



3-4-10 Article 3 on Implicit Bias

Do teachers treat children differently based on their color? Study says yes.

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Black and white children are not disciplined equally for behavior problems in school, researchers say. Last June, research showed that black students are nearly four times as likely to be suspended as white students. In addition, they are almost twice as likely to be expelled, or removed from school.

In September, researchers found that even black preschool children are almost four times more likely to get suspended. The researchers might have found a reason for this. Scientists at Yale University in Connecticut blame implicit bias.

Bias is a belief that some people or ideas are better than others. It often results in people being treated unfairly. When bias is implicit, it is understood, but not necessarily intentional or discussed.

Implicit biases can be held by white teachers. The study found that white teachers expect less from black students. The reason is based on unfair and untrue stereotypes about students of color. The bias also results in fewer black kids being recommended to programs for gifted students. Yale's study showed that much younger children than previously thought are victims of racial bias. Researchers also found implicit bias in both black and white teachers.

Looking for Behavior That Isn't There

Professor Walter Gilliam led the study. He showed 135 educators videos of four preschoolers, a black boy and girl, and a white boy and girl. The teachers were told that scientists wanted to know how they identify challenging behavior in the classroom. They were told to press a button when they saw such behavior.

Actually, no bad behavior existed in any of the videos. Yet when asked which children required the most attention, 42 percent of the teachers identified the black boy.

Researchers also used a computer to track teachers' eye movements. They found that preschool teachers watched black students more closely for bad behavior, especially boys. The participants' own answers led to almost the same results.

Allison R. Brown works for a group that tries to lower the number of students who end up in jail when they get older. She found the results heartbreaking but not surprising. The study report says that "black bodies are policed in the streets and in the classroom." It adds that black boys are often viewed as four and five years older than they are.

Behavior Is More Than Black and White

The study also says that the biggest racial differences in school punishments are for rules that can be interpreted different ways. Examples are disobedience and disrespect. Differences decrease when there is only one interpretation. A student carrying drugs is an example of that. The behavior is obvious.

Brown worries that the study is saying the same thing as the news headlines. Some people view black people as less than human. They treat them as if they do not deserve dignity and respect.

The study results partly confirmed Brown's concern. However, it shows that black children are not the only ones affected. Children of other races are as well. Teachers were also given information about the disruptive child's home life and family problems. Teachers were only more empathetic if they were the same race as the student. Otherwise, teachers were even harsher on the student. When thinking about why this could be, the report suspected it was because teachers felt more powerless if they were not the same race as the student.

"These findings suggest that teachers need support in understanding family struggles as they may relate to child behaviors," Gilliam says. He says it is especially true when the teacher and child are of different races.

Teachers and Parents Can Work Together

The good news is that teachers are willing to work at it. Gilliam said that when he gave teachers the opportunity to drop out of the study, only one person did. He recommends that teachers be offered anti-bias training programs.

Lauren Owen is a white teacher, and a graduate of Harvard University in Massachusetts. Owen describes race as something that is easy to identify with because it is visible. "It's easier to empathize when we have similar experiences with someone who looks the same as us," she says.

Gilliam says that educators are paid very little and teach because they love children. He tells parents of black children not to wait until biases build up. Instead they should get to know teachers and staff. Gilliam says that "in all of my years of studying this issue, I've never seen a case where a child was expelled or suspended from a childcare or preschool setting when the parents and teachers knew and liked each other."

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