

# Unconscious Bias

## When Good Intentions Aren't Enough

*Deep-rooted biases hinder our best intentions.  
Learn how to recognize and address them.*

**Sarah E. Fiarman**


**A**n experience as a teacher one year brought me up short and taught me an important lesson. When I complained about a few students having frequent side conversations during lessons in my class, a black colleague pointed out that I might be falling into a common pattern. Educators, he told me, frequently notice misbehavior among black students while ignoring the same behavior among white students. Sure enough, 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 someone who cares about equity, teaches about racism, and leads an anti-racism faculty group, how could I have read the situation so inaccurately? How could I have shown such bias?

### **The Influence of Bias**

A growing body of research shows that we all harbor unconscious biases. As psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum has explained, we absorb bias in the same way we breathe in smog—involuntarily and usually without any awareness of it.



Tests of *implicit bias* (or unconscious bias) show that people of all backgrounds show unconscious preferences on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, or other aspects of identity. According to these tests, most people favor the group they are a member of—despite claims that they have no preference. The tests also show, however, that people across groups show preferences for the “culturally valued group.” Approximately one-third to one-half of people in “stigmatized groups” tend to favor the “culturally valued group” (Morin, 2015).

These biases influence us even when they are in direct opposition to our espoused beliefs—and sometimes in opposition to our own lived

experience. That’s because unconscious biases are just that—*unconscious*. We aren’t aware of them and how they influence our behavior. For many educators, this can be disconcerting.

Teachers make countless other decisions that affect student learning on a daily and hourly basis. Who gets called on in class? What kind of feedback do students receive about their work? Who gets praise, and who gets redirection? How do we communicate with families?

### **Increase Awareness**

To begin, we must eliminate the stigma around talking about our bias. School leaders need to help their staffs understand that unconscious bias is not deliberate; it doesn’t reflect our goals and intentions. We can increase awareness and normalize talking about bias through direct teaching, modeling, and explicitly naming it. This allows teachers to discuss and examine their own biases more freely and productively.

Finding resources that explain unconscious bias is the easy part. For instance, Microsoft and Google have made their unconscious bias training materials available for free. (Find Google’s resources at <https://rework.withgoogle.com/subjects/unbiasing>. You can also take the Project Implicit bias test at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>.)

Prioritizing and protecting the time for this work can be more difficult. One middle school principal reserves one of two weekly team meetings for teachers to read articles and discuss cultural proficiency, including unconscious bias. At my school, a task force of teachers selected short articles for their colleagues to read and discuss at staff meetings. When we provide time for staff to learn about and discuss implicit bias, we create the conditions for people to monitor their own behavior and call one another on it without the “racist” stigma.

At one high school, the staff read *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Corwin, 2006) and discussed it in book clubs at staff meetings. After one of these meetings, a white teacher stopped by the principal’s office and said, “I get it.” Earlier that day, a white student had arrived late to his class. He asked her if everything was OK. During another period on that same day, a black student had arrived late. The teacher reprimanded her for being tardy and said she needed to take her education more seriously. As soon as

## **This doesn’t mean racism has been eliminated; it has just gone underground.**

Racism today looks different from the racism of 50 years ago. Most of us condemn overt bigotry. But this doesn’t mean racism has been eliminated; it has just gone underground. This isn’t news for people of color who experience the consequences, but many white people may struggle to recognize that they’re biased. If white educators like me don’t seek to understand our internalized biases, we risk perpetuating inequality.

Recently, researchers at Stanford sought to shed light on this issue. They wanted to understand the role

We can take concrete steps to increase the likelihood that these decisions are made with rational consideration of the facts rather than unconscious bias. First, we need to build awareness of unconscious bias and recognize its negative effects. Then we can begin to address it in our practice. Specifically, we can name it, develop systems to reduce biased decisions, build empathy for different perspectives, and hold ourselves accountable.

They wanted to understand the role

the words left his mouth, he heard the difference in how he'd spoken to the two girls. "I didn't think I was biased, but now I get it," he told the principal. Becoming aware of our bias is the first step in combatting it.

### Name It

Sometimes we increase awareness by naming bias in others and in ourselves. How exactly do we call people on potential bias in a way that doesn't feel like a personal attack? When my colleague pointed out my blind spot about students' side conversations, he didn't make me feel like a bad person; he was trying to help me. How does a staff get there?

Colleagues need to trust one another to give honest feedback. Developing and agreeing on norms can help. Singleton and Linton (2006) provide a model with their "four agreements of courageous conversation": stay engaged; expect to experience discomfort; speak your truth; and expect and accept a lack of closure. In addition to norms, your staff can generate ideas for how to raise questions to help one another see potential bias:

- What makes you think that? What leads you to that conclusion?
- Would this decision be different if the family/child were of a different race or background?
- How would you make this decision if this were your own child?

School leaders can model this honest exchange. For instance, when the school counselor and I are filing reports with the state for child neglect, I ask whether we're proceeding more quickly with a family of color than with a white family. I ask my assistant principal whether we're judging a low-income family of color as pushy, whereas we'd see the same action by a more affluent, white family as advocacy.

When someone else calls us on our thinking, we have to practice and model nondefensiveness. A white administrator going through unconscious bias training shared an interaction he regretted. During a meeting with a parent, the distraught mother accused the principal, "You don't care about my daughter because she's black." Feeling like he'd been punched in the stomach, the principal immediately refuted this parent's claim. The meeting ended acrimoniously.



Later, after learning about unconscious bias, this principal reflected that he wished he'd responded differently. He wished he'd acknowledged his potential bias and asked the parent more about what she saw that led her to that conclusion. He wished he'd told her that any biased actions she'd noticed were not aligned with his beliefs and were things he wanted to change.

White educators in particular may worry that acknowledging potential bias introduces a problem not already there. At a meeting with a black parent at my school, the tension in the room was almost palpable. We had been working on building a two-way relationship, so this wasn't

our first meeting. As the white teacher described reasons she was concerned about the child, the mother dismissed every statement. With this level of tension, we weren't going to get very far in developing a plan to help the student. Despite it feeling uncomfortable and risky, I decided to directly address what felt like the elephant in the room.

"If I were in your shoes, I might worry that the school was treating my son differently because he's black," I

said. "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." My intention wasn't to make a case that we were right, but to acknowledge that we were aware of our potential for bias.

No one directly addressed my comment. There were no reassurances from the mother or the black social worker who was also present. I can't claim that the meeting was transformed. But we did come up with a plan. Later, the social worker confirmed that every black family he worked with brought up their fear of bias from school staff. He thanked me for naming it and said it made a difference for him and the parent.

Parents of color are often reassured when a white educator names race or bias—not because it means the person is free from bias, but because it indicates that the person may be aware of his or her own prejudices (Tatum, 2008). Clearly, this is only one factor in building a trusting relationship, but it can begin when a person in authority acknowledges a problem that so many families of color face.

### **Anticipate Bias and Create Systems to Reduce It**

When people understand the problem of unconscious bias, they are more likely to take action to address it (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, we can't rely on increased awareness alone to make a difference. We need to anticipate situations in which our bias may skew our behavior and then proactively design systems that help us be fair.

For example, 40 years ago, orchestras developed a system that resulted in a dramatic increase in women being hired as musicians. Realizing the potential for bias in hiring, orchestras designed “blind” auditions whereby candidates performed for a jury from behind a screen. Despite traditionally low turnover in the country's top five orchestras, the number of women hired increased from 6 percent in 1970 to 21 percent in 1993. In addition, women were 50 percent more likely to advance in the hiring process (Goldin & Rouse, 2000). The system worked.

As educators, we can take similar action. Some teachers use their own “blind” systems to determine which students get called on. They put students' names on wooden craft sticks (sometimes called “fair sticks”) and put the sticks in a jar. When it's time to call on a student, they pull a stick from the jar. Whatever the system, the purpose is to create a structure that ensures our intentions—not our biases—are running the show.

## When we work in isolation, it's hard to see what we don't see.

Increased collaboration keeps bias in check, too. Educators may look at student work collaboratively or raise questions about a challenging student with a team. When we have to justify our thinking to others, we slow down our thought process and are more likely to consider all options. Making decisions collaboratively—about discipline, school policies, and family outreach strategies—provides the opportunity for others to point out our blind spots. When we work in isolation, it's hard to see what we don't see.

In a similar vein, flowcharts for determining disciplinary responses can help increase fairness. At my school, teachers created a flowchart for dealing with inappropriate behavior to increase consistency in our approach to discipline. It included graduated steps of discipline with reminders to communicate with families, connect with students, and collaborate with administrators. Such structures reduce the likelihood of an individual educator jumping directly to a suspension in a moment of tension. After all, it's the split-second decisions that are the hardest to self-monitor.

One black high school principal designed his own system for increasing fairness during daily hall duty. When kids dawdled between classes, he reprimanded them and directed them to get to class. Several students claimed that he singled out black students

more frequently than white students who were often dawdling in the same hallway. After carefully observing his own behavior, he was shocked to realize they were correct. He hadn't noticed the white students—or at least hadn't noted them as misbehaving.


This principal adopted a system to interrupt his unconscious bias—a workaround that would slow down his initial, instinctive response. He decided that when he was about to redirect a student of color, he would always scan to see if there were white students doing the same behavior. This structure forced him to pause and allowed him to monitor his bias in the moment. He now tells this story to educators to drive home the idea that we all harbor unwanted, unconscious bias; we all need systems to help us monitor our behavior and keep us on track.

### **Build Empathy**

Another proven way to counteract the power of unconscious bias is to replace negative associations with positive ones. Biases are built by repeated exposure to a particular message. Deliberately consuming counter narratives can help break down that automatic reflex.

A recent study used a simple “get to know you” survey to help teachers feel more empathy for their students. Although all teachers and students took the survey, only some of the teachers learned the results. Teachers who learned of specific similarities they shared with individuals in their class reported more positive relationships with the students. The effect was strongest for black and Latino students. In fact, the study showed that these students' grades also increased and, as a result, the achievement gap was narrowed by 60 percent (Gelbach and Robinson, 2016). (A free version of the survey is available at <https://backtoschool.panoramaed.com>.)

In a study out of Stanford



University, middle school teachers were randomly divided into two groups for professional development. While the control group learned strategies for using technology in their teaching, the experimental group learned about the importance of building positive relationships with students. They read first-hand accounts of students who struggled and who were helped by a caring teacher. The teachers also wrote about how they built relationships with students in their daily practice and why this was important. After just two sessions, sus-

## Split-second decisions are the hardest to self-monitor.

pension rates for teachers in the second group dropped by half (from 9.6 percent to 4.8 percent) while suspension rates for the control group remained the same (Okonofua et al., 2016).

It didn't take sophisticated psychological interventions over many years to see results in these studies. 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. This approach is replicable. Any faculty can administer the survey about similarities or engage in professional development that taps into teachers' natural inclination to empathize with students.

### Hold Ourselves Accountable

Numbers keep us honest. We may think we're responding to misbehavior fairly, but the office discipline records tell a different story. We say we have high expectations for all students, but does student work bear this out? What

patterns do we see along race, gender, and other lines of potential bias? Close examination of these patterns can reveal where unintended bias is at play. Measuring what we care about keeps us on track.

In schools with strong cultures of trust and collaboration, teachers may ask a peer to collect data. When we're not aware that we're falling into a pattern, outside eyes provide objective feedback. This might involve asking a colleague to observe a specific behavior, such as which students we help when the class is working

independently. A peer's data helps us see what we can't see in ourselves.

The staff at one school recently asked visiting educators to collect data about the level of questioning during class discussions. The staff was surprised when the data revealed that students of color were asked questions with low levels of cognitive demand whereas white students in general were asked questions that required more depth of thinking. Rather than trying to explain away this finding, the teachers saw it as an opportunity to understand how bias might be unconsciously affecting their interactions with students. Collecting data makes patterns like these visible.

Educators want to be effective with all students. Within this context, looking at student data provides an opportunity to shed light on two critical questions: Are we more effective with some groups of students than others? If so, what change in our practice will make us more effective with all students?

### Ongoing Work

Deconstructing our unconscious bias takes consistent work. 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. ■

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