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The Impact of Bias and Privilege on School Performance; Strategies and Interventions to Help

As educators, we are in a prime position to support children and improve overall performance in school, but this task is much easier said than done. Many factors are at play when we look at school performance. But we need only to look at the vast differences between affluent and lower-income school systems to start making assumptions. It becomes quite clear that bias and privilege play a dramatic role. The negative impact of deficit thinking, a lack of inclusion in curriculum, and fewer diverse teachers can have long-lasting effects on students, and we have to start making strides toward narrowing the gap.

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To start, we can hire more diverse teachers. Research shows that nonwhite students benefit from having teachers that look like them.[4] Diversity in the teaching force positively influences student performance and interest in school. Research has also shown the importance of gender diversity in teachers, counselors, and administrators.[5] According to the National Center for Education, males make up only 24 percent of the teachers in K–12 education. Efforts to diversify school staff is the first step to create an inclusive environment for all students and staff.

Privilege in Education

Privilege rears its head in several ways in education. Just as in the case with microaggressions (the slights, indignities, put-downs, or insults directed at people of color or marginalized groups in their day-to-day interactions with individuals unaware of the offensive behavior), privilege is often performed in schools in systemic ways that prevent students of color or other marginalized groups from receiving fair and equitable access to education. For example, teachers and other school administrators—specifically whites—demonstrate their privilege inside and outside of the classroom in a variety of ways. Addressing white privilege is essential, and all educators must recognize the elephant in the room. To do so, we must first dig deeper into white privilege.

Having open and honest conversations about white privilege is critical to making progress.

According to scholar Peggy McIntosh, white privilege refers to the "unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits, and choices bestowed on people solely because they are white."[6] As we discuss and acknowledge areas of white privilege, we must also acknowledge three things: not all white people are racist, not all white people are recipients of things they did not earn, and being white is not correlated with rightness. Having open and honest conversations about white privilege is critical to making progress.

Here are some examples of how white privilege may play out for educators and leaders in a school or classroom setting:[7]

- My skin color is the same as that of people in a position of authority within the school administration.
- I can easily identify role models within the field of education from my ethnocultural group.
- I feel included in my workplace and community interactions. I don't feel isolated, out of place, outnumbered, ignored, overlooked, or kept at a distance, nor do I feel like an object of fear.
- When I participate in staff meetings or trainings, I am not asked to speak on behalf of my ethnocultural group.
- My cultural holidays are recognized by the government, and I am not obliged to work.
- I am seen as a person who is an expert in my field, and I am rarely underestimated.

- I have the same skin color as most of my colleagues.
- When I was younger, my teachers and school counselors all encouraged me to go to college, and I intend to do the same with my students.
- I can work as easily in a rural setting as in an urban setting.
- I never really notice the composition of ethnocultural or racialized groups in my school.
- I teach a curriculum that focuses on my ethnocultural group through books or teaching programs and guides.
- I rarely witness discrimination against people like me because of their skin color, their place of birth, their citizenship, their beliefs, or their faith group.
- I can speak about my culture and my religious beliefs without worrying about others' reactions.
- I rarely think much about my identity or about the ethnic, religious, or cultural group to which I belong.

After reviewing the list above, what are some of your initial thoughts? Are you able to navigate your school and classroom, and do you have access to education in the same ways listed above? The questions posed are critical to examining the role of privilege (specifically white privilege) and the space it occupies in classrooms and schools. Once again, addressing white privilege is not bashing a group, pointing fingers, or attempting to make a single group of people feel bad. Instead, by acknowledging white privilege, we recognize how people of color tend to have less access to resources and face more obstacles to experience success. The emotions that are inherently connected to race, class, bias, and privilege should be acknowledged and never ignored.

Bias in Education

Implicit bias can impact how we engage and interact with individuals from different racial or cultural backgrounds.

As we consider the performance gap in education, we must also examine the impact of implicit bias. Implicit bias is the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes about a group that affect our attitudes, behaviors, and decisions regarding individuals belonging to a particular group. Implicit bias can impact how we engage and interact with individuals from different racial or cultural backgrounds.

How do you know if your biases impact your teaching? Here are some examples of ways educators might show implicit bias in the classroom:

- Educators assume students from certain racial and ethnic groups have lower intellectual ability. Once again, this is an example of implicit bias as a teacher continues to maintain low expectations without assessing a student's true academic aptitude.

- Educators mistakenly believe students from certain racial or ethnic groups are satisfied with low grades and low expectations. These assumptions are often referred to as implicit bias. For example, a teacher looking at their roster may notice several "ethnic" names or names traditionally found in diverse cultures. Without giving much thought, this teacher may assume students with "ethnic" names will perform poorly based on the correlation of their name and cultural background.

- Educators assume students and families from certain racial or ethnic groups are not involved and fail to provide interventions. An example includes teachers failing to use multiple avenues to reach parents or calling only during working hours when parents are likely unable to answer the phone.

- Educators assume students from certain racial or ethnic groups are experts in a particular area. Assumptions such as these are often referred to as microaggressions. For example, a teacher conducting a history lesson will routinely look in the direction of or call on African American students when discussing the civil rights movement or slavery.

To summarize, it is important to keep our biases in mind. It is impossible not to have biases. As discussed in this chapter, self-reflection is essential and key to recognizing biases.

Achievement Gap and Bias

We can't discuss privilege and bias in education without acknowledging the achievement gap that often follows in their wake. The achievement gap has been defined as the disparities in academic performance between groups of students along the continuum of race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender. Even after more than fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, the disparities and inequalities between racial groups and academic attainment still persist. Privilege and implicit bias play a role in the hard-to-budge achievement gap because of unfair bias and perceptions educators and school professionals have

that influence the educational outcomes of diverse students from an early age. Education programs are encouraged to offer coursework and training on the importance of implicit bias and anti-racist education best practices. Here are several strategies and tips schools can employ to determine if current practices or systems are in need of updating:

School-wide Strategies and Interventions

BEHAVIORAL REPORT ASSESSMENT

The first step is to determine if bias and privilege are impacting how you interact and connect with students. One way you can do this is by reviewing behavioral reports over the past four years (or for the current graduating class). Behavioral reports can include discipline referrals, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension discipline reports.

When you review the data, patterns or trends should be carefully noted from all key data points and facets of a child's schooling (behavior, academic, supplemental support, etc.). A review of data should include specific information about each child—for example, gathering a clear picture of the same information such as student's name, grade level, ethnicity, age, and any risk factors (repeated grade, failing course, attendance issues). When patterns arise, note the source of the data for a more detailed picture. Finally, answer the questions below to find positive interventions and direction moving forward.[8]

Patterns

- What are the referral and suspension rates for different ethnic and racial groups of students?
- When are students disciplined the most? Are there certain times, days, or locations? Are there areas throughout the school in need of better supervision? Are there times within my class in need of better engagement? (After the bell for class to start? Transitions? Before the bell rings to end class?)
- Who should be involved in the review? Who are the additional stakeholders needed to implement interventions?
- What are appropriate preventive measures to reduce the achievement gap in my classroom? These measures should include tutoring and/or mentoring resources available for students.

- What are the discipline trends by grade level (race, gender, age)?
- What alternatives can be used to proactively address behavior issues?
- What other possible strategies can be used to address behavior issues?

Direction

- Are the students with the highest referrals receiving supplemental support during school or outside of school hours?
- Do the interventions focus on a team approach (school counselors, school social worker, behavioral specialists, etc.)?
- Does the data point to a specific need in which we are lacking? How can we close those gaps?

ACADEMIC REPORT ASSESSMENTS

Academic Reports (often referred to as report cards), end-of-year assessments, and standardized testing reports give teachers valuable insight into where students are. Academic reports can be collected at the end of specific grading periods, twice a year, or yearly. Academic assessments can also be aggregated to focus on specific groups of students (i.e., race, gender, grade level, subject, etc.). Grade-level teachers can use data from previous courses as well as from state testing to uncover the performance of students based on race or gender and note any patterns that influence performance. In addition, teachers can determine if there are practices in place that may prevent students from achieving, such as a need for tutoring, revised classroom learning modalities, or more cultural sensitivity in teaching/learning resources.

Patterns

- What does the current academic data show about students in my school and classroom?
- When are students performing at their best?
- When reviewing grade and behavioral referrals, are there patterns in terms of race, ethnicity, or gender?
- Are the parent contacts of all races, ethnicities, and genders appropriate? Are they proactive or reactive?
- What are the high-performing trends by grade level (race, gender, age)? What are the low-performing trends by grade level (race, gender, age)?

- When reviewing student performance, what do I notice?
- Are students receiving the same type of referrals (tutoring, other support services, parent calls for conferences, parent check-ins when doing well)?

Direction

- Are the students with the greatest academic concern followed, and is their progress reviewed at key markers during the term/school year?
- Do interventions involve a team approach? Are school counselors, school social workers, behavioral specialists, and others involved?
- Does the data point to a specific need in which we are lacking? How can we close those gaps?

NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

One of the best ways to get a better understanding of your school and classroom culture is to conduct a cultural climate assessment, which helps school officials, teachers, and the school community determine the cultural needs of members and how the school can become more inclusive.

A cultural climate assessment can be done in a variety of ways; however, the most effective and most convenient format is electronic. Electronic survey services such as Google, Survey Monkey, or Qualtrics can collect and aggregate data based on need.

Things to consider when assessing school climate include:

- What are the current student perceptions of racism, bias, and privilege in our school?
- Do teachers and staff members work together to create an overall inclusive environment at our school?
- Have teachers or students personally witnessed or experienced racist or hurtful comments?

As part of the needs assessment process, school leaders can review the following resource to informally evaluate their school's culture. Given that many schools aspire to be anti-racist institutions, this resource provides specific characteristics for comparison and progress purposes.

Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization

Monocultural ➡ Multicultural ➡ Anti-Racist ➡ Anti-Racist Multicultural

Racial and Cultural Differences Seen as Deficits ➡ Tolerant of Racial and Cultural Differences ➡ Racial and Cultural Differences Seen as Assets

1. Exclusive An Exclusionary Institution	2. Passive A "Club" Institution	3. Symbolic Change A "Compliance" Organization
• Intentionally and publicly excludes or segregates African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans • Intentionally and publicly enforces the racist status quo throughout institution • Institutionalization of racism includes formal policies and practices, teachings, and decision making on all levels • Usually has similar intentional policies and practices toward other socially oppressed groups such as women, gays, and lesbians, Third World citizens, etc. • Openly maintains the dominant group's power and privilege	• Tolerant of a limited number of "token" People of Color and members from other social identify groups allowed in with "proper" perspective and credentials. • May still secretly limit or exclude People of Color in contradiction to public policies • Continues to intentionally maintain white power and privilege through its formal policies and practices, teachings, and decision making on all levels of institutional life • Often declares, "We don't have a problem." • Monocultural norms, policies, and procedures of dominant culture viewed as the "right" way" business as usual" • Engages issues of diversity and social justice only on club members' terms and within their comfort zone.	• Makes official policy pronouncements regarding multicultural diversity • Sees itself as "non- racist" institution with open doors to People of Color • Carries out intentional inclusiveness efforts, recruiting "someone of color" on committees or office staff • Expanding view of diversity includes other socially oppressed groups *But...* • "Not those who make waves" • Little or no contextual change in culture, policies, and decision making • Is still relatively unaware of continuing patterns of privilege, paternalism and control • Token placements in staff positions: must assimilate into organizational culture

4. Identity Change	5. Structural Change	6. Fully Inclusive Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization
An Affirming Institution	A Transforming Institution	in a Transformed Society
• Growing understanding of racism as barrier to effective diversity • Develops analysis of systemic racism • Sponsors programs of anti-racism training • New consciousness of institutionalized white power and privilege • Develops intentional identity as an "anti-racist" institution • Begins to develop accountability to racially oppressed communities • Increasing commitment to dismantle racism and eliminate inherent white advantage • Actively recruits and promotes members of groups have been historically denied access and opportunity *But...* • Institutional structures and culture that maintain white power and privilege still intact and relatively untouched	• Commits to process of intentional institutional restructuring, based upon anti-racist analysis and identity • Audits and restructures all aspects of institutional life to ensure full participation of People of Color, including their world-view, culture, and lifestyles • Implements structures, policies, and practices with inclusive decision making and other forms of power-sharing on all levels of the institution's life and work • Commits to struggle to dismantle racism in the wider community, and builds clear lines of accountability to racially oppressed communities • Anti-racist multicultural diversity becomes an institutionalized asset • Redefines and rebuilds all relationships and activities in society, based on anti-racist commitments	• Future vision of an institution and wider community that has overcome systemic racism and all other forms of oppression. • Institution's life reflects full participation and shared power with diverse racial, cultural, and economic groups in determining its mission, structure, constituency, policies and practices • Members across all identity groups are full participants in decisions that shape the institution, and inclusion of diverse cultures, lifestyles, and interest • A sense of restored community and mutual caring • Allies with others in combating all forms of social oppression • Actively works in larger communities (regional, national, global) to eliminate all forms of oppression and to create multicultural organizations.

CURRICULUM DRIVES

- **Parent/Community-Based.** Curriculum drives provide ideas to welcome more diverse students in gifted education, honors, and AP courses. Having curriculum drives where parents can come and learn more about different courses and school specializations (dance, music, math, science, etc.) can provide open dialogue and take the pressure off parents when deciding the best courses of study or academic programs for their child.
- **Inclusion of different languages.** Curriculum drives become more inclusive when representatives have the ability to speak a variety of languages. This allows parents and students to speak in a language that is comfortable and familiar.

MORE INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

One of the not-so-obvious ways in which schools fail to offer diverse learning opportunities to students is by way of curriculum. Evaluating current curriculum can help dismantle unconscious areas of repeated privilege, bias, prejudice, and discrimination. When evaluating a curriculum for diversity and inclusion, we must first determine what the curriculum encompasses. According to the Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative at New York University, a curriculum includes but is not limited to textbooks, lesson plans, worksheets, homework assignments, videos, tests, class activities, learning standards, and expectations.[9] When reviewing curriculum, educators should consider the following:

- The diversity of characters and authors represented in books
- The inclusion of social justice issues such as affirming and acknowledging different cultures, worldviews, and ways of thinking
- Whether the teacher or counselor's materials engage students in meaningful ways and allow students to make real-world connections to their culture, community, family, and traditions

TEAM-BASED REVIEW DAYS

Schools can use assessments to develop small professional learning communities where each teacher, counselor, or department can review the current classroom practices. Data collected from assessments can be used to break down key patterns and help develop a direction to combat

any areas of deficit or lack of cultural sensitivity. Professional learning communities should take place on professional learning days and should be organized for the most efficient use of time, with specific agenda points and assigned leaders from each grade, subject, department, and so on who report back to small and larger groups. In addition, you should compile data from meetings and create a larger, more precise view of curriculum used in grade-level teams and/or departments. Then you should share the findings with the leadership and administration team to develop a plan for creating a more welcoming environment. Team-based review days can include looking at key curriculum performance indicators and inclusion and diversity of the lesson, project, assignment, and so on.

Conclusion

The impact of bias and privilege in education can seem overwhelming and exhausting when educators take on the task to uncover both conscious and unconscious practices within a school and classroom. As we discussed in this chapter, the task to uncover privilege and bias should first start with the individual through individual self-reflections and personal assessments. Examining privilege in the classroom by asking the questions presented in this chapter can help educators start to do this work. In addition, exploration of the achievement gap and conducting school-wide assessments (behavioral and academic) can help educators look deeper as they form professional learning communities to work together as a team. One should not lose focus on the greater task here—creating an environment that promotes learning and equity for all students.

A Student's Story

Ms. Harris, the school office assistant, whispers to Mr. J, the principal, "Jamal is on his way to the office. He received another referral from Mr. G."

Jamal walks into the principal's office still confused by what just occurred in class. Typically, Jamal tries to keep to himself and avoid being called on. He sits quietly, works on his assignments, and submits his work when prompted. Jamal has experienced several conflicts with his English teacher over the past few months and believes these negative interactions stem from how Jamal shares his opinions in class. His teacher views him as loud and disrespectful, while Jamal thinks he is
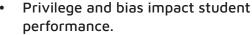
simply sharing his thoughts like he would at home. His teacher readily writes him referrals to the principal's office without any discussion of what occurred and without warnings. Jamal is used to speaking with the principal and accepting his punishment, even though he does not believe he has done anything wrong.
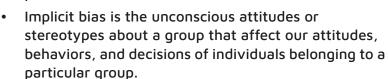
At this point, he does not know how to behave in Mr. G's class, so he tries to fly under the radar. But this approach does not seem to work anymore. Frustrated with not knowing how to behave, Jamal would rather skip his English class and fail for the year than interact with Mr. G. What makes matters worse is Jamal knows other students of color are treated the same. Jamal has told his principal on multiple occasions that Mr. G keeps a stack of discipline referrals with the names of the Black students on his desk. Jamal knows he is being treated unfairly and wants someone to stop this inappropriate and race-based pattern of discipline referrals. He knows if someone would listen to him, believe him, and visit the classroom to see what is happening, he would stand a chance of being treated fairly. Without this support, Jamal knows he is destined to be another minority male who falls behind, which is all too common at his school. He has a good relationship with his school counselor and hopes a conversation may lead to positive interventions (conversation with the teacher, parent-teacher conference, meeting with administration, etc.) and outcomes.

QUESTIONS to CONSIDER

1. Can you think of an example where you have noticed bias or privilege in your school? What happened and was anything done to address it?

2. Where does privilege seem most prevalent in your school?

3. How does implicit bias currently affect your classroom, school, or community?

4. If you gave your students a needs assessment in the next few weeks, what do you think the results might be?

KEY POINTS

- Privilege and bias impact student performance.
- Implicit bias is the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes about a group that affect our attitudes, behaviors, and decisions of individuals belonging to a particular group.
- One of the best ways to get a better understanding of your school and classroom culture is to collect data and ask good questions.