

Implicit Bias: A Foundation for School Psychologists

CASE SCENARIO

A few weeks ago, Dr. Johnson attended a meeting for a third grade student at one of his schools. Upon entering the main office, he greeted the office staff and a few teachers checking their mailboxes. Although a woman was sitting on the couch, Dr. Johnson did not acknowledge her. After a few minutes, he walked to the conference room to prepare for the meeting. After the assistant principal, Mrs. Smith, classroom teacher, and reading specialist arrived, Dr. Johnson asked whether an interpreter would be attending the meeting. Mrs. Smith said, “No.” Dr. Johnson smirked and mumbled to himself, “This is going to be a long meeting. This student probably has a lot of academic concerns and his mother doesn’t speak English.” When Mrs. Smith asked Dr. Johnson why he felt this way, he said, “His last name is Cruz-Martinez. In my experience working in this school, the parents of most students with these types of last names don’t speak English. In fact, I’m pretty sure his mother is sitting in the main office now. I was there a few minutes ago chatting with a few staff members and I didn’t hear her say anything. She likely doesn’t speak English, or speak it very well.” Without responding, Mrs. Smith left to greet the parent, Mrs. Cruz-Martinez, in the office and escort her to the conference room.

Upon arrival in the conference room, Dr. Johnson was expecting to hear Mrs. Cruz-Martinez speak “poor” English. To his surprise, her English was impeccable and she did not have any difficulty understanding the team members as they shared their concerns about her son. Additionally, the referral concern was not academic in nature, but related to his inattentive behavior in the classroom. Embarrassed by his misperception of the student and his mother based on their last name and her quiet demeanor in the office, Dr. Johnson learned valuable lessons about himself and implicit bias.

BACKGROUND

In the coming months, the Social Justice Task Force will be releasing a series of resources that are relevant to the equitable practice of school psychology, including interventions and recommendations for how to address implicit bias and other systemic issues that adversely impact students, families, schools, and communities. Specifically, these resources will be related to the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline practices with nonmajority students and the importance of implementing culturally sensitive building and district level multitiered systems of support (MTSS) to mitigate these and other outcomes. Because of adverse outcomes such as special education disproportionality and the school-to-prison pipeline, which is a byproduct of ineffective discipline practices for nonmajority students, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) feels that these resources are especially imperative to equip and empower its members to address these issues in their schools and school systems. As an introduction to these resources, a

brief overview of implicit bias is provided because it is central to our understanding of disproportionality and how to effectively address systemic inequities in schools.

IMPLICIT BIAS OVERVIEW

As cited by the National Center for State Courts (2012):

Unlike explicit bias (which reflects the attitudes or beliefs that one endorses at a conscious level), implicit bias is the bias in judgment and/or behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control. (p.1)

The underlying attitudes and stereotypes that lead to implicit bias are beliefs or simple associations a person makes between an object, including other individuals, and their subsequent evaluation of that object that "... are automatically activated by the mere presence ... of the object" (Banaji & Heiphetz, 2010; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hudson, 2002, p. 94). Regardless of setting, implicit bias presents a unique challenge for a variety of reasons. First, it operates on an unconscious level. Next, it is neither deliberate nor intentional, but manifests as an automatic stereotypical response or association made about an individual or group of individuals based on perceived group membership (e.g., race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, age). As a result, implicit bias often goes unexamined, hidden within the status quo, creating a gap between intentions and outcomes (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2016; Lai, Hoffman, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2013; Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Jackson, 2016; Van Nunspeet, Ellemers, & Derks, 2015).

Despite our training as education and mental health professionals, like others with whom we serve, school psychologists are shaped by our personal experiences and interactions with the world around us, which makes us vulnerable to implicit bias. In fact, as noted in the vignette above, even a well-intentioned African American school psychologist who prides himself in serving all students and families within his school and community was susceptible to implicit bias. While most research tends to focus on implicit bias through the lens of White individuals, theoretically, everyone is vulnerable to implicit bias. For example, numerous studies (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA], 2016; Goff et al., 2014) have shown that Black boys are perceived as being older and more dangerous than their White counterparts. Furthermore, the vulnerability associated with implicit bias develops at an early age, is reinforced by the beliefs and assumptions of our respective communities, and is perpetuated by stereotypes presented in the mass media (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). For example, historically, Black individuals have been portrayed less favorably than persons from other ethnic groups in movies and television programs by being cast in roles associated with crime, drugs, and other types of negativity. As these images and stereotypes have been reinforced, an inherent fear of Black individuals subconsciously develops. Very importantly, because world views are shaped by personal experience, they cause us to ascribe meaning to certain behaviors, which makes us susceptible to implicit bias. For school psychologists who serve students, families, staff, and communities in a variety of settings, implicit bias is particularly dangerous because it can influence our behavior and decisions, especially when we are faced with ambiguous and subjective situations (Girvan et al., 2016; Staats et al., 2016).

School psychologists have a professional responsibility to ensure that all students receive an equitable and just education that not only prepares them for academic success but also places them in a position to make meaningful contributions to society (NASP, 2013). Although we have a moral

and ethical obligation to operate without bias and prejudice, implicit bias is arguably one of the most significant challenges facing our profession as it influences the educational outcomes of an increasingly diverse student body. School psychologists and other educational professionals might be unaware that implicit bias actively influences, and in many instances determines, teacher expectations as well as negatively impacting a variety of decisions (e.g., grades on assignments; which students are most likely to be referred for special education, gifted, and/or advanced placement classes; which children are more likely to be disciplined and the severity of such discipline; Van Nunspeet, Ellemers, & Derks, 2015). Okonofau and Eberhardt (2015) reported that teacher responses contribute to racial disparities in discipline. Moreover, these racial disparities were evident even when Black and White students behaved in the same manner. Additionally, infractions by Black students influenced the interpretation of, and response to, future infractions. Gregory and colleagues (2010) noted “differential selection” at the classroom level may contribute to racial/ethnic disciplinary disproportionality. Additional evidence for the impact of implicit bias was put forth by Weir (2016), who reported Black students are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than White students, and three times more likely to be recommended for gifted and talented educational programs if they had a Black teacher.

Ongoing research by several authors suggests that working to minimize the impact of implicit bias may be helpful in reducing the school-to-prison pipeline, reducing discipline and special education disproportionality, increasing teacher expectations, strengthening teacher–student relationships, and bolstering the relationship between schools and communities at large (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2016; NASP, 2013; Okonofau, Walton, & Eberhardt, 2016; Skiba et al., 2002). Coupled with being aware of our own propensity for implicit bias, school psychologists are encouraged to highlight this issue and support school-based staff in the implementation of culturally responsive academic and behavioral MTSS to help mitigate and “neutralize the effects of implicit bias” (Girvan et al., 2016, p. 1). Specific actions to take include offering regular cultural competence training, increasing the positive representation of people of color throughout the school building (i.e., hiring professionals of color, displaying positive posters and media), emphasizing professional objectivity, showing professional accountability when incidents of implicit bias occur, and using the resources listed in this handout. Disproportionality data in a variety of areas (e.g., discipline practices and outcomes, special education eligibility, representation in gifted and Advanced Placement courses) should be regularly reviewed. Only when the effects of implicit bias are effectively addressed will all students have access to a quality education and a positive and affirming educational experience.

NASP firmly believes that regardless of race, culture, linguistic background, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, socioeconomic status, disability, or educational need, all students are entitled to an equitable and high-quality education (NASP, 2012). In accordance with NASP’s *Principles for Professional Ethics* (2010; I.3.4), school psychologists should continually engage in critical self-reflection to identify personal biases. They should become familiar with the varying sociocultural histories and experiences of students, and affirm diversity and difference while continually examining assumptions of power and privilege.

RESOURCES

To learn more about implicit bias, please consult the resources that have been provided below. Stay tuned for more information about implicit bias, including intervention ideas related to the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline practices with nonmajority students and the

importance of implementing culturally sensitive building- and district-level MTSS to mitigate these and other outcomes.

- Defeating Unconscious Bias: 5 Strategies, Sun Shower Learning Training Video
<http://fullpreviewbias.instapage.com/?submission=179535526>
- Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity
<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/my-product/2016-state-of-the-science-implicit-bias-review/>
- Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention
http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu/pdfs/Prejudice_Habit.pdf
- National Center for State Courts: Helping Courts Understand Implicit Bias
<http://www.ncsc.org/~media/Files/PDF/Topics/Gender%20and%20Racial%20Fairness/Implicit%20Bias%20FAQs%20rev.ashx>
- Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium
https://maec.org/our_work/educational-equity/
- Open Society Foundation
<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/implicit-bias-and-social-justice>
- Project Implicit, Harvard University: Implicit-Association Test (IAT)
<https://implicit.harvard.edu>
- Teaching Tolerance
<http://www.tolerance.org>
- UCLA Civil Rights Project
<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>
- Unconscious Bias Training Video
<http://www.unconsciousbias.info/?gclid=CL69waiYpNMCFZBKDQoduWwNPA>
- Understanding Implicit Bias: What Educators Should Know
<http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/staats>

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