



Rosa Isiah, Ed.D

Interrupting Implicit Bias: The Power of Mirror Checks

We often speak about biases and inequities as actions that occur in other schools to other people by other people. The perception is that bias does not typically happen in OUR classrooms and schools with OUR students...that we care for students and colleagues and would never hold biased beliefs or engage in biased behaviors. I acknowledge that there is a growing level of awareness and concern about implicit and explicit biases in our systems, but there is also a monumental knowing-doing gap. We understand that bias, inequity and systemic racism exist, but we continue to avoid changes that would disrupt these issues in education. Why? The current system is comfortable for too many adults. As someone who believes that true education is equitable and just, this disconnect and comfort level is tremendously problematic.

In my attempts to understand this knowing-doing gap over my many years in education, I have concluded that we lack the courage to delve into change from the inside out; to look in the mirror and analyze our own biases and how those biases contribute to inequity and a racist rhetoric. Research, experiences, and data over the years indicate that our students do not achieve at high levels or thrive as learners and empowered human beings when we fail to address systemic racism

and inequities in the schoolhouse. The great news is that we can do something about it. Although the work of creating change that recognizes and counters

Explicit bias is defined as the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that one has at the conscious level. Examples of explicit bias include negative stereotypes about

The biases can be positive or negative and are usually unconscious and unintentional.

implicit bias may feel overwhelming, it can be achieved when change begins from within. Countering implicit biases and injustice begins with regular mirror checks as we develop awareness about our own biased beliefs and behaviors. It is difficult to do the inside-out work but we can no longer avoid or ignore the impact of our biases on access and academic achievement. It's time for change and that change begins from within.

Explicit and Implicit Bias Defined

Implicit bias is defined by the Ohio University Kirvan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity as the "attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understandings, actions, and decisions" about a certain group of people. The biases can be positive or negative and are usually unconscious and unintentional. Implicit biases, subconscious associations about people, are learned as part of our lived experiences and social conditioning. Most people are unaware that they hold or express implicit bias.

groups of people, racist rhetoric, hateful speech and discrimination based on race, identity, language, or color. Explicit bias is not only conscious, but intentional and controllable. Unfortunately, there are people in education who have explicit biases as a result of fears or ignorance. We do not have the time or place in our schools for anyone who is explicitly biased. Explicit bias is hateful and every attempt should be made to keep explicitly biased individuals away from staff and children. We should not accept or tolerate it, especially in today's political climate where some continue to normalize this type of negative and deliberate hurtful rhetoric.

It is important to keep in mind that we all have implicit biases and that our biases have a tremendous effect on access and achievement in schools. Biases are barriers to learning for many of our students, but especially for students of color and marginalized youth. It is important to understand that although we all have biases, we also have the

Mirror Checks (cont.)

power to change the prejudice that exists within ourselves.

Ready for a Mirror Check?

A great way to begin to analyze our beliefs and behaviors is through what I refer to as a *mirror check*. A mirror check helps us identify our authentic selves and our biases. Take a moment to conduct a mirror check and ask yourself a few questions:

- Do you believe that ALL students can learn?
- What are your expectations for boys vs. girls in the classroom?
- Do you value diversity?
- Are you color blind or color brave?
- What are your assumptions about your school community?
- Do your students see themselves in your classroom library? In your school?
- Who's history are you teaching?
- Are you analyzing data and looking for achievement and opportunity gaps?
- Who gets suspended at your school site? Do you have disproportionality in discipline practices?
- Are you taking the time to make connections with every student in your class?
- Who are the students that you feel most comfortable connecting with? The white students? The Gifted students?
- Do you view language and culture as an asset or a hindrance to learning?
- Do you have an overrepresentation of Students of Color or English learners in your Special Ed classes?



Inside-Out Work: Closing the Knowing-Doing Gap

Reducing implicit bias requires an inside-out approach to change. It is something that we need to consistently and continuously focus on. Once we are able to recognize our implicit biases we can begin to work on ourselves which leads to the disruption of the entire system. These are ways that educators can begin to do this personal work:

- Connect and build meaningful relationships with your students and colleagues
- Embrace a color brave mindset-acknowledge diversity, language, and race
- Welcome families into your classroom

- Share a variety of literature and picture books that highlight diversity
- Share and discuss current events that impact students of color and students in poverty
- Call out racist and hateful acts in your classroom and school
- Create a culture of community and empathy in your classroom
- Become a culturally responsive practitioner
- Read and fill your “backpack” with knowledge about systemic oppression and antiracist educational practices. Share your knowledge with your colleagues.

Implicit bias is something we all struggle with. And yes, it is impacting OUR schools and OUR students every day. Implicit biases held by those entrusted to educate and care for students contribute to a never ending cycle of systematic oppression. WE have the power to begin a wave of change by challenging our own beliefs and behaviors. Countering our personal implicit biases begins with regular mirror checks and working from the inside-out. Maya Angelou shares, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” Join me in regular mirror checks and closing the knowing-doing gap. We can do better for ALL students.

Dr. Rose Isiah has served students in her community for 26 years. Currently, she serves as Director of Elementary in CA. Dr. Isiah is passionate about equity and access, multilingual Ed, leadership, and closing opportunity gaps for historically underserved students. Dr. Isiah’s experiences as an immigrant, English learner, and a child in poverty add to her passion for her work.

Dr. Isiah is founder of #WeLeadEd Twitter chat and the WeleadED BAMradio radio podcast focused on Ed Leadership and Social Justice. Dr. Isiah co-authored three books on the whole child, equity, and the power of relationships. She contributes her voice to blogs, podcasts, and books on social justice, diversity, equity, access, and women in leadership. Dr. Isiah was the recipient of the Loyola Marymount University 2019 Leader for Social Justice award.

Dr. Isiah is a Solution Tree Culture and Equity professional development associate. She has also presented on social justice topics at conferences including AMLE Guatemala City and Hawaii, UCLACenterX Math Parent Project, SDCOE, NY SPED Collaborative, and EdSurge.