Getting Mindful About Race in Schools

Cultivating awareness of unconscious biases can help schools shrink opportunity gaps.

Elena Aguilar

I don't know what else to do!" Kia exclaimed as she paced around her office. "We see the same results, year after year." She pointed at student performance data and a culture and climate survey, which showed that the outcomes and experiences for students of color hadn't improved in her school in years.

Kia was the experienced principal of Woodmont High[1], a public high school in the San Francisco Bay Area whose student population was fairly equally divided between African American, Latino, Asian, and white students. I'd just begun working with Kia as her leadership coach. Despite implementing a number of new programs aimed at closing opportunity (and achievement) gaps, the school's students of color were still underperforming academically. Male black and Latino students were still sent to the office in numbers far greater than their counterparts.

"But it's not just that data," Kia added. "It's who takes honors classes, which parents come to back-to-school night, and who feels prepared for college." Kia felt ashamed that as a woman of color herself, she was unable to interrupt these manifestations of systemic oppression at her school. "What should I do?" she demanded. "Could you just do an equity audit of our school and tell me what's wrong?"

When the intensity of emotion subsided, I asked her to elaborate on her request for an "equity audit."

"I know I have blind spots," Kia explained, "I wish you could look in all our closets, or find the elephants in the room that we don't want to talk about, or put us under a microscope and show me where the demons of racism are multiplying." I appreciated her metaphors—the complexity of racism requires many metaphors—and was intrigued by the idea of an "equity audit." I agreed to explore a process that would help her see some of the root causes of racially based inequities at her school.

Racial inequities exist in schools largely because of educators' actions—but actions emerge from beliefs. We do what we do because of what we think. Many well-intended equity initiatives fail because they are targeted at

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the level of people's behaviors and actions and rarely dig into underlying beliefs. Many "diversity" programs, equity and inclusion initiatives, and even culturally responsive practices stay on the surface and address only educators' behaviors, amounting to only technical responses to inequity. Token appeals to diversity—such as celebrating Latino History Month, setting a cap on how many black boys are sent to the office, or including a novel written by a woman of color in the core curriculum—do little to address the root causes of racial inequities.

Schools are inequitable in terms of outcomes and experiences for different races in part because educators' beliefs are profoundly polluted with racism. On a smoggy day in Los Angeles, you can't deny the filthy air you take in. But when it comes to racism, it's very hard to see polluted beliefs. This is true for both white people and people of color, many of whom have so deeply internalized messages of white hegemony that they don't recognize the pollution. Unless we take intentional action to examine what we inhale, and block the infectious particles, we may inadvertently act on unhealthy and damaging beliefs.

Starting with Leadership

Kia sought to identify how her school unconsciously operated from a racist belief system. I suggested we start with her leadership team, because a leadership team is the nucleus of a school and what happens in meetings is often a microcosm for what happens elsewhere, including with students. Furthermore, I knew that for Kia to feel more empowered to lead change, she'd have to see her own role in perpetuating the dysfunction.

The team was on board with the audit. The guiding question we co-constructed for my observations was, "How does systemic oppression manifest in leadership team meetings?" I gathered resources to define systemic oppression, and then looked not only at race, but also at the intersection of race and gender. This leadership team had five women, three of whom were women of color, and four men, two who of whom were men of color. They met weekly for 90 minutes. I attended eight consecutive meetings, observing like a fly on the wall, gathering qualitative and quantitative data around their communication and power dynamics.

After eight observations, the leadership team analyzed my data. They were surprised and saddened by what

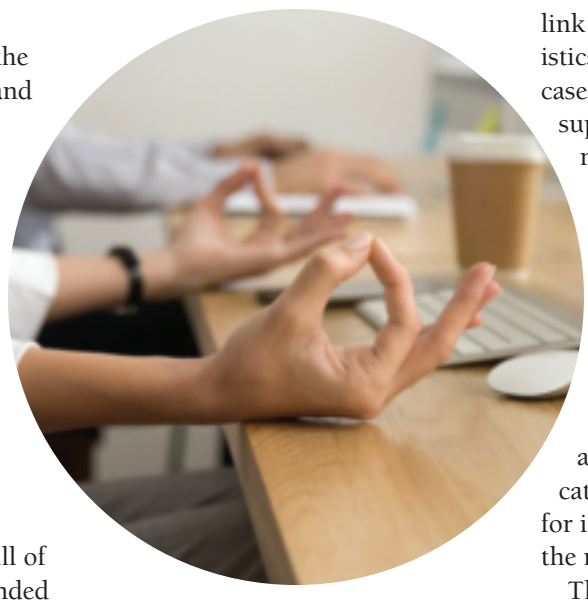
they discovered. Men had spoken far more than women; they had also interrupted women far more often than women interrupted them. The Latina and Asian women in the group were interrupted the most—by my tally, Alejandra (Latina) had been interrupted 22 times over the eight meetings, whereas Mike (white) had never been interrupted. Alejandra, upon seeing this, said, "The sad thing is, I'm so used to being interrupted that I don't even notice it anymore." Furthermore, ideas proposed by the white men were quickly accepted and acted on. Ideas proposed by the people of color were questioned and challenged.

Several incidents revealed the lack of psychological safety for women of color in particular. In one interaction Gail (a black woman), disagreed with a proposal from Mary (a white woman). Mary objected to Gail's "tone of voice" and asked Gail to explain her ideas in a way that was "less angry" and provide the research supporting her counterargument. When Gail explained her ideas—her voice full of energy and passion—Mary responded with, "I feel like you're attacking me," and proceeded to cry. At this point, the focus shifted to Mary's hurt feelings. Her psychological safety was centralized. When the team looked back at my transcript from this moment, they were startled by their complicity in silencing Gail. Similar exchanges had taken place several times.

The data debrief was extensive and painful. After the meeting, Kia's first words to me were, "Well, systemic oppression is alive and well in our leadership team, and I can see how I'm contributing." Kia recognized the times when she'd prioritized the input of some colleagues over others, based on her unconscious racial bias and possible favoritism toward males. "If this is how leaders operate in our school, I can guess at how this manifests in the classroom and has an impact on kids," she added.

"Were you surprised by this data?" I asked.

Kia groaned. "I didn't think we'd see this much inequity because we have such a diverse team," she said.



I nodded. "Numerical diversity doesn't result in equity. That's why hiring programs that aim to simply increase representation don't necessarily result in more equitable experiences and outcomes for kids."

"What now?" Kia said.

"Now we dig into implicit bias, Kia," I responded.

Understanding Implicit Bias

Due to the influence of societal injustices and assumed hierarchies, people's perceptions of others often involve implicit biases—unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that impact our responses to certain groups of people, especially around race and ethnicity, class, and gender. We've been absorbing biases since we were born. They often manifest automatically and unconsciously without our awareness.

Our snap judgments are informed (or perhaps even formed) by years of explicit and implicit cultural messages—transferred to us from family, the media, our experiences, and countless other sources—that link particular physical characteristics with a host of traits. In some cases, these messages (such as the superiority of Caucasians) originated centuries ago with colonialism, capitalism, and the enslavement of African and other non-European peoples. These messages of superiority and inferiority are internalized in our consciousness and entrenched in our institutions. You could think of racism as a virus like a cold—it's easy to catch, so it's hard to blame someone for it, but that doesn't release us from the responsibility of containing it.

The ramifications play out in schools. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018) recently released a report finding, among other things, that black male students, who account for 15.5 percent of all public school kids, represented about 39 percent of students suspended from school. Researchers at Stanford University have studied how implicit bias contributes to such high rates of suspensions and expulsions of students of color (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). They found not only that the implicit bias of teachers led them to more harshly punish black male students, but also that

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black teachers had equally high rates of unconscious bias when it came to disciplining students. It's critical that we hear this hard-to-hear finding, so we don't make the mistake of simply thinking that hiring more black and brown teachers means a reduction in bias.

Interrupting Our "Stories"

Building equitable schools requires multilayered approaches that include institutionalizing new practices, such as creating protocols to make opportunities to take advanced courses more open to students of color and hiring more teachers of color. But without excavating and examining our belief systems, without intentionally working to shift them, we won't truly transform schools—and we risk replicating oppressive structures.

So after I recommended new meeting behaviors for Kia's team, such as using discussion protocols to counter inequitable dynamics and incorporating a rotating process observer, I took a more unconventional step. To help shift their unconscious biases, I advised them to take up mindfulness meditation. Kia's jaw dropped. "*Meditate* together?" she asked. "Yes," I said, "together and, if possible, independently."

Although we all have unconscious bias, neuroscientists have found that people can rewire their minds to override our impulses toward those who seem different from us (Amodio, 2008). Mindfulness—the cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness—is an invaluable tool to help us notice and interrupt unconscious bias. Mindfulness is often practiced through meditation focused on the breath. Through this practice, we observe our thoughts, emotions, preferences, and biases. This helps us interrupt mental stories we've come to rely on. To change our stories, we must recognize when we're telling a story and then activate our agency to tell different stories. This requires creativity and courage, intentionality and vulnerability, and exquisite awareness.

Race is a story. It's a very dangerous and destructive story that has resulted in the dehumanization, marginalization, and deaths of millions of people. It's a story constructed by European men who sought to colonize and exploit the earth, a story told to keep people separate, a story told to justify oppression and uphold hierarchy. This story's power comes from the fact that it has been institutionalized. But race is a construct. By naming it as a story, and acknowledging the danger of that story, we can transform it.

I encouraged Kia's team to first learn about mindfulness and then practice breathing meditation together.[2] Kia incorporated five minutes of mindfulness meditation into the opening of leadership team meetings. The team found it helped them settle into their meetings after long, busy days, and it altered their patterns. Gradually, the women of color began speaking a lot more in team meetings—and being heard. Kia began to assert herself more often. Male team members started consciously creating space for others to speak. The pace of conversations slowed. On several occasions, when a team member was triggered by another team member's comments, someone would call for a "time out" to breathe and re-center.

Coming Out of Autopilot

Mindfulness pushes us out of autopilot and helps us pay close attention to our thoughts and feelings, and to what others are saying, doing, and feeling. Just as mindfulness can help a leadership team avoid harmful patterns, it could help teachers do so as well if they could recognize, in the moment, when their thoughts have been polluted by racism and make a choice about what they say and do—including with students. At Woodmont, the exploration of mindfulness extended outside the school's leadership team to 18 of its 60 teachers. These teachers are now also experiencing greater awareness in their interactions with students and colleagues.

Let me be clear: Mindfulness is just *one* tool that can help interrupt previously established associations

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Do you agree with Aguilar's point that because a school's leadership team is its "nucleus," its interactions "are often a microcosm for what happens elsewhere" in the building, in terms of bias being recognized and addressed?
- What techniques—such as taking a deep breath or "pushing pause"—have you tried during tense interactions with a student or colleague? Could you use that pause to test internally whether bias is coming up?
- What do you think an "equity audit" would reveal in your school?

Think of racism as a cold—it's easy to catch, so it's hard to blame someone for it, but that doesn't release us from the responsibility of containing it.

(Lueke & Gibson, 2014). To truly uproot implicit bias, mindfulness needs to be complemented by additional learning and increased opportunities for contact between different groups of people. It will take far more than mindfulness meditation to create equitable schools, but I don't think we can do it without mindfulness.

Here's an example of how mindfulness supported dialogue about bias at Woodmont. During a professional development session, an African American female teacher made a passionate comment about the low number of African American students in advanced placement classes, directing her comment to a white female teacher. In response, this teacher (who taught AP English) said, "I feel like you're attacking me, and I just wish you would use a different tone of voice. There's no need to be so angry."

Everyone in the room froze. Both teachers belonged to the group of teachers who were practicing mindfulness. Many in the room had talked previously about how African American women are often stereotyped as the "angry black woman," which could create restrictions around how black teachers, especially, could openly express emotions—restrictions no one wanted to uphold.

In this instance, the white teacher immediately responded to her own comment, saying, "Oh wow. I need a moment." She closed her eyes for 15 seconds and then turned to her colleague. "I'm sorry," she said. "I responded defensively, from my own bias and fear. I centralized my feelings and labeled your behaviors in a way that was problematic. This way of thinking is clearly ingrained in me. I'm coming to see that through my meditation practice—and I'm really sorry. Thank you for your grace."

The African American teacher nodded as her colleague spoke. She said, "Thank you," then continued to offer her suggestions for how the school might make changes that would lead to high numbers of African American students in AP classes. Moments like these are beginning to happen frequently in Kia's school.

Toward a Calmer Place

For people of color, addressing systemic racial oppression in schools can be exhausting. Whether we've long been aware of implicit bias or are becoming aware of it now, our awareness may trigger strong emotions. If we can be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, we'll be more likely to find a way for those emotions to serve our greater purpose. Mindfulness helps my heart stop racing when I perceive implicit bias. It helps me think about what to say next, and, crucially, it helps my heart stay open.

Mindfulness can also create the general conditions that minimize bias: It helps us slow down, become aware of our emotions, take multiple perspectives, regulate our responses. Empathy and a sense of security—emotional states we'll need to uproot conscious and unconscious bias—increase with mindfulness meditation.

But I'll say it again: Addressing racial bias only at the individual level isn't enough. Bias, racism, and oppression live within the walls and foundations of institutions. Our education, housing, criminal justice, and other systems are set up in ways that privilege some and underserve others. There cannot be equity or justice until these structures are thoroughly overhauled or, in some cases, dismantled.

But personal growth *can* spark change. In the two years since I began working with Woodmont leaders, data on student experiences and outcomes is finally shifting. When students are surveyed about their relationships with teachers, whether they feel that teachers treat students fairly, and whether they feel cared for by teachers, the responses of black and Latino male students, particularly, indicate they are feeling a lot more comfortable at school. Office referrals and suspensions are down, and leadership and teacher morale has risen. It's hard to draw a straight line at Kia's school between

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For a discussion on the link between words and beliefs, see the online article "How Our Language Feeds Inequity" by Robin Avelar La Salle and Ruth S. Johnson at www.ascd.org/el0419lasalle.

mindfulness practices and improvements in student experience and outcomes, but one thing is clear—the school feels like a calmer, happier place for all.

Recently, Kia reflected on her growth since we began working together:

> I'm not making frantic decisions based on urgency and anxiety. I can see inequities more clearly, I see how we replicate them in our team meetings—and I can pause and ask that we stop and think more clearly and consider all perspectives before making a decision. I feel more grounded and powerful.

Those of us committed to transforming external systems of oppression must also examine our own *internal* systems that unconsciously fuel those systems. Mindfulness offers an entry point. It's one place we can start on what will be a long journey for everyone. As we embark on this journey and build new schools, systems, relationships, and neural pathways, let's take each step with conscious awareness. EL

[1]The school name is a pseudonym, as are the names of educators in the piece.

[2]I helped the team learn more about mindfulness and meditation by drawing on resources from Mindful Schools (www.mindfulschools.org). Mindful Schools was invaluable to Woodmont in all aspects of incorporating meditation practice into leaders' and teachers' work.

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