expectations and decreased warmth, such as reduced eye contact, shortened interactions, and heightened anxiety during interactions.

Microaggressions. Microaggressions, or “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue et al., 2007), can arise as a result of unconscious bias. For example, saying that a Black student is from a “good” family may imply that the alternative was anticipated. Calling one Black student by another Black student’s name (e.g., LaToya for LaTasha) may signal that the students reside in a similar category in your mind, rather than as unique individuals.
Implicit bias is like a habit that can be changed through a combination of efforts. Our biases have been formed over a lifetime and efforts to change should be viewed as life-long, as well. Here are a few strategies to get us started.

1) **Clarify your motivation.** Studies have shown that having a professional commitment to equality without also having a personal one has a limited effect on decreasing implicit racial bias (Rachlinski & Johnson, 2009). Examine why reducing the impact of bias in your interactions is "personal" to you. Write down your motivation, share the document with a colleague, post it somewhere, and revisit it regularly.

2) **Increase your self-awareness.** Explore your implicit biases by taking one or more of the race-related Implicit Association Tests (IAT) via the Project Implicit® online test site hosted by Harvard University (www.projectimplicit.org). Knowing what is in your own mind is an important first step to decreasing its influence on your behaviors.

3) **Create new thought patterns.** Although we can't go back and change our childhood socialization, we can continue to create new associations in our minds. Surround yourself with people who exemplify ideals counter to your stereotypes (e.g., images of Black scholars and artists). Seek out media outlets led by and for people of color to reduce the reinforcement of stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media (e.g., overrepresentation of Blacks as criminals). Develop authentic relationships with people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds who hold equal status to you (e.g., not only with the children or families in your school over whom you hold power). Studies have shown that deep friendships, especially romantic relationships, with someone of a different race assist in developing deeper empathy and increase a person's ability to take the perspective of people who are different (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011).

4) **Increase your "bias literacy" and engage in reflective practice.** Learn more about how unconscious bias might influence teachers' behaviors. Create a group to engage in reflective practice through discussions of readings. Videotape classroom teaching, and use case studies to understand how/if

*(Continued)*
patterns exist in your classroom and school. The group could pay particular attention to the micro- and macro-practices that may result in disparate outcomes reported at your school (e.g., suspensions, access to advanced placement classes, graduation rates). Consciously monitoring the influence of bias in everyday decision-making has been shown to decrease its impact.

5) Be a change agent in your school and profession. Changing ourselves as individuals is important, but if we don’t change the systems that perpetuate bias then we’ve done little to tackle the problem. Educate yourself and others on unconscious bias in hiring and advocate for hiring more staff and faculty of color; serve on a curriculum committee and ensure that the curriculum teaches about the greatness of all racial/ethnic groups; develop authentic relationships with colleagues of color to hear about their experiences and work together to change your institution.

6) Last, but certainly not least, take care of yourself: Research has shown that we are most prone to biased decision-making when we are tired, rushed, or otherwise cognitively burdened. Teachers too often work in underresourced, overly monitored environments where these conditions might occur. By taking care of yourself, you will be able to be more mindful about your behaviors and behaviors of others.

As a teacher, you have one of the most profound opportunities to make a difference, for the positive or negative, in a child’s life. Addressing unconscious bias won’t fix everything that hinders students’ success in our society, but it will provide tools to create more equitable and inclusive classrooms. It will also strengthen our individual and collective abilities to form more authentic multiracial relationships with colleagues and families to work together to forge a more just educational system for all.

The following piece by John Marshall implores White women to know themselves before they try to understand Black boys. Dr. Marshall, the chief equity officer for Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, has created systemic change that has raised the number of Black students in advanced placement classes throughout his district. However, when asked to write a chapter for The Guide, he chose to write about the importance of White women understanding their own identity because of how foundational that knowledge is to any lasting change within any system. Notice any feelings that come up as you read this chapter. It may be different to hear this message from a Black man rather than a White woman. Debby Irving and John Marshall have distinctly different styles. But the message is the same. Our work, as readers, is to learn to listen—and to hear—from many different voices. And in particular, our work, regardless of our racial background or gender identity, is to hear and understand the words that Black boys, Black men, and the families of Black boys are trying to tell us.