Defining Implicit Bias

Also known as implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection. The implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance. These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. In addition to early life experiences, the media and news programming are often-cited origins of implicit associations.

(Kirwin Institute)
Key Characteristics

● Implicit biases are pervasive. Everyone possesses them, even people with avowed commitments to impartiality.

● Implicit and explicit biases are related but distinct mental constructs. They are not mutually exclusive and may even reinforce each other.

● The implicit associations we hold do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse.

● We generally tend to hold implicit biases that favor our own ingroup, though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our ingroup.

● Implicit biases are malleable. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques.

(Kirwin Institute)
All of us have implicit biases to some degree. This does not necessarily mean we will act in an inappropriate or discriminatory manner, only that our first “blink” sends us certain information. Acknowledging and understanding this implicit response and its value and role is critical to informed decision-making and is particularly critical to those whose decisions must embody fairness and justice.

_Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking - Malcolm Gladwell_
We tend to see things not as they are, but as we are.
The Impact of Invisibility

- In this example, when Whiteness remains invisible, White educators may experience difficulty seeing how different life is for students of color.
- “With White privilege comes an unconscious skepticism and/or dismissal of people of color’s racial perspective or experience and an insensitivity toward the racial backdrop of American society” (Singleton, 2006).
Who/what is hypervisible in your school?

Likewise, who/what goes unacknowledged?
Making the Invisible, Visible

- The experiences of students without IEPs must be made visible in order to understand the experiences of students with IEPs.

- The experiences of students in a religious majority must be made visible in order to understand the experiences in a religious minority in the school community.

- The experiences of heterosexual students and students who identify with male/female gender norms must be made visible in order to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students and who do not identify as male or female.
Unlearning the Bias Within

- The biggest challenge is unlearning what has been learned, while also recognizing our vulnerability to constant messages that reinforce what we are working to unlearn.
I Don’t Know What I Don’t Know

I don’t know
I don’t know

I don’t know but I think I do

I know I don’t know

WILL

I know
I know
A White female teacher is asked whether or not Black students in the school are underrepresented in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in comparison to White students. Having never considered this and being unaware of the racial enrollment in these courses, she responds no. Ignorant of the realities of White overenrollment in the honors and AP classes, her consciousness at this moment is in the stage of “I don’t know I don’t know.”

— Next, the teacher expresses the belief that there is no racial achievement gap in the honors and AP program. This belief is in the stage of “I don’t know but I think I do” because she is operating from an assumption that students of all races who qualify for these courses excel to the same degree.

— Following this, the teacher is presented with statistical data highlighting the achievement gap between Black and White students in honors and AP courses. This is now a consciousness-raising experience informing the teacher that her fund of knowledge related to the intersection of race and student course placement has been limited. At this point, she advances into the stage of “I know I don’t know.”

— Based on this experience, the teacher must exercise her will and engage her passion to discover the reality of the achievement gap, which might include discussing with honors and AP students of color why they succeed and don’t succeed. This should lead her to explore other racial inequities that exist in her school. By doing this, she has elevated her consciousness into the stage of “I know I know.” Secure in this newfound knowledge, the teacher becomes much more effective in her own classroom with all students.
Thinking through the Stages

- Disaggregation of achievement data (causes/reasons)
- Discipline
- Course placement and course recommendations
- Tracking
- Special Education and 504 identification processes
- Assumptions pertaining to care, engagement, motivation, values re: education
- Day to day, second by second decision-making
Think and reflect on a time when your consciousness was developed. Name and reflect on the discovery, then trace it through the stages outlined.

If you work in schools or with children, think about a related example.
I have to work to access a deeper level of consciousness to positively impact students, parents and colleagues of different identities and experiences.

We must figure out the distance between our own consciousness and that of the people we serve and support in schools.

Students often disengage from learning before the adult attempts to raise their own consciousness and meaningfully engage students.

Unfortunately, it’s often too late and many students cannot wait for us to DO OUR WORK.
I don’t know, but I think I do

Gaps in consciousness = Dissonance

I know, I don’t know.

W I L L

I know, I know

ACKNOWLEDGE AND OWN

Position myself to learn
Listen, reflect and engage
Center voices and experiences - honor the truths of others/multiple perspectives
Understand my role and the impact of my decisions
Partner with students and staff to transform beliefs, outcomes and the system
Lead and participate in conscious-building across the entire system/school

Teachers, Staff, Administrators

Students

Teachers, Staff, Administrators
Key Take-Aways

- Understand the impact of choosing not to do this work (personally and professionally)
- Create conscious-raising opportunities for ourselves and our staff
- Work to make the invisible visible (naming and acknowledging)
- Create opportunities to increase relational trust and understanding
- Own our work (take responsibility)
- Position ourselves to learn and grow
  - Ask, listen, consider, act
- Work to shift beliefs and structures
- Normalize discomfort and everything that comes with it...
If we are growing, we are always going to be outside of our comfort zone.

John C. Maxwell
THANKS!

Comments and Questions?

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