My Journey to TEAR Down Implicit Bias Through Embedded Reflective Practices

BY MELINDA YOUNG

Inescapable images of horrific violence, protests, and social injustice urged me to engage in deeper conversations, conversations during which I have felt scared, tired, angry, vulnerable but ultimately empowered to continue. It is important to be self-aware and willing to reflect on our implicit biases in order to move forward. Implicit biases can breed microaggressions and relationship barriers that impact how we interact with one another as educational leaders and how we engage with families. Ultimately, this affects the relationships and environments of the children we serve.

Over the past 16 years, I have reflected on my experiences in the education field. When I was an assistant director, I remember addressing a parent's concern that their Black son might not be nurtured in the same way as the other students because his teachers were white. Their concerns were valid. I had a choice to blindly defend the teachers or use this concern as feedback to reflect on the experiences of children of color within our program. This is where my journey truly began to shift. To achieve transformational change, we must TEAR down our biases by doing the reflective work of facing our **T**ruths, **E**valuating our systems, **A**ligning our behaviors with our beliefs, and developing authentic, collaborative **R**elationships.

TRUTH & TRUST

Reflective Question: Do I Have Biases? The Truth is Yes.

To start tearing down implicit biases, I had to take an honest look at myself, my actions, and my attitude. To start tearing down implicit biases, we have to see the truth (our perceived truth and how others see us). Implicit biases guide how we categorize people according to cultural stereotypes. This unconscious categorizing occurs as we allow our past experiences and influences to shape our assumptions of others. In the book, *So you want to talk about race*, Ijeoma Oluo discusses "checking my privilege." She talks about how we can be both privileged in some areas of life and underprivileged in others. According to Oluo, when we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else's oppression, we'll find our opportunities to make real change.

As an African American woman raised by a single mom trying to care for three children on minimum wage for a portion of my life, I was underprivileged. Yet, at the same time, I recognize that I also benefit from the privilege of being raised by my dad and step-mom in my latter years and having the opportunity to go to college. Recognizing that these experiences impacted how I communicated meant that through self-reflection, I examined my bias with single mothers, my interactions with parents from different socio-economic levels, and my views on fathers and male staff members. This allowed me to meet all parents and staff where they were and not where I assumed they would be.

Not only did I need to recognize the truth of my current understanding and behavior, but I also had to trust the process. Over the years, my understanding of systematic thinking grew. Change comes first by

seeing the truth in the role you play in enabling bias within your current system and breaking down those areas into actionable goals that tie back to addressing equity in the larger system. You may ask, "How can I build my practice as a leader for equity, starting with who I am and what I bring because of who I am?" Change also requires building one's capacity to trust. You need to have trust in the reflective process and in the people around you. I had to trust that just as I embodied the capacity for change, so did my co-workers, staff, and the families we served. Truth and trust are the beginning.

EVALUATE

Reflective Question: Who Are My Biases Affecting, and How?

To answer this, you need to begin evaluating your program, from the administration to teacher-child interactions. Reflective practices should be built on a foundation of research-based, valid and reliable assessment. Assessment tools should support the setting of objectives and targeted goals. I have used tools like the *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care* and the *Program Administration Scale* to examine systems and management practices. By evaluating the data around items like staff orientation and supervision and performance appraisal, we began to think about our current systems for onboarding and the continuous development of our staff. Other assessment tools that guided us were the Environment Rating Scales and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System.

You may ask: What data stands out? Within what areas? When? And is this across multiple areas? After you form your questions, look at your professional development practices and how they support determining answers and gaining strategies. When addressing areas of change, and especially when uncovering biases, this needs to be a parallel process. As leaders support teachers on their journey, we need to do the same work on the administration level and use assessment tools designed to look at the quality of leadership and management practices that can impact equity in the work environment.

ALIGNMENT

Reflective Question: Where Do I Start?

Revisit your mission and vision as an educator and an organization. Compare this with the data you have collected from the evaluation process. How are they aligned? Where are there discrepancies? How do diversity, equity, and inclusion play a role? Think of this process as a tune-up. Like a car, we need to have an alignment. We need to check and see if our actions match what we say we believe. As you look at your systems and compare practices to the data, continue to ask questions: Do I have an automatic feeling about discrepancies found in the data? What is that about? Is there a pattern across assessments? How can I become more conscious of these patterns in order to change them? Who can support me and hold me accountable?

RELATIONSHIPS

Reflective Question: How Are My Relationships?

Job-embedded professional development is learning that occurs in action. There are many contexts for professional learning to happen (e.g., knowledge development, collaboration routines, reflective

supervisory dialogue and feedback, and transfer to practice supports). All of the formats require teachers to be open to critical feedback and willing to share.

You may ask: How do your organization and your teaching teams support reflective practices? Who will be your accountability partner and brainstorm with you? Are your work relationships inclusive, authentic, and honest? Do you engage with people different from yourself and expose yourself to positive role models within that group (community)? How do you create spaces where you can learn from their expertise and lived experiences?

If you are in a homogenous environment, connect with and learn from resources, organizations, and communities that differ from you. Go outside your normal boundaries and invite people you don't usually talk with into conversations. Be an active listener to what they want you to know about them and their culture. Relationships are necessary for unifying our communities. As stated in an old proverb, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

Connecting and creating relationships may cause friction at times, but it fortifies both people in the end. As we strive to build a future that values diversity, equity, and inclusion, we must be willing to do the reflective and sometimes messy work of tearing down our biases.

If you would like to hear some of my journey, check out this video: [Tearing Down Implicit Bias Through Embedded Reflective Practices](#).

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