

# Why Teachers Must Fight Their Own Implicit Biases



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By **Melissa Garcia**

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During these summer months away from the classroom, we teachers are readying ourselves to embrace our next opportunity to make a difference. We're attending workshops and writing curriculum (and of course binge-watching Netflix).

The beauty of teaching is that each year we get another chance to do things better, to get things right. So each year we eagerly prepare our classrooms and our lesson plans to ensure that they're better than the previous year.

We post rules, hang a "welcome" greeting on the door, write a neatly color-coded agenda on the board—and we're ready. When the greatly anticipated first day of school arrives, we stand by our doors smiling and greeting students as they enter the classroom.




That's when it starts to happen. In these moments, as students mingle and shyly interact with one another, we the teachers **begin to make the very crucial observations that will affect our perceptions**, and thus inform our expectations, of each student that school year.

Research has shown that before teachers even have a conversation with a student, **they have already formulated a number of opinions based on that student's race, appearance, and other factors**—and begun to form a certain set of expectations. How is this possible, why does it happen, and what does this mean for our teaching?

## **Underestimating Students' Potential**

Regardless of how much we may like to think of ourselves as progressive educators, the reality is that our subconscious is at work. We, too, **are studying the every move of our students**: their dress, their personal grooming, their hair style, their use of language, and their mannerisms. Admitting it may be uncomfortable, but almost all of us have looked at a student at one time or another and thought, solely based on their appearance, "That kid is going to be someone," or "that kid is going to make my life miserable," or "that kid should pick up his pants; that's so disrespectful."

These subconscious thoughts and feelings are known as implicit biases. Whether our perceptions are positive or negative, they have an impact; they determine expectations, and these expectations dictate how we teach. Studies show that **teacher expectations are closely linked to student achievement and success**.

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In my 15 years of teaching, I have been flooded with implicit biases; after all, that is not something we can control. We can, however, control how we deal with and respond to our biases. Our implicit biases, then, should only be a source of shame if we choose to ignore them.

One time when I struggled with implicit bias has especially stuck with me. I first met Anthony in mid-October of last year. He walked into my classroom three minutes late wearing an oversized shirt, slicked-back longish hair, and baggy jeans that hung well below the waist, revealing his underpants if not for his shirt. I greeted Anthony, feigned a smile, and asked what class he had been in last year.

Inwardly, I only half-listened to his response as the other part of me was already making assumptions: He must be behind, he'll never catch up, he's probably a troublemaker. Anthony had not even taken a seat in my classroom, yet already I had assigned him a set of not-so-high expectations simply because of his tardiness and his appearance.

But after a lesson on figurative language, he began to rap complex and beautiful lyrics in English and Spanish as he picked up his backpack and began walking out of my classroom. I asked about the artist, and he smiled proudly and responded that the lyrics were his own. Then he quickly added, "I surprised you, didn't I?"

He was right; he did surprise me. I had let my implicit biases go unchecked. Fortunately, Anthony reminded me to check myself. That single interaction was an indication that I had clearly underestimated his intelligence, potential, and his own academic expectations.

### **Ignoring Bias Furthers Inequity**

Not all kids are as confident or as vocal as Anthony; actually, most students will not call you out. Most students will instead internalize your low or lowered expectations and your lack of confidence in them or their academic ability. Over time, this internalization **results in low academic performance and apathy**. More often than not, if we raise expectations, students will rise to the occasion; the opposite is true as well.

I was wrong about Anthony. He wasn't behind, and he was no troublemaker. He made daily contributions to the class, and his creativity fueled that of his peers while it inspired me. I was fortunate enough in Anthony's case to minimize the damage, but how many other times have I unwittingly allowed my implicit biases to inform my teaching and my relationships with students?

These biases are ever-present, and as such they require constant monitoring. Ignoring our implicit biases guarantees that we further impoverish the already poor or marginalized student. As educators, we must be mindful of not just how we teach students, but how we approach them, how we talk to them, and how we convey our academic expectations for each of them.

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