Implicit Bias Has No Room in the Classroom

No matter how good we are at teaching to the standards, central to the success of our lessons is classroom community. Students need to feel connected to their class, feel valued as individuals, and feel safe to make mistakes as they learn. Did you know, however, that nearly everyone—teachers included—possesses unconscious bias (Anderson 2019)? This bias, often referred to as implicit bias, is exemplified in behaviors that come from the subconscious and are often in direct opposition to one’s explicit values (Suttie 2016).

These unconscious behaviors are a result of stereotyping that our brain performs as it seeks out patterns (Staats 2015). Because so much of our cognitive processing occurs outside of our conscious awareness, our decision making can be influenced by implicit bias. One form of implicit bias is confirmation bias, in which we unconsciously seek out information to support our beliefs. This can impact the way we interact with students and can influence our expectations for student achievement (Staats 2015). One only has to examine the data associated with disciplinary actions to see that implicit bias exists within our schools. For example, minority students, particularly African Americans, are more likely to be disciplined than any other group of students (U.S. Department of Education 2012).

How can you reduce your implicit bias in order to create a positive learning environment for all your students? In the classroom, consider blinding the names of your students as you grade and using an app to randomly call on students (Anderson 2019). Perhaps most important, cultivate an awareness of your own implicit biases. One way to do this is to participate in Harvard University’s Project Implicit (2011); the project website contains numerous tests designed for individuals to uncover their biases. By taking the time to understand and confront our own implicit biases, we can take steps to improve our classrooms so that all students feel valued and respected.

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REFERENCES

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