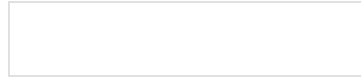


Four Ways Teachers Can Reduce Implicit Bias



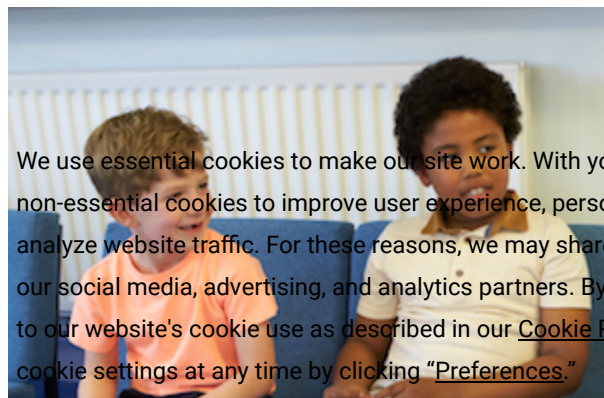
We're all subject to bias. Here are tips to help teachers treat all of their students with dignity and care.

BY JILL SUTTIE | OCTOBER 28, 2016



A friend of mine recently told me about an incident involving students at Berkeley High School. On the first day of classes, African-American juniors and seniors were being asked by their honors course teacher to show him their schedule when they entered the classroom. The teacher, who was white, apparently assumed the black students were lost and in the wrong room, and his gesture made them feel unwelcome and humiliated.

This is an example of implicit bias—a behavior that arises from subconscious associations, which may even contradict someone's explicit values. Implicit racial bias plays a role in many classrooms and schools with potentially devastating effects. In one recent experiment with preschool teachers, researchers found that when teachers were primed to look for behavioral problems while watching a classroom video with black and white children (none of whom were misbehaving), teachers gazed much longer at black children than white children, as if anticipating the behavioral problems would come from the black children.



We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with our social media, advertising, and analytics partners. By clicking "Accept," you agree to our website's cookie use as described in our [Cookie Policy](#). You can change your cookie settings at any time by clicking "Preferences."

Accept

In another experiment from the same study, teachers read a vignette about a behavioral problem with a preschooler randomly identified as a black boy, black girl, white boy, or white girl, and then were given details about the child's background or not. Providing the background information on the child increased the severity of suggested disciplinary actions when the race of the teacher didn't match that of the child, supporting the idea that we are more inclined to punish those who look different from us.

In fact, disciplinary actions are more likely to be perpetuated against African Americans—boys and girls alike—than any other group of students, regardless of the infraction. And while it's understandable that teachers would want to prevent disruptions in the classrooms and take actions to avoid them, some seem to have little idea of how to do that without turning to ingrained biases.

Of course, teachers are not alone in having racial biases. Their behavior reflects how social messages are hard to escape, even for people of color. But studies like these show how racial disparities can be perpetuated in classrooms, too. If left unchecked, this kind of biased treatment can haunt a student well into elementary school and beyond, making the promise of “schools as the great social equalizers” a false one.

The good news is that teachers *can* learn to combat their prejudice, even the implicit kind, if they become more aware of it and take steps to actively fight it in themselves. Here are some of the ways that might help educators treat all of their students with dignity and care.

1. Cultivate awareness of their biases

Teachers are human and therefore influenced by psychological biases, like the fundamental attribution error, when we assume that others who behave in a certain way do so because of their character (a fixed trait) rather than in response to environmental circumstances. In-group bias leads us to assign positive characteristics and motivations to people who are similar to us.

We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with our service providers, analytics, and advertising partners. By clicking "Accept," you agree to our website's cookie use as described in our [Cookie Policy](#). You can change your cookie settings at any time by clicking "[Preferences](#)."

Biases like these are natural, used as cognitive shorthand for making quick social judgments in ambiguous situations, especially those involving people from unfamiliar ethnic or social groups. They become a problem when we're not aware of their impact on other people. And if we're part of a majority group with more social, economic, or political power than a minority one, then accumulated unconscious bias can be extremely destructive, limiting the life opportunities and hurting the well-being of the minority group.

Many researchers believe that becoming more aware of our biases can help us improve our interactions with others, decrease our sense of unease in interracial contexts, and make better decisions. Though most of this research has been done with other professional groups or the general public, the same lessons are likely to apply to teachers.

However, many teachers feel pressures not to cop to those biases, perhaps out of fear they will be accused of racism. This leaves them blind to the ways that biases work at an unconscious level. Pretending to be colorblind is *not* helpful and in fact adhering to a color-blind philosophy has been shown to increase implicit bias, at least in college students. Admitting that we are all subject to biases creates a safer space to examine them more carefully and to take steps to fight them.

2. Work to increase empathy and empathic communication



We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with

our social media, advertising, and analytics partners. By clicking "Accept," you agree to our website's cookie use as described in our [Cookie Policy](#). You can change your cookie settings at any time by clicking [Preferences](#).

Empathy—the ability to understand another's perspective and emotions—is important in all human social encounters, including teaching. Yet, often teachers have little understanding of the communities where their students live and have

trouble understanding their perspectives, leading them to treat these students more harshly.

One solution: learning about the lives of students and showing that you care. At least one study has found that actively trying to take the perspective of another person—as opposed to trying to be “objective”—increased one’s ability to not fall prey to stereotypical views of others. Actively inducing empathy for another person has been tied to a willingness to consider environmental circumstances more closely when handing out punishments for misbehavior. And, one recent study has found that training teachers in empathy cut down student suspension rates in half.

Though perhaps more research has been done on empathy in other professionals (such as physicians and police officers), teachers may want to take note of the ways that they have learned to increase their empathy through a combination of stress reduction, learning how to manage difficult emotions, and practicing empathic communication. Treating students with kindness and consideration is a sure way to bring out kindness in them, too.

3. Practice mindfulness and loving-kindness

Mindfulness practices—such as paying attention in a nonjudgmental way to one’s breath or other sensations—has been shown to decrease stress in teachers, which can indirectly have an effect on reducing bias. But according to some research, mindfulness may also have a direct effect on bias reduction as well.

In one study, young white participants who listened to a 10-minute audiotape with instructions in mindfulness showed less implicit bias towards blacks and older people than those who listened to a 10-minute discussion of nature. This suggests that nonjudgmental awareness, even when not specifically focused on reducing prejudice, can help reduce unconscious biases.

Loving-kindness meditation—a practice that involves consciously sending out compassionate thoughts toward others—may also help. In a recent study, the random assignment of a short-term loving-kindness meditation reduced implicit

We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with our social media, advertising, and analytics partners. By clicking "Accept," you agree to our privacy notice described in our [Cookie Policy](#). You can also help manage your cookie settings at any time by clicking "Preferences."

bias toward a targeted group, though it didn't decrease implicit bias for other groups not targeted by the meditation.

4. Develop cross-group friendships in their own lives

MORE ON IMPLICIT BIAS

Explore **how to stop the racist in you**.

Learn **why teachers are more likely to punish black students**.

Look to the **unconscious** to understand our new racial reality.

Discover how **mindfulness can defeat racial bias**.

While it's important to take steps in the classroom, the relationships we form outside of the classroom can also have an impact on bias.

Cross-group friendships have been shown in several studies to decrease stress in intergroup situations, to decrease prejudice toward outgroup members, and to decrease one's preference for social hierarchy or domination over lower-status groups. These findings alone might encourage teachers to seek out cross-group friendships in their lives so that they can be more receptive to the diverse students they find in their

classrooms.

Another reason for teachers to consider developing cross-group friendships is that they may influence their students to do the same. When people see cross-group friendships working out in positive ways, they tend to be more willing to engage in cross-group friendships themselves.

In addition, positive cross-group friendships can have contagion effects in other people within social groups, turning whole communities into warmer, more receptive spaces for cross-group interactions. All of this bodes well for teachers role-modeling the kind of behavior they want to see in their students.

We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with our social media advertising and analytics partners. By clicking "Accept," you agree to our website's cookie use as described in our [Cookie Policy](#). You can change your cookie settings at any time by clicking "[Preferences](#)."

Of course, this doesn't necessarily mean teachers should indiscriminately approach someone just because they are from a different racial group. Instead, teachers can reach out to colleagues at work, or get involved in activities or perhaps attend events where people with different backgrounds and perspectives come together for a common cause. Developing friendships can be one of the best ways to break down barriers of prejudice, and it's more easily done when people have some common interests.

Is this a lot to ask, given all the burdens our society heaps on teachers? Perhaps. Teachers should get more support than they do, and, ideally, school districts should make reducing implicit bias a priority backed up with money, policy, and training. Individual teachers can only do so much.

Luckily, the teaching profession tends to attract altruists who *want* to teach in a way that helps their students. By working at countering implicit bias in themselves, they can truly make a difference in the lives of their students, making them feel safe, cared for, and welcome in the classroom.

Get the science of a meaningful education delivered to your inbox.

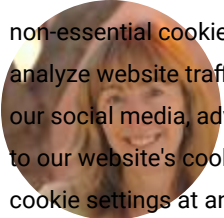
Email Address

Sign Up

About the Author

We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use

non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with

 **Jill Suttie, Psy.D.**, is *Greater Good's* former book review editor and now serves as a staff writer and contributing editor for the magazine. She received her doctorate of psychology from the University of San Francisco in 1998 and was a psychologist in private practice before coming to *Greater Good*.

We use essential cookies to make our site work. With your consent, we may also use non-essential cookies to improve user experience, personalize advertisements, and analyze website traffic. For these reasons, we may share your site usage data with our social media, advertising, and analytics partners. By clicking "Accept," you agree to our website's cookie use as described in our [Cookie Policy](#). You can change your cookie settings at any time by clicking "[Preferences](#)."