Five Steps to Addressing Implicit Bias in Schools

(Originally titled "Unconscious Bias")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Sarah Fiarman remembers an epiphany she had as a teacher. Between classes, she expressed annoyance that a few students were frequently having side conversations while she was teaching. A colleague said she might be noticing this behavior among black students but not among whites. "Sure enough," says Fiarman, "when I observed more carefully in my next class, white students were doing the same thing. Without realizing it, I had selectively noticed the misbehavior of just one subset of students." As a white teacher who prided herself on racial sensitivity, she was chagrinned that she, like so many others, had absorbed an unconscious bias "in the same way we breathe in smog – involuntarily and usually without any awareness of it."

Implicit biases are present in people of all backgrounds – unconscious preferences based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity, usually favoring one's own group, but sometimes, among stigmatized populations, favoring the dominant group. Researchers have found that black students are often punished more harshly than white students for the same infractions, and there are differences in who gets called on in class, the level of questions, praise and correction, how educators communicate with families, and whether a parent's assertive advocacy is seen as pushy or appropriate. Fiarman's suggestions:

     • *Increase awareness*. "School leaders need to help their staffs understand that unconscious bias is not deliberate," she says; "it doesn't reflect our goals or intentions. Normalizing talking about it allows educators to examine and discuss their biases more freely and productively." Two free online tools are https://rework.withgoogle.com/subjects/unbiasing and https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html. Leaders can also suggest articles or books and give staff time to read, reflect, and discuss. This can lead to the kind of realization Fiarman had about her chatty students.

     • *Name it*. The teacher who helped Fiarman see her blind spot wasn't trying to make her feel bad; she was being helpful and her words were received in that spirit. How does a school facilitate such interactions? Singleton and Linton (2006) suggest four agreements for courageous conversations about specific incidents:

- Speak your truth.
- Expect to experience discomfort.
- Stay engaged.
- Expect and accept a lack of closure.

Colleagues can work on being non-defensive and deal with questions like: *What leads you to that conclusion? Would this decision be different if the family or child were of a different race or background? How would you make this decision if this were your own child?*

Fiarman describes a tense meeting with an African-American family. As principal, she took a risk and said, "If I were in your shoes, I might worry that the school was treating my son differently because he's black. I want you to know that we're thinking about that too. We don't want to be the school that disproportionately disciplines black boys." This helped create a climate that produced a positive plan.

     • *Anticipate bias and create systems to reduce it*. Forty years ago, symphony orchestras began auditioning musicians behind a screen, and the percent of female players increased from

6 percent in 1970 to 21 percent in 1993. In classrooms, calling on students using popsicle sticks eliminates the possibility of bias. It's also helpful for leaders to make decisions collaboratively, not in isolation or in anger, so there's time to slow down and hear from others.

      • *Build empathy*. One study showed that when teachers administer a simple questionnaire to students and learn about common interests and experiences, grades and behavior among minority students improve and gaps close. Another study found that intentionally building positive relationships with students can cut the suspension rate in half. "When teachers simply had opportunities to relate to or consider the perspectives of their students – and to be reminded of the value of this perspective-taking – they were more likely to change their behavior," says Fiarman.

      • *Hold ourselves accountable*. "Numbers keep us honest," she says. Tracking discipline referrals, the rigor of classroom questions, the quality of student work, and other data by race, gender, and other variables is a useful check on what's really happening.

      "Deconstructing our unconscious bias takes consistent work," Fiarman concludes. "We can't address it once and be done. We need to recognize these unwanted, deep-rooted beliefs and limit their influence on us. Then our actions will match our intentions."

"Unconscious Bias" by Sarah Fiarman in *Educational Leadership*, November 2016 (Vol. 74, #3, p. 10-15), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/2f5GI9Q; Fiarman can be reached at sarahfiarman@gmail.com.

Strategies for Boosting the Achievement of African-American Students

In this *Kappan* article, Derek Mitchell, Jesse Hinueber, and Brian Edwards (Partners in School Innovation) say it's unwise for schools to try to be colorblind. "Although the impulse is understandable and the sentiment is admirable," they say, "…[w]e cannot avoid being affected by racial currents in society, whether we acknowledge them or not… Schools that do achieve strong results for black students address racial dynamics carefully yet directly, empower students to bring their whole selves to school, and teach in ways that leverage students' experience and cultures." Here are the details of what these schools do:

      • *Direct attention, strategies, and resources to black student achievement.* This includes looking at multiple indicators (grades, discipline data, graduation rates) while treating students' race and culture as central to their identity – as assets to build on. For example, the Oakland, California schools have seen positive results from the Manhood Development Program, which focuses on the contributions of Africans and African Americans from ancient times to the present, emphasizes careers and civic engagement, brings in peer mentors, and features role models in school assemblies.

      • *Foster adult learning about race, culture, class, and power.* "Teachers of all races can successfully serve black students," say Mitchell, Hinueber, and Edwards, "and professional development can accelerate the process. School leaders play an important part by providing time and support for professional learning, modeling an assets-based approach toward students and staff, and demonstrating profound respect for students and families." Ongoing PD topics should include historical school experiences of black students, implicit bias, teacher

expectations, courageous conversations, discussion protocols, and key aspects of culturally responsive instruction. One particularly important point: teachers need to give honest and helpful feedback to students, not fall into the common trap of overpraising black students in an effort to boost their self-esteem. The most successful teachers are "warm-demanders."

• *Build strong relationships between educators and black students.* Effective schools "don't search for a silver-bullet instructional strategy," say the authors, "but, instead, understand that trusting relationships are essential to creating a thriving academic community." This means building rapport with students and their families (home visits are very helpful), allowing more student and family voice in parent conferences, and building a firm alliance with students focused on achievement. Teachers might think of the curriculum as mirroring students' backgrounds, providing windows to expose students to other cultures, and building bridges that connect the two. This kind of curriculum goes beyond superficial items like food, dress, and music, focusing on "deep culture" – how kinship and fairness are defined.

• *Foster non-cognitive skills and student agency.* This includes giving students a sense of belonging (*I am part of this academic community*), value (*This work is important to me*), growth mindset (*With effort, my skills will keep on improving*), and self-efficacy (*I can do this*). One particularly effective gap-closing strategy is having students reflect on and write about the principles that guide their lives.

"Looking Race in the Face" by Derek Mitchell, Jesse Hinueber, and Brian Edwards in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2017 (Vol. 98, #5, p. 24-29), www.kappanmagazine.org; Mitchell can be reached at dmitchell@partnersinschools.org.

Access and Equity Resources

Articles
- "Changing Students' Lives Through the De-tracking of Urban Mathematics Classrooms" Jo Boaler, Journal of Urban Mathematics Education
  http://ed-osprey.gsu.edu/ojs/index.php/JUME/article/view/138/85
- "How Does Race Affect a Student's Math Education?" Melinda Anderson
  https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/04/racist-math-education/524199/
- "Lens of Social Justice: Acknowledgment, Actions, and Accountability" NCSM/TODOS
  http://www.todos-math.org/assets/docs2016/2016Enews/3.pospaper16_wtodos_8pp.pdf

Books
- "Heterogenius" Classrooms: Detracking Math & Science, A Look at Groupwork in Action, Maika Watanabe (included a DVD)
- Mathematics for Equity: A Framework for Successful Practice, Nasir et al, NCTM
- Rac(e)ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms, H. Richard Milner
- Teaching With Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It, Eric Jensen
- The Impact of Identity in K-8 Mathematics: Rethinking Equity-Based Practices, Aguirre et al, NCTM
- The Brilliance of Black Children in Mathematics: Beyond the Numbers and Toward New Discourse, Leornard and Martin
- Building Mathematics Learning Communities: Improving Outcomes in Urban High Schools, Erica Walker
- Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap, Paul Gorski

Professional Development
- Building Culturally Responsive Systems--team based training offered through the Wisconsin RtI Center
  http://www.wisconsinrticenter.org/assets/files/resources/1479139463_BCRSFlyer.2016-17.pdf
- Promoting Excellence for All: Wisconsin DPI https://dpi.wi.gov/excforall

Video
- "Global Math Department" presentation by Rochelle Gutierrez, entitled *How our Definitions of Math and Equity relate to Who Excels*.
  https://www.bigmarker.com/GlobalMathDept/How-our-Definitions-of-Math-and-Equity-relate-to-Who-Excels

Organizations/Journals
- TODOS: Mathematics for All, Excellence and Equity in Mathematics,
  http://www.todos-math.org
- Journal of Urban Mathematics, Open source, ed-osprey.gsu.edu/ojs/index.php/JUME