

Implicit Bias

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Section 1: Statement of Diversity Issue

Multicultural education challenges racism and biases in school structures and practices. Authors Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (2012) comment teachers are not the main cause of low academic achievement because the majority genuinely care about their students, but their personal biases based on assumptions and stereotypes can negatively impact the academic achievement of students of color. Though unintentional, a teacher's implicit bias, or "relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgment and social behavior" (Brownstein, 2016) toward students of color aid to the systematic nature of discrimination in today's schools.

Heritage Middle School in Wake Forest, a public school in an affluent suburban neighborhood, has a student population of over 1300 students where the 66.7% are categorized racially as white and 15.7% are black. According to data compiled by SAS, Inc. for NC Schools Report Cards, during the 2014-2015 school year 80.2% of the students were proficient on their End-of-Grade (EOG) reading and mathematics tests scoring an achievement level 3 or above from levels ranging from 1 to 5. The disparity in those who displayed proficiency and those who did not surrounds ethnicity where 85.6% of the white students passed and 55% of the black students passed both tests. Though the percentage of black students passing both tests is higher than the district and state percentages, a large difference between the two groups exist at the school, district, and state levels. The negative implications of implicit bias in the classroom can affect the overall achievement of black students including their success on standardized tests like the EOG.

State and local programs, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS), have been put into place at the school level to identify and support

students who are not performing on grade level. Part of the intervention process is to determine where the student is underperforming, provide specific interventions targeting the skill, and either continue the intervention (if it is working) or proceed to determining if the student has a learning disability. What if before students are identified to need targeted interventions through the RTI or MTSS process teachers are given the opportunity to be made aware of and reflect on their own implicit biases toward skin color? In order to challenge the systematic persistence of racism in today's schools all aspects must be uncovered – including possible hidden feelings by those educating the children.

Section II: Multicultural Focus and Supporting Literature

Growing up in the early 1990s, I enjoyed stumping friends with the following popular riddle: *A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies at the scene and the son, badly injured, is rushed to the hospital. In the operating room, the surgeon looks at the boy and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He is my son."* Authors Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald (2016) explain our immediate association to the word surgeon is male, which causes our brains to fail at figuring out the second part of the riddle as to why the surgeon is the boy's mother and not father. This automatic word association is an example of stereotyping surgeons as male – having our brains leap beyond available information provided in the riddle. We categorize information presented to us including people we encounter. Banaji and Greenwald (2016) state "The primate brain has evolved to pay special attention to others of its kind, and one way in which we do this is to routinely try to predict what might go on in the minds of others" (p. 13). People are constantly making judgments and decisions about other people without having enough knowledge to correctly make a decision about, for example, the trustworthiness of a person. Through their research, the authors found mindbugs existed in people that are at "the root

of likes and dislikes, even strong passions” (p. 17). These mindbugs influenced social groups, and perceptions of people about themselves and others, which gave explanation to certain behaviors exhibited toward others.

Anthony Greenwald needed a way for people to make unbiased associations, therefore he constructed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) in 1994 in order for the test taker to complete a sorting task “relying on the fact that the brain has stored years of past experiences that cannot be set aside” (p. 39). For each IAT, the test has four categories: the two items being associated, insects and flowers, and a list of pleasant words and unpleasant words. Based on stronger feelings for one category or the other, the test taker will have an easier time pairing particular words with either insects or flowers. When presenting this information in 2011, Greenwald stated the “IAT measures relative association strengths some of these correspond to preferences; some correspond to stereotypes.” Greenwald next created the Race IAT associating African American and European American faces to pleasant words and unpleasant words. The test times how fast and accurately the test taker first sorts the faces, and then sorts African American faces with pleasant words and European Americans with unpleasant words before switching the sorting to African American faces with unpleasant words and European American faces with pleasant words. The test taker is scored to have White preference if he or she can sort pleasant words with European American faces faster than sorting pleasant words with African American faces. As an African American and an educator I thought I had no preference to either one, but the test showed I had an automatic White preference – the same outcome as nearly 75% of those who have taken the Race IAT online and in laboratory studies (Banaji and Greenwald, 2016, p. 47). Greenwald concluded those who scored White preference on the Race IAT showed “no overtly racially hostile actions – no racial slurs, no statements of disrespect, and certainly no

aggressive or violent actions... [but] a hidden race bias” (p. 52), which can allow for discriminatory behavior.

Let us revisit the earlier riddle. The association of surgeon to male is an existing mindbug that can have a negative word association to feminists, members of the LGBTQ community, and anyone else who wishes for gender and sexuality equality. The automatic preference serves as a navigational device for decisions and actions. Author and psychologist Claude Steele (2010) uses an experience of African American writer Brent Staples to explain an example of stereotypes influencing decisions by both the people stereotyping and the person who was stereotyped:

I became an expert in the language of fear. Couples locked arms or reached for each other’s hand when they saw me. Some crossed to the other side of the street. People who were carrying on conversations went mute and stared straight ahead, as though avoiding eyes would save them...

I’d been a fool. I’d been walking the streets grinning good evening at people who were frightened to death of me. I did violence to them just by being. How had I missed this...

I tried to be innocuous but didn’t know how...I began to avoid people. I turned out of my way into side streets to spare them the sense that they were being stalked...out of nervousness I began to whistle and discovered I was good at it. My whistle was pure and sweet – and also in tune. On the street at night I whistled popular tunes from the Beatles and Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. The tension drained from people’s bodies when they heard me. A few even smiled as they passed me in the dark. (p. 6)

Brent Staples illustrates his perceived threat while walking in Hyde Park in Chicago. His response to defuse the negative perception by whistling Vivaldi, a display of the dominant White culture, made him less of a threat to those walking near him.

Negative associations, carry weight in our society, which extends into the classroom. The achievement gap is not a new phenomenon that Nieto and Bode (2012) describe as “the circumstances in which some students, primarily those from racially, culturally, and linguistically marginalized, and low-income families achieve less than other students” (p. 13). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) used the 2011 NAEP grade 8 math assessment data to highlight the Black-White achievement gap in the United States. The report found that the gap existed whether black students were at a high-density school (more than 60% black population) or black students were at a low-density school; but the gap was smaller between races at the lower-density school. The study did not give solutions to narrowing the achievement gap, but noted several trends at schools with narrower gaps: “focusing efforts on differences within schools...or changing process (e.g. differential teacher expectations, tracking) that might be associated with higher student achievement” (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015, p. 22). This conclusion mirrored Joseph D’Amico’s observations at schools with narrower achievement gaps. Authors Nieto and Bode (2012) explained “He found that schools...have highly competent, dedicated, and well-trained teachers who have higher expectations for all students” (p. 68).

Section III: Action Plan and Rationale

Implicit bias allows us to make split-second decisions based on incomplete information. Upon meeting students on the first day of school, teachers make judgements and conclusions about student behavior and academic achievement based on stereotypes and past experiences.

Having the knowledge that 75% of the people who have taken the Race IAT scored higher on White preference warrants the years of reproduced racism or discrimination occurring in our society. Completing the Race IAT allowed me to stop and reflect and on my initial judgements about students, and question if those judgements have decided my level of academic expectation from the student or level of rigor I have placed on the specific students. At Heritage Middle School, the majority population is characterized as White while only 15.7% of the students are Black or African American. Of those students, just over half exhibited proficiency on either the math or reading EOG at the end of the 2014-2015 school year. In that same year, 85.6% of the White population demonstrated proficiency on the same tests. With a 30-point difference between the two groups at the same school, I question if teacher implicit bias of African American students negatively affects academic achievement and proficiency on the end-of-year standardized tests.

The idea of educator implicit bias against Black students cannot be the only reason for a large achievement gap at Heritage Middle. The data discussed in the NAEP Black-White achievement gap report gave ideas that aided the gap including academic tracking and teacher expectations. In regards to tracking students, or separating students by academic ability, Heritage Middle does participate in ability grouping specifically for mathematics classes. Upon entering middle school in sixth-grade, students are academically tracked due to their math level which dictates their schedule for the other three core classes. Traditionally, students are placed in classes with like-minded students. Black students are disproportionately underrepresented in advanced math classes and over represented in core math classes, thus creating a negative association of low expectations with black students. Claude Steele (2010) reminded his readers that “Education is not equal in this society, in either access or quality. Socioeconomic

orientations have all dampened the educational opportunities of some groups more than others...” (p. 47). The quality of education, or the types of activities, taking place in core math classes versus advanced math classes differ. Nieto and Bode (2012) comment that teachers’ “beliefs that their students are ‘slow’ can become rationale for providing low-level work in the form of...simple drills and rote memorization” (p. 75). If Black students are overrepresented in classes where the class as a whole is viewed as incapable of the work, coupled with a teacher’s preference to White children, it is no wonder that Black students across the country are scoring significantly lower on tests than their White counterparts. Unfortunately, academic tracking is not going away in Wake County Public Schools anytime soon, therefore I will focus on the other suggestion: teacher expectations.

Multicultural education challenges racism, biases, and stereotypes within the school, which includes how teachers view all students. It is incredibly simple for teachers to claim their neutrality or colorblindness in order to stay objective as Banaji and Greenwald explained in their book Blindspot. The brain has mindbugs or blind spots that exist in the subconscious without realizing they are there. These mindbugs are going to affect facial expressions, responses, or overall reactions to students reinforcing negative stereotypes without the realization it is happening. The following set of activities are intended for teachers at Heritage Middle to reflect on their own race assumptions and implicit bias and re-examine their classroom practice.

One the first workday at the start of the school year, all 75 teachers at Heritage Middle will participate in the implicit bias training in the media center lead by the 5-person administration team, including the Instructional Resource Teacher. Heritage, a year-round school, would have just ended the school year the week prior, and this time is one of the only times the entire staff is in the building. The participants will be given a brief overview of student

achievement and cultural bias before examining their own hidden biases individually. Teachers will go to the Project Implicit website, click “I wish to proceed,” and select the Race IAT. They will spend a few minutes taking the test with given time to retake if they were unsuccessful with a receiving a clear preference. This information will not be shared with anyone but used as a tool for personal reflection. After completing the test, teachers will respond to the following questions: How did the IAT inform your understanding of hidden bias? To what extent were you surprised or not surprised by your results? Banaji and Greenwald (2016) stated once people took an IAT they’ve “discovered [people] would rather know about the cracks in their own minds” (p. 60). Within their small groups, participants will converse about the following question: How does understanding your own implicit bias prepare you for engaging with diverse populations? In a popcorn fashion, representatives from each group will write on chart paper hung around the room their takeaways from the conversation.

The presentation will move to assumptions about race and how that can influence how teachers may view their students. Brent Staples’ experience in Chicago and the surgeon riddle are appropriate examples of how assumptions lead to extend stereotypes and unintentional racism. Teachers will watch a 2-minute video slideshow, *Me, My Race and I: What’s Race Got to Do with It*, a piece of the PBS series *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. This portion of the series allows the teachers to listen to how race plays a large role in everyone’s lives, but do the race rules apply to everyone equally. After the video, the participants will work together on a sorting activity on the Understanding Race website. The groups will answer whether other nationalities fall under the category of White with only a name of the nationality to go by. This activity, though simple, questions the socially constructed concept of race and the power that it holds. Once the sorting activity is complete, groups will converse about the following questions: How

can my assumptions influence how I see and interact with people in negative ways? How does the IAT, video slideshow, and sorting activity make me more aware of my implicit bias? Just like in the last activity, teachers will discuss as a small group before a representative of the group writes down their findings on the chart paper around the room.

The final piece to the presentation is to relate implicit associations to high achievement. If implicit bias is how we see people in general, teachers need to reflect on how that can influence interactions with students and student potential. Participants will hear about Claude Steele's (2010) research on what he calls stereotype threat – the devaluation of Blacks and other people of color due to attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about particular groups. Steele tells of an experiment he performed on a group of Black students taking the verbal exam section of the SAT. He split the group of students into two, where one group experienced the pressure or stereotype threat of being low achieving and the other group experienced no pressure of the stereotype by saying the that questions were an “instrument to study problem solving in general, and not a diagnostic of individual differences in ability” (p. 56). His experiment found that Black test takers in the negative group performed considerably worse than that of the Black test takers in the ability test group. Relieving the stress and the self-doubt by simply changing the wording of the test changed the students' outlook on their ability to perform well. This example serves as a testament to pressures from the biases Black students experience on a daily basis – whether aware or unaware of the affect it has on academic achievement. Participants will end the session self-reflecting on initial encounters with students and how that can influence expectations and student performance. Teachers will leave the meeting encouraged to truly reflect on their mindset toward students of color, and how increasing their expectations for all students without modifying the curriculum will increase student achievement. As teachers leave the media center

they will be challenged not to share their previous experiences with students to their upcoming teachers in order for them to not prematurely form biases toward individual students.

Throughout the school year teachers will be given the opportunity to reflect on their classroom practices, and will hold each other accountable for actions or conversations that unintentionally puts a student or group of students down. On the Early Release before Winter Break, teachers will be asked to use the Teacher Perception Tool developed by Teaching Tolerance and found on its site to revisit the conversation on perceptions and judgments had the beginning of the school year. Teachers will compare their initial perception in each of the scenarios to their feelings at the start of the year and answer the following questions: Have initial feelings toward specific groups changed? If so, what have you done differently to change how you view people? If not, in what ways are you combatting those feelings in the classroom to ensure fair and equal treatment of students? This time for self-reflection will continue throughout the school year with hopes by educating the staff on cultural acceptance they apply and extend that same mindset to their classrooms.

We all have biases, which can negatively impact student academic success. The works of Banaji, Greenwald, Nieto, Bode, and Steele offer insight to those unintentional biases that can persuade decisions and actions within the classroom. Knowing about the implicit biases is only half the battle. Teachers must understand how the ramifications of their unintentional actions continues the cycle of institutionalized racism and discrimination, which prolongs the Black-White achievement gap. Knowing is only half the battle, but it is the first step to properly implementing multicultural education.

Section IV: Reference List

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