

IMPLICIT BIAS IN K-12 EDUCATION CASE STUDY AND SCENARIO WORKBOOK

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

THE KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RACE & ETHNICITY

Overview

Now that you have an understanding of how implicit bias operates, manifests in the real world, and ways to mitigate your biases, it is important to put theory into practice. This workbook provides you with a series of case studies, scenarios, and reflection questions that will assist you in thinking about how to apply what you have learned to your work as an educator.

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Case Study I: Part A: Maria's Student Experience in a Well-Intended School

Maria is a junior at Middlebury High School. Her family moved into the school district at the beginning of the academic year. Her family is one of a few Latinx families in town, all of which moved to Middlebury in the past few years. Maria is frequently late to or absent from first period so her teacher, Mr. Jacobs, is worried about her. She misses important material when she is absent. When she is late it causes a disruption for the entire class since the lesson has to be paused. Mr. Jacobs asks Maria why she is often late or absent and she says that she just cannot seem to wake up on time because she is always tired. Mr. Jacobs tells Maria that all high school students are tired but that the other students still manage to make it to class on time. He encourages her to stop staying up so late at night so that she can come to school well rested and invites her to talk to him any time about how she can become more motivated in school.

Little does Mr. Jacobs know that Maria is exhausted because she works two part-time jobs in order to save money for college. She knows that she is not eligible for most scholarships and financial aid because she is undocumented, so she has to make sure she saves money to follow her dream of attending a university. Maria is disheartened by the conversation. She feels that Mr. Jacobs—like many other teachers she has had before—does not understand what it is like to work two jobs on top of doing homework. She feels that Mr. Jacobs would not take her seriously even if he knew she was working two jobs and she does not dare explain further for fear of anyone finding out that she is undocumented.

Maria tries hard to get to school on time after the conversation with Mr. Jacobs but eventually she has missed enough school that the counselor's office sends a letter to her parents. In the letter they warn Maria's parents about the possible consequences of truancy. Maria's parents do not speak English, but the staff figures that Maria can translate the letter for her parents.

Maria starts to feel unwelcome at her school. One morning during class, Maria and a fellow student got into a small argument. In response, Mr. Jacobs verbally reprimands Maria to "stop being so dramatic and so loud." Because of Mr. Jacobs' phrasing, Maria feels stereotyped. Maria has heard comments about Latina women being loud and

dramatic before and feels it is a stereotype too often associated with her and other Latina women. Maria walks out of the class in frustration.

Maria becomes increasingly frustrated with Mr. Jacobs and the school. When Maria expresses this frustration to the few other Latinx students at Middlebury, they all say that they feel similarly. One student even says that another Latinx student was suspended twice for disrupting classes by being too loud and acting defiant toward a teacher. The student also says that a White student who is always loud in the exact same class has only ever been sent to the office to calm down and asked to write an apology letter to the teacher for being rude. Maria had not heard about this situation before but it seemed like proof that the teachers at Middlebury treat her and the other Latinx students differently than the White students.

Reflection Questions

What assumptions does Mr. Jacobs make in this scenario?

What assumptions do Maria and the other Latinx students make?

In what ways is implicit bias potentially operating in this scenario?

How do you believe educators could address the feelings of Latinx students at Middlebury?

Case Study I: Part B: Maria's Student Experience in a Bias-Conscious School

Maria is a junior at Middlebury High School. Her family moved into the school district at the beginning of the academic year. Her family is one of a few Latinx families in town, all of which moved to Middlebury in the past few years. Maria is frequently late to or absent from first period so her teacher, Mr. Jacobs, is worried about her. She misses important material when she is absent. When she is late, it causes a disruption for the entire class since the lesson has to be paused. Mr. Jacobs asks Maria why she is so often late or absent and she says that she just cannot seem to wake up on time because she is always tired.

Mr. Jacobs has heard this excuse many times in his career, as it is a common experience for teenagers. However, he knows that incomplete or ambiguous information can lead to making decisions based on implicit biases so he decides to ask some clarifying questions. He tells Maria that he is sorry to hear that she is not getting enough sleep and asks why that is the case. She informs him that she is working two jobs to save up money for college. Mr. Jacobs thinks Maria is a bright student with a promising future, so he tells her so and encourages her decision to pursue higher education. Mr. Jacobs then asks if there is anything he can do to help (even though he knows he cannot change the overall circumstances of her life). Maria tells Mr. Jacobs that she appreciates his understanding and encouragement. She feels affirmed that her teacher took the time to listen to her. Mr. Jacobs then asks Maria if he can give her a responsibility in the class as the class greeter. She would just need to greet students at the door in the morning and sometimes hand out class materials. Maria is surprised by his question but agrees because she is glad he trusts her with a responsibility.

Maria tries hard to get to school on time after the conversation with Mr. Jacobs, especially with her new responsibility as class greeter, but eventually she has missed enough school that the counselor's office sends a letter to her parents warning about the possible consequences of truancy. The counselor's office tries to call parents before sending these types of letters. Although no one in the office speaks Spanish well enough to feel comfortable calling Maria's parents, they decide to do so anyway because it is worth any potential confusion or awkwardness in order to treat all students equitably. During the call, the counselor is able to connect with Maria's parents and better understand Maria's situation. The counselor asks if it would be beneficial to

schedule an elective class for Maria's first period during the next semester so that she is not missing content for a core class when she is absent/tardy. Even

though Maria's personal circumstances have not changed, she hopes that she will be able to learn more and miss less essential material the following semester due to the counselor's understanding and creative strategizing.

One morning, Maria confronts a fellow student who has been making her feel unwelcome. Mr. Jacobs' first instinct is to reprimand her verbally for being dramatic and loud. Mr. Jacobs wants Maria to know that it is not appropriate to be rude to peers when you are frustrated. After all, that kind of behavior is not only disruptive to the class but will not lead to success in the "real world." Mr. Jacobs realizes that his implicit association may influence his perception of Maria's behavior, so he decides to pause for a moment before responding to Maria. He says, "I understand that you might feel frustrated right now. Can you help me understand why that might be the case, if so, and how we can resolve it and move forward with class?" Maria is glad that Mr. Jacobs was patient and asked why she was direct with another student instead of making any assumptions or invoking stereotypes about Latinas like some other teachers had in the past. She tells him that she overslept and missed breakfast as a result, so Mr. Jacobs asks if she would like a cereal bar. Mr. Jacobs has some in a desk drawer because the school knows some students come to school hungry so they give all teachers some cereal bars each month in case students need food.

Maria begins to appreciate Mr. Jacobs and the school. She feels that they are valuing her as a person with their supportive actions. When Maria mentions her conversations with Mr. Jacobs and the counselor to the few other Latinx students at Middlebury, they all say that they feel similarly. One student says that another Latinx student and a White student had both disrupted a class by being too loud and acting defiant toward a teacher. Instead of punishing them, however, the teacher decided to ask both students to take some quiet time in the counselor's office to calm down. The students apologized to the teacher later after realizing that they had disrupted the class. Maria had not heard about this situation before but it seemed like proof that the teachers at Middlebury treat students fairly. She is pleasantly surprised to hear this story because at other schools she had attended in the past Latinx students often felt that they were perceived as troublemakers and treated differently than their White peers.

Reflection Questions

In what ways is this scenario different from the first scenario—for the students, teachers, and administrators?

How might you use these parallel scenarios to inform practices, policies, and procedures at your K-12 educational institution?

Case Study II: Mateo's Student Experience

As you are supervising lunch period, you overhear a group of students asking another student for his papers. You assume they are discussing term papers but as you move closer to the group you notice the student that is being asked to show his papers is Latino. You realize that the students are asking about immigration papers and you hurry over to break up the group. You send the students who were asking for papers to the principal's office. You ask the Latino student his name and if he is okay. His name is Mateo and he is upset because this is not the first time he has been bullied like this. You apologize to Mateo for having to experience these things when he comes to school and you ask him if he feels comfortable sharing more with you about what he has been dealing with.

Mateo tells you that every day these students, as well as others, ask for his papers and slide notes in his locker saying things like "build the wall," among other racial slurs. Mateo begins crying and shares that he is a third generation US citizen and that his parents emigrated here from Columbia on student visas and obtained US citizenship. Because of the political climate of the US, Mateo has been experiencing an increase of hate language used against him in the school. Many students assume Mateo is an undocumented Mexican immigrant and they harass Mateo because of these perceived identities.

You are extremely disheartened to hear how tormented Mateo has been feeling and you decide that issues regarding racial bias should be addressed to the entire student body and school staff. You ask Mateo if he is interested in helping you come up with a way to improve the school culture and make him and others who deal with the same barriers feel safer in the school. Mateo excitedly agrees because he wants his school to be a more inclusive and informed space. Mateo introduces you to a group of students who are racially diverse but all share the Latinx identity. This group of students decide they want to form a student coalition that combats racial bias. The students ask you to be their advisor and you are honored to accept the responsibility. You work within the school to help the students get the platform they need to address the entire school. The students in the coalition decide a Social Justice Cultural Diversity night and talent show would be a fun and exciting way to learn about different cultures and some of the challenges they face. You agree that this is a fantastic idea and you schedule a meeting with the school principal to propose the students' Social Justice Event.

When you meet with the principal, she immediately tells you that this type of event is not an event the school can support as she feels it will exclude students who don't identify as Latinx. In order for your students to have a budget and space to plan and host the event, you have to justify why it would be beneficial to the entire school.

Reflection Questions

What would you tell the principal about implicit biases and creating a more just and inclusive school culture to get her approval?

Case Study III: Part A: Grading in the Classroom

You and Mrs. G, a young White woman, co-teach a class of fourth graders at Brighton Middle School. For the most part you have a great class with promising young minds. However, there are two students who seem to consistently struggle with Pre-Algebra and calculations: Jalen and Amber. Neither turns in homework consistently and when they do few answers are correct. They live in the same neighborhood so they study together often. Both Jalen and Amber understand how to build formulas introduced in Pre-Algebra but they rarely calculate their numbers correctly. This could be due to both students lacking the financial ability to purchase a graphing calculator to use at home for their homework.

When reviewing their last test scores to determine proper interventions, you notice some differences in their grades. Amber consistently scores higher than Jalen even though they demonstrate very similar levels of understanding and similar work. You expect the similarity in their work because they study together, but the drastic differences in their scoring has caught you completely off guard. Mrs. G. handles grading and you see that she tends to give Amber higher grades than Jalen on her quizzes and tests. As a result, Amber has not been receiving the additional interventions that Jalen has, thus causing Amber to fall even further behind her peers. Having learned about implicit biases, you understand that Mrs. G isn't necessarily intentionally trying to be unfair to either Amber or Jalen. Nevertheless, you know that something must be done to address this grading—and subsequent academic achievement opportunity—discrepancy.

Reflection Questions

In what ways might implicit bias be operating in this scenario?

How would you open a conversation about this discrepancy with your co-teacher, especially knowing that Mrs. G explicitly values fair grading?

Case Study III: Part B: Grading in the Classroom

You are the principal of Brighton Middle School. Two co-teachers of a fourth grade class—Mrs. G and Mr. S—ask if they can talk to you about some concerns regarding academic achievement in their class. When you meet with the two teachers, they inform you that they have had extensive discussions about how implicit bias could be operating in the classroom in regards to grading students differently without actually intending to. They tell you about a situation in which it became apparent that students named Amber and Jalen were receiving different marks despite having somewhat similar challenges with their Pre-Algebra. It sounds like Mrs. G and Mr. S have had a thoughtful and deep conversation about how this one instance might be part of a broader pattern. The two educators are both genuinely worried that if this kind of discrepancy has happened in their classroom despite the best of intentions, then perhaps it is also occurring in other classrooms in the school.

Reflection Questions

What are some ways that you might address possible implicit biases in grading on an institutional level? In other words, what are some strategies you could design and implement as the principal that could help reduce the likelihood that some students are being graded differently than others?

How would you simultaneously support teachers and their autonomy in their individual classrooms while also having mechanisms in place that challenge implicit bias in relation to academic achievement?

Scenario I: School Discipline

Today your 4th grade students are having recess in the gym because of the thunderstorm outside. Many children are running and playing throughout the gym. There is a group of Black male students playing basketball on one side of the gym and not too far away is a group of White female students playing jump rope. Due to the thunderstorm, the lights in the gym suddenly go out and turn back on. When the lights come back on, you hear a White female student scream, “Black people suck!” Her comment causes the boys in the basketball game to become very upset and they yell back to her, “White people suck!” You run over to see what is going on. The girls tell you that the boys threw the ball at them when the lights went out. The boys say they were shooting a shot at the hoop when the lights went out and the ball accidentally hit the girls.

How do you respond to this situation? Please consider why the following responses might be helpful, as well as any potential concerns.

Response A

I take the basketball from the boys and tell them if they cannot play nicely then they cannot play basketball at all. I make sure that the girl student is okay and I send her to the nurse’s office.

1. Why might this response be helpful?

2. What are some potential concerns?

Response B

I reprimand all of the students by giving them detention for the racist comments they all made. Because of their actions, none of the students involved will be able to continue playing during recess.

3. Why might this response be helpful?

4. What are some potential concerns?

Response C

I separate the two groups of students from the rest of the students at recess and explain to them that racist and prejudiced comments like the ones they made are not acceptable in our school. Every student would need to write an essay on how harmful our words could be. I would then ask the students to explain what happened. If it is determined it was an accident, I would allow the kids to continue to play at recess and have the groups spread out more.

5. Why might this response be helpful?

6. What are some potential concerns?

Response D

I would send the girl student who yelled, “Black people suck” to the principal’s office. Whether or not the incident was an accident, that type of language is unacceptable.

7. Why might this response be helpful?

8. What are some potential concerns?

Discussion

When deciding the best way to respond, it is necessary that you first address the racist and prejudiced comments made. You could explain how harmful generalizations can be and ensure that all students in the space can feel safe. If you decide to discipline the students you must discipline every student in an **equitable** way. You could acknowledge that the girl student initiated the comments but she shouldn't be the only one punished because all of the students involved used harmful language. The focus of discipline should **be teaching tolerance, not punishment**. It could be helpful to have the girl student be disciplined a little more sternly than the other students but to only punish her wouldn't be fair. It is not the best decision to discipline the boys for throwing the ball if that was an accident, however you will want to ensure that the girl student is not physically hurt. You should also speak with each group of students separately to address any additional concerns they have. This would ensure that both groups of students feel **heard** and their feelings **validated**.

1. After reading the discussion, what response do you feel is the best response and why?
2. How would you respond to the situation and why?
3. Have you dealt with a similar instance in your school? If so, how was it handled? Would you have handled it differently?
4. How could implicit biases have influenced discipline decisions in this scenario?

Scenario II: Student Discipline in the District

You are a teacher at Barker City High School. There was a lot of outrage in the community because the superintendent interfered with a school discipline decision made by the principal in regards to two boys who were punished differently for participating in the annual senior prank. It was discovered that one student received expulsion while the other student only received suspension. The parents of the student who was expelled called the superintendent expressing concerns of racial bias. The superintendent ended up going over the head of Principal Evans, reversing the student's expulsion, and giving him a weeklong suspension instead. A school climate committee has been created as a result of community accusations of discrimination and unfair treatment at BCHS. You have been asked to be part of the committee along with several other teachers and a few administrators.

Most of the teachers at the high school—including most of the teachers on the new committee—are on Principal Evans' side and believe that the boys did not deserve the same punishment since one boy had a reputation as a troublemaker and the other boy was just a class clown. However, you attended a conference recently that discussed how implicit bias can manifest in school discipline decisions. Even though you do not personally know either of the boys involved in the situation, you do know that one was Black and the other was White. Over your 10 years of working at BCHS, you have vaguely noticed but had never been totally sure that students of color—especially Black and Native American students—seem to be punished more frequently and severely than White students. While everyone is talking about this one particular school prank incident, you realize that this is not a rare occurrence at BCHS. You're glad this issue is being brought to people's attention because students aren't disciplined in equitable ways and you are ready for a change.

Reflection Questions

How could you bring the up the possibility that BCHS might have a wider issue with disciplining students differently to the school climate committee?

When you bring up the issue, most of the committee member are resistant to the idea that BCHS might have a wider problem with implicit biases. They ask you to provide actual strategies to determine if there is a problem and how to address it if so. What action(s) would you suggest that the committee take?