Implicit racial bias often begins as early as preschool, a study finds

By Yolanda Young, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.07.16

When it comes to classroom behavior, black and white children are not treated equally. Research released in June showed that black students are nearly four times as likely to be suspended as white students, and nearly twice as likely to be expelled.

In addition, researchers recently found that black preschoolers are 3.6 times more likely to get suspended from school. The reason for this? Scientists at Yale Child Study Center at Yale University in Connecticut blame implicit bias.

Bias is a prejudice in favor or against one group or person, which often results in treating some people unfairly. When the bias is implicit, it is understood, though not stated clearly or directly.

Classroom Behavior Study Revealed Biases

Implicit biases show up as subtle, sometimes subconscious stereotypes held by white teachers. They were shown to expect less from black students because of unfair and untrue beliefs about all students of color. Implicit bias also results in fewer black kids being
recommended to programs for gifted students. Yale’s study revealed that biases are
directed at much younger children than previously thought. Researchers also found
implicit bias in both black and white teachers.

Professor Walter Gilliam led the study. He showed 135 educators videos of a black boy
and girl, and a white boy and girl in a classroom setting. The teachers were told the
following:

“We are interested in learning about how teachers detect challenging behavior in the
classroom. Sometimes this involves seeing behavior before it becomes problematic. The
video segments you are about to view are of preschoolers engaging in various activities.
Some clips may or may not contain challenging behaviors. Your job is to press the enter
key on the external keypad every time you see a behavior that could become a potential
challenge.”

While the teachers were asked to detect challenging behavior, no such 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.

In addition to answers from the teachers, researchers used eye-tracking technology during
the study. The results noted that preschool teachers “show a tendency to more closely
observe black students, and especially boys, when challenging behaviors are expected.”
The participants’ own answers about which student needed the most attention led to
almost the same results.

**Shutting Off The "School-To-Prison Pipeline"**

Allison R. Brown is executive director of the Communities for Just Schools Fund, an
organization that works to combat the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Her group works to stop
black kids from getting expelled or suspended at higher rates than white kids. She found
the results heartbreaking but not surprising. The study report states that “black bodies are
policing in the streets and in the classroom.” It goes on to say that research demonstrates
that black boys are viewed as four and five years older than they actually are.

The study also says that the biggest racial differences in school discipline exist in
subjective categories, where different people might experience the same thing in different
ways. Examples of this are willful defiance, insubordination and disrespect.

Those race differences decrease significantly for the more objective categories such as
possession of alcohol on campus. Possession of drugs with intent to distribute and
possession of a loaded weapon are also examples of objective categories. They are
objective because either students possessed the contraband or they did not, whereas the
subjective categories could be more based on opinion.
Arming Teachers With Information

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

The study's results partially confirmed Brown's anxiety. However, they show that black children are not the only ones affected, children of other races are, too. Researchers found that when teachers were given information about the disruptive child's home life and family stressors, they were only more empathetic if the teacher and the student shared the same race. Otherwise, teachers were even harsher on the student. Scientists suspected it was because teachers felt 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, especially when the teacher and child are of different races,” Gilliam says.

The good news is that teachers are willing to work at it. Gilliam pointed out that when he gave teachers the opportunity to withdraw their results from the study, only one person chose to do so.

Gilliam recommends anti-bias training programs and suggests consulting the work done by Howard Stevenson on racial literacy and racial climate in schools. Stevenson is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Getting Past The Visuals

Lauren Owen is a white teacher and recent graduate of Harvard Graduate School of Education. She wrote an essay on the need for empathy in teaching. In the essay, Owen describes race as a category that is easy to identify with because it is visible. "I think it's tough to get past visual indicators of sameness or different-ness because they are reinforced too frequently, and so it's easier to empathize when we have similar experiences with someone who looks the same as us,” Owen says.

Gilliam is hopeful and says that educators, who are paid very little, pursue teaching because they love children. He tells parents of black children not to wait until biases build up, but instead be proactive and get to know teachers and staff.

"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," Gilliam says.
Quiz

1 Fill in the blank. The CENTRAL idea of the article is developed by ........
   (A) analyzing why Gilliam led the study of school discipline and explaining
       people’s concerns.
   (B) describing the results of Gilliam’s study and providing suggestions for
       fighting implicit bias.
   (C) comparing the issue of racial bias in schools to news headlines about black
       people.
   (D) explaining what students think when they encounter implicit bias from
       teachers at school.

2 Which of these sentences from the article would be MOST important to include in an objective
   summary of the article?
   (A) Yet, when asked which children required the most attention, 42 percent of
       the teachers identified the black boy.
   (B) She found the results heartbreaking but not surprising.
   (C) The good news is that teachers are willing to work at it.
   (D) In the essay, Owen describes race as a category that is easy to identify with
       because it is visible.

3 Walter Gilliam would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?
   (A) The participants in Yale’s study were aware that they were unfairly targeting
       the black male student.
   (B) When families and teachers get to know each other, teachers have more
       empathy toward students with different backgrounds from themselves.
   (C) Teachers are naturally empathetic to issues affecting students of different
       races at school and at home.
   (D) Teachers who have implicit biases should avoid pursuing careers in
       preschool and elementary education.

4 Based on the article, which of the following answer choices would BEST describe teachers’
   reaction to the results of the study?
   (A) They rejected the results and think teaching needs empathy.
   (B) They accepted the results and think that racial climate will not change.
   (C) They rejected the results and express that racial bias is implicit.
   (D) They accepted the results and want to fix the problem of racial bias.
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