

# CHECKING OUR BIAS AT THE DOOR

## Centering our core values in the classroom

By **Rebecca EunMi Haslam**

Whether we call it implicit, subconscious, or unconscious bias, this phenomenon not only affects individual relationships and perceptions of others, but also influences policies and real-world conditions that distort equitable opportunities for success in and outside of school. Although none of us can free ourselves of biases, we can learn how to recognize them, question them, and mitigate their impact.

As our local and national communities become more racially and culturally diverse, literacy educators need to have the skills to recognize and address bias and microaggressions when they occur, unpack their hidden messages, and better understand their effect on student achievement and well-being.

### Bias starts with self

We're all products of our experiences and environment, which shape the way we interact with the world, contextualize our understanding of information, and inform our assumptions.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity defines implicit bias as the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Biases are typically not things we consciously choose to believe. Instead, they are things that we've heard since early childhood, things our parents said, things we heard on TV, read on

the internet, and things that, over time, we've come to accept as truth.

This is the way implicit bias works. We form prejudices about folks whom we see as different from us, and because we can't fully understand someone else's lived experiences, we go with what we think we know, our assumptions, and what we've come to believe about *people like them*.

### Bias and schema theory

Bias informs our understanding of social norms. Grounded in our own experiences, communities, and perspectives, bias typically leans in our favor. This might look like giving the benefit of the doubt to someone with

whom we can relate, maybe a student who reminds us of our own children, or having more empathy for people "like us" whose experiences we feel we understand.

The flip side of this, of course, is troubling. Bias often causes us to view "others" in a more negative light. If we can't fully understand someone else's experience, or even relate to it at all, our brains default to what we think we know or what we think is probably true.

Schema theory tells us that when we encounter new information, we look for existing knowledge to hang the new information on, to make connections to what we already know and contextualize the new understanding.

If we've never encountered a particular difference before—for example, if we've never had a close relationship with a member of the LGBTQ community—then the first time we meet a person identified as trans, our brain, lacking anything familiar to draw upon, will instead default to our biases, the things we heard somewhere and think are probably true, and we run with it.

When we act on our biases, we might be causing unintentional harm. Although none of us are immune from bias, it is our responsibility as educators to be aware of when they're creeping in so we can push back against them, question our assumptions, provide counternarratives to stereotypes we might not have known we had, and ensure that we are, in fact, living up to our stated core beliefs in the classroom.

## A values-based approach

Biases often conflict with the social norms and egalitarian values we would claim to embrace. In my work as a pre-K–12 trainer for educational equity, I have asked more than a thousand teachers to summarize their core beliefs about children, learning, and education. Themes that emerge include our shared desire for all children to feel safe, welcome, respected, heard, affirmed, supported, and valued in school.

Teachers enter the profession with their whole hearts, and I believe we all want to realize those stated core values. To do so, we must be able to check our own biases at the door.

In other words, if we truly believe every child in our care can learn, achieve, and succeed, if we truly believe that every child deserves to be loved, valued, cared for, accepted, and nurtured, we simply cannot allow our own personal politics, religious beliefs, or biases to impact our interactions with any child.

If we refuse to affirm an individual student's home life, family structure, religious beliefs, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, language, or cultural practices simply because they differ from our own, *we are doing damage to the children entrusted into our care.*

One year in my own first-grade classroom, I was doing an integrated social studies and literacy unit about family culture. I asked everyone to draw and label their family members in as much detail as they could.

Starting with their “adults at home,” some drew a mom and a dad, some drew just one parent, some drew two moms, two dads, a grandparent, an older sibling, an uncle, and a foster parent. One child, surprised to see a peer's drawing of his mom and mommy, laughed and told him he must have made a mistake.

This moment helped illustrate how unimportant our own biases, opinions, and even religious beliefs become when talking about a child's life. These were his parents, regardless of what anyone thought about it. This was his family, and this was him. There was no other choice in that moment than to affirm this for him, and for everyone in the room.

All children should feel validated for who they are and for the contributions they make to the diversity of perspectives in the classroom. If we make space only for those we view as similar to us, we are allowing our own biases to dictate the climate in the classroom, to set the norm, and to position deviation from the norm as a deficit.

## Learning from our students

I recently had the pleasure of working with a large group of seventh graders in a rural community in northern Vermont. We were talking about our own social identity markers such as race, social class, age, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ability status, language, and interests, and how we viewed people who are different from ourselves. We used the frame, “So if I am \_\_\_\_\_, I probably don't fully understand the experiences of someone who is \_\_\_\_\_.”

Students practiced using this frame to talk about age, surfacing some of the assumptions they hold about younger kids and about adults. They shared stories about their experiences being treated as if they were too young to make intelligent contributions to a conversation or to understand complex concepts. Next, they talked about gender, opening the conversation up

beyond the binary language of “boy or girl” and talking about all the space in between. Many shared that they didn't understand the experiences of people who identify as genderqueer, gender nonbinary, or gender fluid.

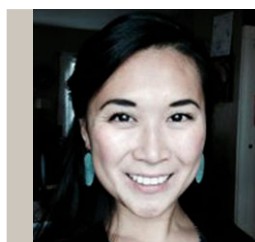
We talked about how people react when they're uncomfortable, and how this is different from thinking something is funny. We talked about how our own lack of understanding about someone different from ourselves doesn't automatically signal deficit.

We also talked about religious beliefs. Students expressed a wide range of perspectives including being very religious, being nonreligious, and being unsure of what they believed. Some talked about how their own beliefs have changed over time or how their beliefs might differ from those of their parents. This allowed many to see the connection between lack of understanding, lack of being understood by others, and how they might apply this reflection to other aspects of their lives like their personal politics, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

## Implications

Learning from these seventh graders' experiences, we might allow ourselves to consider the ways in which our own perspectives can act as barriers to understanding difference. Even despite our best intentions, we must acknowledge how our decisions, word choices, affirmations, the perspectives we choose to represent, erase, or omit, our avoidance of certain topics, our assumptions, and biases all have lasting impact on students.

None of us can free ourselves of all bias, but we can try to be aware and increase our capacity to question our assumptions, to recognize when our perspectives might be influencing our judgments and expectations of others, and to check our bias at the classroom door with the goal of aligning our stated core values with our actions. ■



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