Why are we Whispering? Addressing Implicit Bias in K-12 Education

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Abstract: Efforts such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) have focused on providing an equitable education for Black students. However, educational inequality for marginalized and underrepresented students continues to persist. Education experiences for black students are impacted significantly by implicit bias. The purpose of this article is to discuss the impact of teachers' implicit bias on Black students in classrooms. The article concludes with research-based strategies for K-12 education to mitigate the effects of implicit bias by teaching educators how to identify their own implicit bias, building a supportive school culture, and co-learning opportunities.

Introduction

The 1950s marked a critical historical moment as school integration began across the United States. However, desegregation was not a deliberate or speedy process. The transition was fraught with racism, fear, and hatred. White students and parents often openly protested the integration, and Black students faced verbal and physical abuse. Nevertheless, integration was a sign of progress and a move towards a more just and equitable society.

Integrating Black students into the same classrooms after the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) significantly changed the demographics of many schools. The Supreme Court ruling was an essential step in the Civil Rights Movement and set the stage for future progress for equality. However, over six decades after the Supreme Court decision, several fundamental inequalities remain in public education, such as a lack of quality teaching and curriculum, under-resourced urban schools, higher rates of teacher bias and prejudice, and lower academic expectations unaddressed (Diem & Welton, 2020). For example, James Coleman's "Equality of Educational Opportunity" report, mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, assessed the availability of equal educational opportunities in public schools to minorities. The report illustrated significant achievement disparities across races and regions within the United States post-desegregation, which is now known as the achievement gap (Coleman, 1968).

Concepts and terms such as the achievement gap have fostered dangerous ideologies creating pervasive barriers to Black students' right to an equitable education and safe learning environment (Desruisseaux & Quinn, 2022; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Quinn,

2020; Quinn & Desruisseaux, 2022). This implication is harmful because it overlooks numerous other factors that can contribute to lower achievement, such as systemic disparities in resources, access to effective teaching, and the impact of teacher bias.

Scholars and educators can no longer gather at the water cooler whispering about the decisions, practices, and legislations negatively impacting Black students' educational experiences, learning outcomes, and mental and emotional well-being. There is a need to address teacher bias in education and its impact on Black students. This article analyzes how teacher bias manifests and its long-term implications on marginalized Black students in the American educational system. The researchers conclude with research-based practices for teachers committed to the ongoing pursuit of equity.

Defining Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect understanding, actions, and decisions resulting from subconscious associations we receive that can influence our perceptions and interactions with others (Staats et al., 2015). In education, implicit bias involves unconscious stereotypes that may affect a teacher's responses, attitudes, interactions, and teaching styles toward specific students based on their demographics (e.g., race or social-economic status; İnan-Kaya & Rubie-Davies, 2022). For example, the curriculum teachers offer may change if they have lower expectations for members of a particular ethnic group. Biases such as this can have negative implications, as teachers' belief in their students' potential is an imperative component for students' personal beliefs in their academics, progression, and attitude toward school, ultimately impacting their educational attainment and self-esteem (Cherng, 2017). To begin addressing the issue of implicit bias, there is a critical need for teacher identity work (Jagers et al., 2021).

Demographics of Educators and Black Students in Public Schools

Before *Brown v. Board of Education*, separating students in public schools based on race was constitutional until the Supreme Court ruled in favor of desegregating schools, marking the beginning of a new era of education for Black students. While the court's ruling was a win for the Civil Rights movement, Black educators and students are still recovering from the trauma of desegregation. For example, desegregation has unintended consequences in the disproportionate teacher demographic makeup because over 38,000 highly qualified Black educators were demoted or forced to resign (Lutz, 2017; Venzant Chambers, 2019). In the present day, the results of this loss are still evident in the underrepresentation of Black educators in the teaching profession.

Since the ruling, America's public school teachers have been significantly less representative of the racial and ethnic diversity in the student population (Schaeffer, 2021). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 79% percent of the American education workforce consists of White, middle-class, monolingual females, as opposed to the six percent of Black educators in public schools (Howard, 2020; NCES, 2022a, 2022b). The lack of Black educators may cause educational inequality (Grissom et al., 2015), as students have higher academic outcomes when paired with a teacher of the same race (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Educators from all backgrounds teaching in the U.S. should be prepared to

use strength-based practices to support Black children from various backgrounds and mitigate the impact of bias on those students.

Impact on Student Outcomes

Implicit bias resulting from a teacher's attitudes, actions, and expectations can harm Black students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Ura & d'Abreu, 2022). Students who experience implicit bias in school are likely to face difficulties of alienation, marginalization, and incivility regardless of their race, culture, ability, language, or gender (Anderson, 2020; Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). In recent years, research has indicated that students are likely to encounter implicit bias as early as preschool (Gilliam et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the plague of educators' implicit biases has negatively impacted specific demographics more than others. Studies have found that teachers tend to complain more about Black students and identify their behavior as problematic. Black preschoolers are twice more likely to be expelled or suspended (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Additionally, biometric data has recorded teachers spending significantly more time fixating on Black students even when they are not demonstrating disruptive behaviors (Gilliam et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these findings further support how implicit biases affect students' educational experiences at an early age and prove that they are more like to be subjected to discriminatory treatment (e.g., harsh discipline practices and policies, overly policed, referred to law enforcement, or reminded of not belonging), ultimately hindering their scholarly attainment (Dewan, 2016).

Moreover, as students navigate the education system, alarming statistics suggest implicit bias intensifies for Black students with disabilities and from low-income communities. Over the past years, educational inequalities have had a long-term impact on historically marginalized Black students, resulting in lower educational expectations from teachers, poor school performance, increased rates of dropouts, or higher involvement in the juvenile justice system (Snydman, 2022). Empirical evidence on the long-term impact has demonstrated discipline disparities among Black students with and without disabilities (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018); the overrepresentation in the high-incidence disability categories (Rynders, 2019; OSEP, 2021); the underrepresentation in gifted education programs and advanced courses (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Ford et al., 2020); and the school to prison pipeline (Mallet, 2016; Snydman, 2022). Further analysis, specifically evidence within classroom settings, has revealed that Black students are often inaccurately seen as angry (Halberstadt et al., 2022); less favored by teachers in their mathematical abilities (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020), placed in more segregated or restrictive programs (National Council on Disability, 2018), and perceived as less capable or less well-behaved (Grissom & Redding, 2016). As a result, these research studies underscore the need to acknowledge and address implicit bias in educational settings to ensure Black students obtain equitable opportunities.

Addressing Implicit Bias in Education

Current literature on teacher bias indicates a need for more preparation, resources, and support to ensure teachers create a safe learning environment for Black students of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Starck et al., 2020). Many schools and districts have already begun taking initiatives to help teachers counter their unconscious and conscious biases through belief-focused practices. Still, researchers have shown that the current professional developments that focus on teachers; beliefs have minimal to no impact on teachers' classroom practices (Utt & Tochluk, 2020).

Whispering at the water cooler is a passive approach to addressing a profound problem. Jagers and colleagues (2021) suggest that driving teachers' beliefs into actions is the most effective method to debunk their biases toward Black students from diverse backgrounds. However, a study examining the changes in teachers' daily classroom practices, in addition to their shift in attitude after participating in culturally responsive professional development, proposes that both are more likely to happen when teachers' emotions are evoked, and their practices are given oversight and direction (Lewis Chiu et al., 2017). Considering the limitations in the literature and the implications for underserved Black children, schools need to implement research-based strategies to help educators tackle their implicit bias.

Recommendation for K-12 Education

Addressing implicit bias in K-12 education is essential in ensuring Black students have access to an equitable education. Taking actionable steps toward providing a safe learning experience for all students is not a task but a responsibility. Teachers must encourage diverse students from a strength-based perspective and consciously ensure high expectations of every learner (Gay, 2002; Pollock et al., 2016). By becoming aware of their biases, creating equitable learning environments, and participating in collaborative learning opportunities, educators can attain the conceptual change needed to achieve an equitable learning experience for all students (Bateman & McCausland, 2020; Jagers et al., 2021; Samuels, 2018).

Self-Identifying Implicit Bias

To ensure equitable access to education, teachers must be aware of implicit biases and how these biases can affect the educational experiences of Black children. The critical work of teacher identity requires self-analysis and demands partnerships from school administrators, families, and communities. Schools can implement strategies that help teachers become more aware of their biases and their impact on Black students' performance and outcomes using tools such as the Implicit Association Test (Project Implicit, 2011). The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is used to help understand a person's implicit beliefs and attitudes, particularly those associated with race, gender, or other demographic categories (Project Implicit, 2011). Teachers can use tools like this to better understand themselves and their implicit biases and identify areas in which they can strive to become more inclusive and equitable in their behavior, instruction, and student interactions. Understanding and addressing implicit biases through belief-based and action-based professional developments on diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential in creating a more equitable education system for all students, especially Black students.

Supportive School Culture

Gay (2021) emphasizes that creating a caring, validating environment is imperative to culturally responsive teaching. Caring for the personal well-being and academic success of Black students is an active engagement that shows concern, compassion, commitment, and action from educators. K-12 schools should develop comprehensive policies that require implicit bias training as part of their efforts to advance the humanity, culture, and education of Black students. Teachers should be able to recognize and avoid biases in their instructional practices by learning how instruments such as vague grading scales can introduce bias as opposed to having clearly defined evaluation criteria (Quinn, 2020). For example, some teachers may give more generous grades based on vague grading scales, while others may give harsher grades to Black students (Quinn, 2020). Teachers can minimize bias against Black students by providing them with these resources and methods for creating objective and equity-oriented classroom tools.

Additionally, all teachers should receive guidance on creating an inclusive classroom environment that encourages equitable interactions between students and staff using practices such as Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching (Bateman & McCausland, 2020). Furthermore, a consistent review of the curriculum content should be in place to ensure that it reflects society's diversity and various perspectives and backgrounds. Additionally, events such as professional learning communities, diversity institutes, or book clubs can increase awareness of issues impacting minoritized populations.

Co-Learning Opportunities

The concept of "co-learning" refers to the co-construction of knowledge between students, teachers, and community partners to render shared learning experiences (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Schools can adopt activities such as Community Walks where teachers and students explore the community students live in with an intentional focus on identifying cultural assets. Students can lead the learning experience (Bateman & McCausland, 2020). Additionally, including students in the design, atmosphere, and policies within the classroom allows them to bring their diverse perspectives to co-create a more inclusive culture in the classroom. By applying these steps, schools can foster an equitable learning environment and cultivate a generation of educators more equipped to respond to the needs of Black students.

Conclusion

Schools can contribute to reducing implicit bias through rigorous preparation and careful implementation of the recommendations suggested. With the effects of implicit bias plaguing our education system, the call for equity is pressing in K-12 schools. The time is now to amplify our voices about the impact of implicit bias in education for Black students. Educators can no longer whisper about implicit bias and its effects on Black students because the issue of racial inequality in education is becoming more widely known in our society leading to a growing recognition of the need to prioritize an equitable education and create a learning environment for all students. This necessitates open, honest

discussions about the effects of implicit bias on Black students and taking actionable steps toward addressing it. We cannot change something we refuse to acknowledge. As we continue to advocate for the progress of fostering a culture of diversity and inclusivity in classrooms and schools across the nation, we must remember that equitable education is not a destination but a practice.

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