

“I can’t seem to connect with my students!”

How White, Middle Class Teachers Can Apply Psychology to Teach Students Who are Different From Them

A Practice Brief for Educators by Dr. Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman & Dr. Krystal Thomas

In Public Schools, the U.S. Has:

80%
White Teachers

51%
Students of Color

Almost All
teachers have college degrees; the majority are middle class (NCES, 2018)

19%
of students live in poverty (NCES, 2016)

The majority of U.S. teachers are White and middle class, but more than half of their students are students of color, one-fifth of students live in poverty, and 2.5% experience homelessness (NCES, 2016, 2017). Just as teachers acquire skills to teach reading or math effectively, the skills to teach students who are different from them can be learned, too. New advancements in psychology shed light on how to create more equitable learning environments.

How Can We Solve Problems that Stem From Implicit Bias?

One important solution involves recruiting more diverse educators. Yet another solution is to prepare White, middle-class educators to teach students who are different from them. This brief focuses on the latter solution.

The skills to teach students with diverse identities requires educators to engage in self-reflective work. It is important that all educators hold themselves and each other accountable to do this necessary and important work. Without these efforts, educators underserve their students and prevent them from reaching their potential.

Key Definitions

Implicit Bias: attitudes or stereotypes towards others that people hold without conscious awareness of these beliefs. These develop because we tend to accept majority views that surround us in daily life.

Stereotypes: a type of prejudice that over-generalizes beliefs about a particular group of people that can be stigmatizing and misconstrue expectations for a person’s behavior.

Prejudicial habits: behaviors that people exhibit unintentionally as a result of the biased beliefs that they hold.

What Does the Research Say?

- Students know when school feels unfair and this leads to problems. For instance, adolescents who perceive racial/ethnic discrimination show lower academic achievement, lower motivation, less self-esteem, more depressive symptoms, and more behavior problems in school (Benner et al., 2018).
- Racial stereotypes lead to problematic teacher behaviors, which in turn lead to inequitable conditions in school. For example, if teachers have negative beliefs about Black children, they are more likely to deliver harsh discipline when they perceive that a Black child shows a pattern of misbehavior (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).
- Teachers’ implicit bias leads to lower expectations for some students than others, discrimination in the classroom, and increased likelihood to discipline Black students (Ispa-Landa, 2018).
- Implicit bias stems from a set of deficit beliefs that can be changed if educators are motivated to change, become aware of their implicit biases, and adopt strategies to shift their ways of thinking and acting (Devine et al., 2012; Forscher et al., 2017).

Four Suggestions to Improve Teaching Practices

Educators can reduce their implicit bias and connect with students who are different from them. We recommend educators:

1
Become Self-Aware & Unlearn Prejudicial Habits

2
Learn About Students & Their Perspectives

3
Individuate to Counteract Stereotypes

4
Transform the School Climate & Culture

1. Become Self-Aware & Unlearn Prejudicial Habits

In the U.S., we all develop implicit biases as a part of living in our culture. Movies, books, social media, advertisements, and people persuade us to think certain ways about groups of people (Tatum, 2017). This is a major problem and we need to take action or these biases will lead to prejudicial habits in classrooms.

Mostly, we tend to be unaware of these biases, which is why they are called implicit biases. But, occasionally, we become aware of stereotypes that we have. In those moments of awareness, people often feel shame or embarrassment and try to push thoughts about their biases away. That makes biases worse, not better. Moments when we become aware of our biases are critical times to take action and counteract our biases to prevent prejudicial habits.

- Implicit bias is a learned attitude that can be changed with hard work. Take action by engaging in this 3-part exercise described by Devine and colleagues (2012):

- 1. Detect.** Notice stereotyped responses when they occur.
- 2. Reflect.** Uncover, acknowledge, and understand your own history and background to explain your stereotypical thought.
- 3. Reject.** Consciously replace that stereotype with new, non-stereotypical ways of thinking about others in your mind, which will help counteract bias in the future.

2. Learn About Your Students & Their Perspectives

Learn more about your students so you can understand their perspectives. Take time to understand your classroom from their point of view, identify their strengths and interests, cultivate empathy for them, and appreciate their uniqueness.

- Draw upon students' skills and knowledge that stem from their culturally specific experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2005). For example, encourage students to share their home language, music, a specific cooking skill, or a craft that they learned at home. These practices will help you learn about your students' strengths and interests, and students will feel known, safe, and more interested in learning.
- Design student assignments to be meaningful to students by asking them to make connections between their home culture and the curriculum (Martinez & Meija, 2020). Then, use these assignments to understand your students' experiences and the important people in their lives. For example, choose books that include positive characters that resemble the ethnic and racial mix of your classroom. Increase the relevance of assignments in ways that connect with students' home culture. For instance, if students are writing about book characters, ask them to write a letter to a friend or family member about a time when they had a similar experience as that character. Encourage students to compare their own feelings to those of the book character.
- Use what you know about your students to develop trusting, respectful relationships with them. Positive teacher-student relationships are crucial in childhood (e.g., Etkel & Shi, 2020) and adolescence (e.g., National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, 2019). Developing positive, respectful relationships with students' families is paramount.

3. Individuate to Counteract Stereotypes

Counteract stereotypes by individuating. Individuating means noticing individual students' behaviors and becoming aware of their strengths, challenges, and personal preferences. It means seeing a person as an individual, not only as a member of their social category.

- One challenge is that educators need to individuate *and* recognize the role of race/ethnicity or social class on the individual's identity and behavior in the classroom. For example:
 - Ignoring race/ethnicity (i.e., racial colorblindness) can make inequities worse (Knowles et al., 2009);
 - Ignoring social class among students in extreme poverty can prevent educators from recognizing students' persistence in overcoming challenges.
 - Helping students understand and value their own racial and ethnic background promotes student success.
- Educators can achieve a balance by getting to know students individually, supporting students' identity development, and reducing their expectation that a student will show behavior that matches stereotypes for that social group (e.g., race, social class; Apfelbaum, Norton & Summers, 2012; Ispa-Landa, 2018).

4. Transform the School Climate & Culture

- Cultivate trust and good relationships among students, families, teachers, administrators, and other school staff. Whether in-person or virtually, every communication is an opportunity to build (or erode) trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).
- Educators can look for strengths in their students and families and use those to build the culture of the school. Find strengths by asking these questions (Yosso, 2005):
 - Do families and students speak more than one language? If so, leverage this linguistic capital.
 - Do students have skills needed to oppose existing structures and systems that produce inequity? If so, find ways students can use this resistant capital.
- Some families and youth have more power in school decision-making than others. Identify which families and students have more power at your school. For example:
 - Do the parents whose children take AP classes have the most impact on school policies?
 - Do the White families have more say about school policies than families of color?
- Amplify the voices of individuals from groups that tend to be left out of conversations and decision-making. Make sure that school mission statements, policies, and curricula reflect inclusion, respect, and equity for diverse groups. Include the perspective of diverse groups in school practices (e.g., lesson plans, school-wide activities, community events).

Select References

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