

5 Keys to Challenging Implicit Bias

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In 1999, I was a young history teacher at a diverse urban high school, pushing my students to read and write at pre-collegiate levels. One day, a group of kids came to lodge a complaint: "Why aren't we getting honors credit for this course? We're working so hard!" So I did what any scrappy young teacher who cares about equity might do: I tried to create an honors option within my course. I studied the state requirements, stayed up late to write a proposal, and brought it to the assistant principal in charge of scheduling. He rejected it outright.

"Why?" I implored. "My students are doing the same caliber of work as honors students at the magnet school across town."

"Our students aren't accelerated enough to handle an honors curriculum," he replied in a flat tone, as if to say, "*Didn't you get the memo?*" I was deeply troubled by this wrong-headed and frankly racialized assumption. My students were brilliant! Didn't *he* get the memo? But at age 26, as a white teacher learning to become an ally and advocate for students of color, I lacked the language to argue my position.

Implicit Bias: What Is It?

In recent years, I've learned about the powerful and pernicious impact of implicit bias on students' opportunities to learn. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that unconsciously affect people's perceptions, actions, and decisions (Kirwan Institute for Race and Ethnicity). According to Professor John A. Powell of the University of California at Berkeley, only two percent of our emotional cognition is conscious; the remainder lives in our unconscious networks, where implicit racial and other biases reside. Biased messages can be framed to speak to the unconscious. As they stack up, the brain uses rapid cognition to assess the humanity, threat, and worth of other human beings. More concretely, the prefrontal cortex lights up when we see someone as "highly human," but it fails to activate when we dehumanize people (Equal Justice Society).

Implicit biases often stand in opposition to a person's stated beliefs. My assistant principal believed that he was an advocate for our students, but his actions were driven by unconscious assumptions that formed a glass ceiling over their achievements. We can't afford to ignore the far-reaching effects of implicit bias in schools, including:

- **Disproportionality in discipline:** Policies that appear racially neutral on their face, but result in the over-representation of students of color -- particularly black boys -- in suspensions, expulsions, and referrals for subjective infractions like "defiance"
- **Disproportionality in special education:** Misguided placements that result in the over-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs
- **Teacher mindsets and beliefs:** Underestimating the intellectual capacity of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and often girls, inside the classroom
- **Tracking:** School policies that automatically place students of color in remedial or low-track courses

- **Dominant discourse:** Ways of thinking and talking about students and families that diminish, underestimate, or even pathologize them

Challenging Implicit Bias

How can we listen, lead, and teach for equity in the face of implicit bias? Here are five keys:

1. Become aware of your biases so that you can interrupt them.

Before entering a conversation with a student, colleague, or parent who triggers you, take a ten-second pause to ask yourself: "What are my biases toward this person? How can I disrupt my autopilot thoughts so that I can genuinely see and listen to him or her?" With awareness, you can replace biases with receptive listening and affirming thoughts.

2. Study and teach colleagues about implicit bias.

Here are a few facts that every educator should know:

- Bias is a universal human condition that must be recognized and managed, not a personal defect.
- We all carry biases from swimming in the waters of a racialized, inequitable society.
- According to Stanford social psychologist [Jennifer Eberhardt](#), focusing on individual acts of bias, or weeding out the "bad people," won't solve the fundamental problem.
- Listening helps us take in a person's multiple stories and disrupts biased thinking.

3. Pay attention to gap-closing teachers.

We all know teachers who connect with and support the success of every child. Consider how those teachers manage their own biases. How do they get to know their students as complex individuals? How do they build trust? What learning routines characterize their classrooms and humanize students? Through conscious reflection, you can isolate and track instructional practices that interrupt bias.

4. Stop tone policing.

[Blogger Maisha Johnson](#) defines tone policing in this way: "When marginalized people speak up about our struggles, and people from more dominant groups focus not on *what* we said, but *how* we said it." To challenge implicit bias, we must listen to the voices of colleagues who have been underestimated or misjudged. Often, however, when people of color are brave enough to name bias in schools, they hear that they're "too emotional" or "making things up." There's nothing made up about implicit bias. Learn from those who have the courage to speak up.

5. Tune into implicit bias in your school.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Where do I see implicit biases playing out in our school?
- What fear or apprehension do I have about addressing this issue?
- How can I be an ally to colleagues, students, and families who experience bias in our school?

In a wonderful [TED Talk](#), Verna Myers defines biases as "the stories we make up about people before we know who they actually are." She asks, "Who do you trust? Who are you afraid of? . . . How many authentic relationships do you have

with young black people. . . or any other major difference from who you are?" A recent study found that 75 percent of white Americans have entirely white social networks -- an experience that results in exaggerated perceptions of difference as well as fear and threat. Knowing this, you can engineer experiences in the classroom and the staffroom that build bridges and challenge misconceptions.

What are your ideas about interrupting implicit bias? I would love to hear.

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