

# Bringing Bias Into View

For educators, ignoring one's own unconscious biases won't make them go away

**W**hen I first took the implicit bias test, I was sure I would pass with flying colors. Halfway through the test, I could already tell—by the speed and accuracy of my reactions—that I was “failing.” I finished the test with confirmation that I had a bias in favor of white people, and against black people.

Technically, there is no “pass” or “fail” when it comes to bias, but it goes without saying that as an educator, I didn’t want to have it. And yet, bias is part of the human experience; most people have some form of it—and because we live in a heavily racialized society, most of us have some kind of racial bias.

My first reaction to the news was to hide it or cover it up. After 20 years of exposure to multicultural and anti-racist learning, I didn’t want anyone to know that I had a bias. But covering it up or hiding it—especially from myself—is what allows a bias to grow and fester. My task—once I knew I harbored an unconscious bias—was to make the unconscious conscious, and to recognize

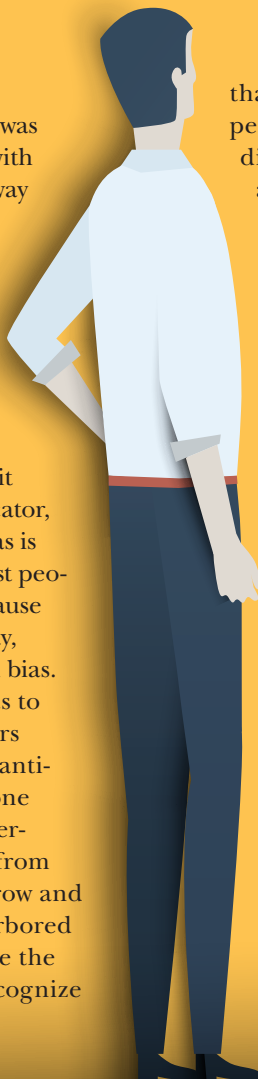
that it might be active when I am hiring people, firing people, grading students, disciplining kids, interacting with parents, and building relationships.

## A Background in Bias

I grew up in a predominantly white community, where I was largely unfamiliar with people of color. Knowing very few people of color, I was familiar mostly with the cultural and linguistic styles associated with middle-class white people.

When I consider my background, it helps me understand where my bias comes from. Bias is a natural byproduct of growing up separately, in a society that teaches many inaccurate and often subtle stereotypes about people of color.

But my individual story isn’t just my story: Most white people who grew up in the 20th and 21st centuries did so in racially segregated communities or social networks, largely unfamiliar with the cultural and linguistic styles of people of color. This matters in education, because 82 percent of the teachers in the U.S. are white. My story is the story of many





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educators. And the bias that is part of my story is at work—unconsciously—in classrooms across the country.

### Hidden in Plain Sight

In *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, Diane Finnerty—one of 80 authors who contributed to the more than 400-page volume—describes the way that hidden bias impacts black boys in our classrooms. She cites studies in which preschool teachers are asked to find the “problem” student, and their eyes track the black boy in the video 42 percent of the time, even though he is only 25 percent of the group on screen—and the video intentionally contains no problematic behaviors.

She also shares studies in which subjects were able to more quickly and easily identify a gun as a gun (and misidentify a toy as a gun) after seeing the face of a black 5-year-old boy. Seeing the face of a white 5-year-old boy had the opposite effect; subjects more quickly and easily identified a toy as a toy and were quicker to misidentify a real gun as a toy after seeing the face of the boy who is white.

Another study cited in the book shows that black boys tend to be perceived as older than their chronological age by 4.5 years. These

biases, taken together, amount to a significant barrier to black boys’ success and sense of belonging in school—so much so that we can’t actually separate the achievement levels of black boys in school from the examined biases about them that teachers bring to school each day.

### Managing Microaggressions

Microaggressions are tangible manifestations of bias that otherwise remain invisible and internal. So named by Derald Wing Sue and his team at the Teachers College of Columbia University, microaggressions are tiny, barely perceptible slights. Because they are a product of unconscious bias, there is typically a discrepancy between intention and impact; that is, the person committing the microaggression is often unaware that they are doing so, while the recipient is aware of it and hurt by it.

Microaggressions cause hurt because of a cumulative impact that comes from seeing or hearing the same thing from multiple people over time. They also usually communicate a persistent underlying social message. “Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously,” adds “Critical Race Theory, Racial



### CHECK YOURSELF

Try an implicit association test for yourself at [www.projectimplicit.org](http://www.projectimplicit.org).

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Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African-American College Students,” an article by Miguel Ceja, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara J. Yosso.

Common microaggressions include calling one black student by another black student’s name or assuming that an Asian-American or Latinx family doesn’t speak English as a first language. Each of these behaviors communicates an underlying message (e.g., “People in your group all look alike to me,” or “Asian-American and Latinx families are perpetual outsiders”).


Again, microaggressions draw power from the cumulative effect of multiple people engaging in the same assumption and thereby communicating the same underlying message. The cumulative effect is one of alienation, disconnection, “othering,” and exclusion—the opposites of what effective educators want to communicate to students and families.

### **Addressing Hidden Bias**

Most of us would like to say we have no bias, and yet it wouldn’t be true. Calling only on boys in a classroom is a byproduct of bias. A curriculum that positively reflects only one side of history—white, middle-class history—is a byproduct of bias. It is the denial of bias—the refusal to see it—that makes us dangerous.

In *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, Finnerty shares several strategies for educators who want to change habits grounded in hidden bias:

- Clarify your motivation. Developing a personal motivation—and not just engaging in bias reduction for your job—will help you be more effective.
- Examine and understand why reducing your bias is important to you personally.
- Increase your self-awareness. Try an implicit association test for yourself.
- Understand your biases and educate yourself.
- Create new thought patterns.
- Find counternarratives to your stereotypes: Seek out media by and for people of color, develop authentic relationships, and attend events that expose you to new situations.
- Increase your “bias literacy” and engage in reflective practice.
- Reflect with peers, record your practice on video, explore case studies, and do book clubs together to counter bias.
- Be a “change agent” in your school and profession to recognize and change the systems that perpetuate bias.
- Work to change hiring practices, curricula, and peer relationships.

Last, but certainly not least, take care of yourself. Bias is most activated when we are tired or overloaded. Self-care helps you to be mindful about your words, your behaviors, and your bias. 

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