

# Teacher Shortage and Implicit Bias: Identifying How Judgments, Decisions, and Behaviors Impact Teacher Stress

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## Abstract

According to the American Psychological Association, Implicit bias, also known as implicit prejudice or implicit attitude, is a negative attitude, of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group. Implicit Bias can occur within classrooms. This article provides a model for addressing implicit bias. Confirmation, Attribution, Gender and Racial implicit bias activities are utilized to identify and address these biases. Research indicates the need to examine and regularly assess for implicit biases. There also exists a need to disaggregate discipline/referral data by groups and provide follow-up professional development to address potential biases.

## Keywords

Teacher Shortage, Implicit Bias, Teacher Burnout, Stress, Trauma, Teacher Attrition, Classroom Management, Referrals

## 1. Introduction—Teacher Shortage

According to federal data, shortages in personnel that created challenges for K-12 leaders at the start of the 2022 academic school year persisted and continued to disrupt the stability of the nation's public school systems. Furthermore, data showed that a contributing factor to this instability was driven by fewer new teachers entering the pipeline (Camera, 2022). According to other figures, 4% of all teaching jobs in public schools needed to be filled immediately. The typical public school has at least two open teaching positions. Only 18% of public schools had just one open position, while 27% had several. Other data show that

special education (7%), English as a Second Language or Bilingual Education (6%), and Computer Science (5%) professions had the three highest vacancy rates among teaching posts in public schools. Schools with a high-minority student population (greater than 75 percent minority) experienced a minimum of one teaching vacancy (60 percent) when compared to schools whose minority student body was low (25 percent or less minority; 32 percent) (NCES, 2022).

While multiple factors are linked to the shortage, a new study by the American Psychological Association (APA) highlights issues related to inadequate working conditions and concerns for the physical safety and mental well-being of educators (McMahon et al., 2022).

## 2. School Discipline and Shortage

Schools around the nation are experiencing increased behavioral issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including fighting, vandalism, and overall disrespect... It leaves educators in a difficult position as they acknowledge the rise in disruptive behaviors from students associated with individual, academic, mental, and emotional health problems exacerbated by the pandemic. Nonetheless, teachers are dealing with burnout due to behavior and discipline issues (Silberstein, 2022). The National Education Association reveals significant data regarding school discipline and its connection to the shortage. For example, amid fears of a widening shortage “almost half of all teachers report a desire or plan to quit because of school climate and safety” (Buck, 2023). The survey shows an increase in physical assaults on teachers by students and parents is on the rise since the beginning of COVID. More teachers may choose to leave their positions if the resources required to enhance the school atmosphere and safety are not implemented (Walker, 2022). Examining patterns of office referrals connected to students’ discipline can be helpful in decisions about school programming needs and effective interventions to support students and teachers (Kaufman et al., 2010).

## 3. Disproportionate Referrals

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Office, there are pervasive disparities connected to race in how schoolchildren are disciplined. The longitudinal study, which examined data from the previous 15 years, discovered that minority children were subjected to an unfairly high number of disciplinary measures at schools nationwide, from those in wealthy suburban neighborhoods to those in the most underprivileged urban districts (Chen, 2023).

## 4. Implicit Bias

Teachers make hundreds of decisions that directly affect students and influence the way they view themselves and the world (Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2016; Staats, 2016). Teachers that have not spent time becoming familiar with the implicit bi-

ases they possess unknowingly make assumptions and decisions about students that result in them being labeled, receiving unwarranted reprimands, and having a tainted educational experience. Students do not receive unfair treatment well, so their responses to it further impacts teachers' stress levels. [Benson & Fiarman \(2019\)](#) define implicit bias as, "learned beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes about a particular race that result in harmful or preferential treatment of members of that race". The four types of implicit bias that will be discussed and defined are: confirmation bias, attribution bias, gender bias and racial bias. Unexplored implicit bias is lethal and can perpetuate harm in the lives of students. Teachers that spend time identifying their implicit bias, analyzing the influence their implicit bias has on their reactions to students, and engaging in professional development with others concentrate on diluting the dominance of implicit bias on their decision-making and increase their ability to equitably respond to students and diminish their stress levels.

### **Proposed Model**

The proposed model would include a series of professional development activities for all teachers designed to address each type of implicit bias.

#### **4.1. Confirmation Bias**

When teachers hold strong beliefs and preconceived notions they seek to validate their beliefs in the actions and behaviors of their students ([Peters, 2018](#)). If a teacher believes a student is lazy, when the student is seen with their head down during independent work time, the teacher's confirmation bias can result in the student receiving a discipline referral. A teacher that has explored their confirmation bias would challenge their belief by being curious and asking the student why their head is down and what is needed to aid them in completing the assigned work. When teachers challenge the urge to seek confirmation bias in situations, they open themselves up to discover and meet the unique needs of their students.

### **Activity**

Teachers will receive professional development regarding confirmation bias. They will receive a handout with three different vertical sections with the description of ten instances of students in action throughout the school day in the left section. In the middle section, they will have two minutes to write down their belief regarding the students' actions. Only two minutes is allotted for this portion of the activity to expose the teachers' confirmation bias. Lastly, the teachers will find a partner at a different table to share their responses with and collectively they will write, in the right section, ways to approach the students with the goal of not being driven by their confirmation bias.

#### **4.2. Attribution Bias**

Teachers frequently witness students displaying behaviors that are the antithesis of what is desired ([Anderman, 2020](#)). Often, teachers engage in attribution bias

by contributing the undesirable behaviors they witness from students to flaws in their character and personal disposition instead of considering the environmental factors influencing students' behavior. When a student attempts to explain the situation, a teacher that holds tightly to their assessment of the situation can experience stress from being challenged. Teachers that develop an understanding of the insidiousness of perpetuating attribution bias pause and consider the environmental factors before responding. Then, with the full context in mind, a more appropriate response to the undesirable behavior is rendered. When teachers refrain from connecting a student's behavior to their character, they institute effective ways to respond and refrain from overly issuing disciplinary referrals.

### Activity

Teachers will receive professional development regarding attribution bias. They will work in triads to role-play three different scenarios. In each scenario, a teacher and a student will be in the principal's office discussing the content of a submitted disciplinary referral. The student will discuss what happened, and the teacher will continue to view the situation through the lens of their attribution bias. The principal will synthesize the information using the skills taught during the professional development to help the teacher notice their bias. Each triad member will alternate between being the principal, the teacher, and the student.

### 4.3. Gender Bias/Racial Bias (Other Resources)

Implicit Bias Resources (surveys) help to identify and address biases. The Implicit Association Test (IAT), measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, old people, or gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good or bad) or characteristics (e.g., athletic, smart, or clumsy).

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/user/agg/blindspot/indexrk.htm>

The Unconscious Prejudice: A Self-Reflection Questionnaire provides individuals an opportunity to rate their comfort level regarding varying situations to uncover implicit bias. Questions about race, sexuality, gender, weight, and disability are asked.

<http://breakingprejudice.org/assets/AHAA/ChapterActivityMaterials/Unconscious%20Prejudice%20Activity/Unconscious%20Prejudice%20Questionnaire.pdf>

## 5. Data Analysis

Teachers will be pre and post tested on Implicit Bias. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) and/or The Unconscious Prejudice: A Self-Reflection Questionnaire would be utilized. Other Implicit Bias questionnaires could also be utilized.

- The Implicit Association Test (IAT), measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, old people, or gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good or bad) or characteristics (e.g., athletic, smart, or clumsy). Per the National Institutes of Health, the IAT's average test-retest reliability is .50. "This is adequate for studies that assess correlations of IAT measures

with other measures or for studies that test hypotheses about group differences or experimental treatment differences in mean IAT scores. Validity of the self-esteem IAT is low, but estimates vary across studies. About 20% of the variance in the race IAT reflects racial preferences. The highest validity is obtained for measuring political orientation with the IAT (64%)” (Greenwald et al., 2021).

The IAT is based on the observation that individuals put two words in the same category quicker if the words are already associated in the brain.

- The Unconscious Prejudice: A Self-Reflection Questionnaire provides individuals an opportunity to rate their comfort level regarding varying situations to uncover implicit bias. Questions about race, sexuality, gender, weight, and disability are asked.

## 6. Recommendations

Since there are diverse gender, ethnicity and social groups in schools, there is a need to regularly assess for implicit biases. In an effort to monitor bias, educational institutions should disaggregate discipline/referral data by groups and provide follow-up professional development to address potential biases. For example, if 80% of a school’s discipline referrals were written for boys, a potential implicit bias may be occurring. Furthermore, if 80% of a school’s discipline referrals were written for boys, and they were written by a particular teacher, a potential implicit bias may be occurring. After analyzing discipline referral data school-wide, grade-wide, subject-wide, by teacher, counselor and administrator, discussions and recommendations for Implicit Bias professional development should be provided.

## 7. Conclusion

Ongoing educator professional development (training, coursework, PLCs...) and support are needed to address implicit bias. This model proposes professional development that would identify and address implicit bias from a multi-directional approach. The identification lens of bias must examine every individual in the school setting: teachers, counselors, administrators... Furthermore, curriculum, instruction and assessment practices should also be considered for examination and further research. This article was not funded by an external agency.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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