

# Creating Welcoming Classrooms:

**How Understanding the  
Concept of Implicit Bias  
Can Strengthen Your Teaching**





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**Scan to visit the webpage for this resource**  
(<https://www.ilctr.org/understanding-the-concept-of-implicit-bias-for-teachers>)

# Introduction

Some researchers contend that in order to create safe and welcoming classrooms, we must dive into what they call implicit bias. But what is implicit bias, and what lessons can we learn from this concept?

To answer those questions, we look to presenters Stacy Davison, formerly with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and social worker Alaisa Grudzinski, who explained why they believe this is such an important concept in school environments.

## What is the concept of implicit bias?

“

[Implicit bias is] the **unconscious attitude, stereotypes and unintentional actions**, positive or negative, toward members of a group **merely because of their membership in that group.**

”

Davison gives the ADL definition of implicit bias as “the unconscious attitude, stereotypes and unintentional actions (positive or negative) toward members of a group merely because of their membership in that group.”

How does this happen? The human brain is capable of processing about 11 million pieces of information at a time but can only give conscious attention to a handful of those. To handle the rest, [some research suggests](#) your brain categorizes information into groups and assigns an instinctive reaction. That’s

why, for example, the word “jelly” automatically comes to mind when you hear someone say “peanut butter.” It may also explain our unconscious reactions to people of different ethnic backgrounds or immigration status.

Bias can often overrule rational thought, causing well-meaning and intelligent people to react in ways that are at odds with their conscious intentions. It’s tempting to believe that implicit bias is only a problem for other people, but [some research suggests](#) that people often overestimate their own ability to relate to those who don’t share their background.

Watch “[Patterns & Perceptions: Breaking Down Implicit Bias](#)” (18:17 minutes):



or read the [written transcript](#)

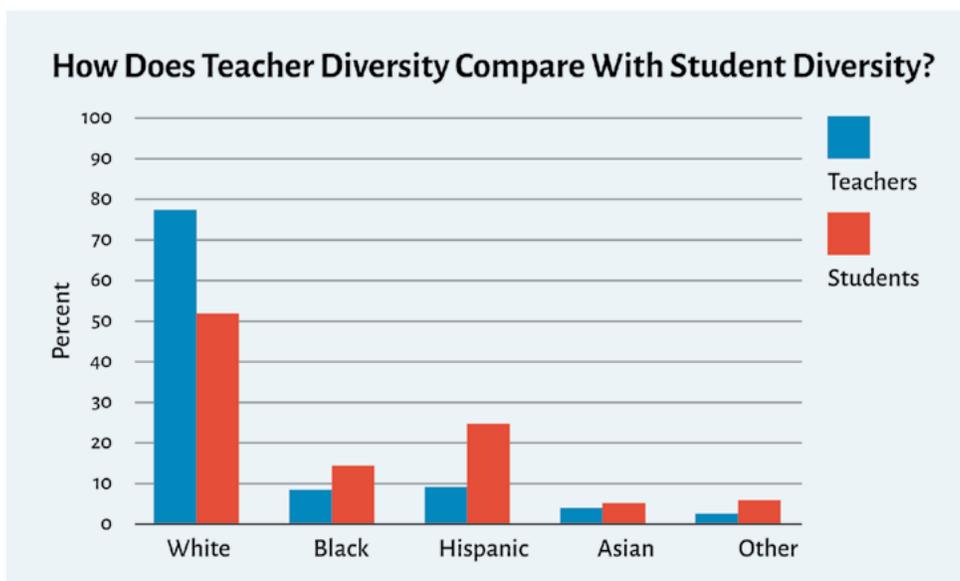
# How might implicit bias affect immigrant students?

As a group, American teachers are less diverse than the students they teach. As of 2014, [almost 19 million, or about one out of every four, school-aged children were either first- or second-generation immigrants](#). This number is increasing every year. Although [foreign-born teachers](#) play a crucial role in our education system, only about one in 10 education professionals is an immigrant, and the numbers drop [even lower for first through 12th grade teachers and special education teachers](#).

This means that [teachers are likely to come from different racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds than many of their students](#). This lack of diversity creates a challenge for students of color, who perform better with teachers of the same background.

To mitigate divisions and stereotyping in diverse classrooms, some experts advise teachers to become aware of implicit bias in themselves and others. Grudzinski notes, “Our own racial identities are framing the way that we perceive students’ racial identities, students’ experiences.”

Even the best intentioned of educators can make generalizations about their students’ ideas, experiences and abilities. One common problem Grudzinski noted was based on a positive association: the belief that Asian students are better at math. Asian students who struggle in math often don’t receive the help they need because [teachers assume they don’t need it](#). Teachers who are aware of such potential subconscious biases can find a way to counteract them and see past the stereotype to extend a helping hand to their students.



SOURCE: Urban Institute, [Diversifying the Classroom: Examining the Teacher Pipeline](#) by Constance A. Lindsay, Erica Blom and Alexandra Tilsley. Data from the American Community Survey, 2015.

NOTE: In this graph, “students” are defined as all individuals ages 5 to 17; “teachers” are defined as individuals ages 25 to 34 with a bachelor’s degree who are teachers at the pre-K through high school level.

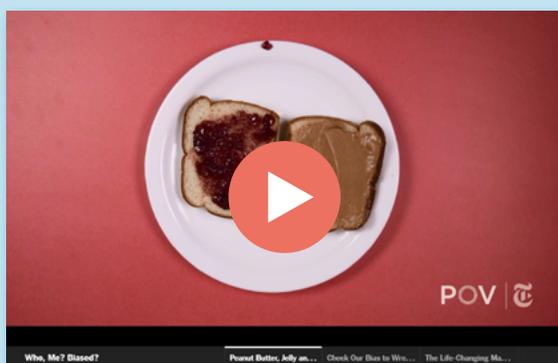
# How do you examine implicit bias?

Having a thorough understanding of the concept of implicit bias is essential. Davison recommends watching a short series of videos from *The New York Times* called “[Who, Me? Biased?](#)” that breaks down common forms of bias and the reasons why people are susceptible to them.

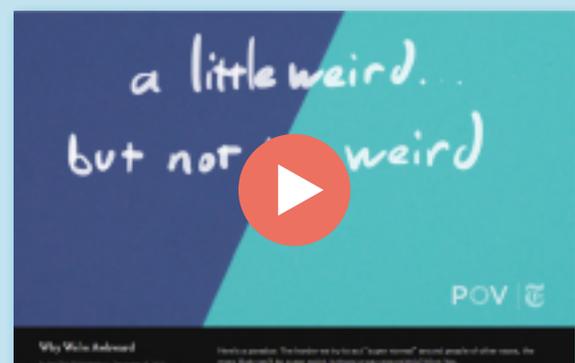
One form of bias mentioned in the series is called a blind-spot, the tendency for individuals to see prejudiced action in others but not in themselves. Educators and school districts may consider an in-depth training on implicit bias offered by organizations like the [ADL](#) or [Learning for Justice](#).

The best thing you can do to counteract biases is to build relationships across ethnicity, age and immigration status. If you have immigrant students in your classroom, make a habit of going to events in those students’ communities. Reach out to your peers or community leaders in different ethnic, immigration status or cultural groups.

If you’re used to mostly being with people who are like you, it may sound uncomfortable to go places where you are the minority. [Research suggests you can reduce awkwardness by addressing it head-on.](#) Making a genuine effort to better understand your students will be seen as a sign of respect.



This episode of *The New York Times*’ video series “[Who, me? Biased?](#)” introduces the concept of implicit bias and how it influences our thinking (2:26 minutes).



This episode of *The New York Times*’ video series “[Who, me? Biased?](#)” examines awkwardness and how you can reduce it by addressing it head-on (2:41 minutes).

# What other strategies can combat implicit bias?

Regularly engage in self-reflection, examining your own perceptions and the influences that form them. Do your patterns of perception and reaction accurately represent your values and your care for your students?

Remember that having biases doesn't make you a "bad" person. According to the concept of implicit bias, it is an inherent part of human thinking. So let yourself relax, especially since it's been shown that humans are more likely to show bias when they are tired, hungry or stressed!

Your most important tool, real relationships with diverse people, is something that will gradually become a part of your daily routine and patterns of thought.

It's also a good idea to stimulate positive associations. Davison brought up a sign at the entrance of her son's elementary school that reads "Respect, Responsibility, Regard," and showed how it helped the community to remember those values.

“

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**Your most important tool, real relationships with diverse people, is something that will gradually become a part of your daily routine and patterns of thought.**

”

# More Resources

## Free, on-demand webinars for educators



Free, on-demand webinars for educators from The Immigrant Learning Center's Public Education Institute.

(<https://qr.go.page.link/bzJYD>)

## Educator Resource Library



Resources for educators from The Immigrant Learning Center's Public Education Institute.

(<https://qr.go.page.link/e8kkj>)

## 20 years later, Beverly Daniel Tatum asks again: 'Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?'



The classic book on prejudice in schools, *Why are the All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, takes on diversity, equity and bridging divisions.

(<https://qr.go.page.link/GHWHw>)

## Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events | Race, Perception and Implicit Bias



The ADL tackles different forms of implicit bias and offers prompts for starting conversations on these topics.

(<https://qr.go.page.link/aAWYv>)

## Courageous Conversation about Race



Courageous Conversation about Race offers resources for ending the race gap in education and reducing bias in schools.

(<https://courageousconversation.com/about>)



# The Immigrant Learning Center

## About The Immigrant Learning Center

The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) of Malden, MA, is a not-for-profit organization that gives immigrants a voice in three ways. The English Language Program provides free, year-round English classes to help immigrant and refugee adults in Greater Boston become successful workers, parents and community members. The Public Education Institute informs Americans about the economic and social contributions of immigrants in our society. The Institute for Immigration Research, a joint venture with George Mason University, conducts research on the economic contributions of immigrants. For more information, visit our website at <http://www.ilctr.org>.

## Stay Informed



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(<https://qr.go.page.link/cuNNz>)



Sign up to receive information about the next educator webinar  
(<https://qr.go.page.link/CSu7f>)



## Handout: Print-Friendly Guide to Resources, Page 1 of 3

### Page 1



Stanford Encyclopedia of  
Philosophy: Implicit Bias  
[https://plato.stanford.edu/  
entries/implicit-bias/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/)



Practicing Cultural Humility  
<https://qrgo.page.link/jRzCo>



Recording of “Patterns and  
Perceptions: Breaking Down  
Implicit Bias” with Stacy Davison  
[https://www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=qLF9kXjmwkw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLF9kXjmwkw)



Written transcript of “Patterns  
and Perceptions: Breaking  
Down Implicit Bias” with Stacy  
Davison  
<https://qrgo.page.link/kGG5c>

## Handout: Print-Friendly Guide to Resources, Page 2 of 3

### Page 2



The Increase of Immigrant Students Tests Tolerance

<https://qrgo.page.link/XvPsd>



A Portrait of Foreign-Born Teachers in the United States

<https://www.immigrationresearch.org/node/2421>



PDF: A Portrait of Foreign-Born Teachers in the United States

<https://qrgo.page.link/6BDPm>



Diversifying the Classroom: Examining the Teacher Pipeline

<https://qrgo.page.link/AwSfq>



PDF: You're Asian, How Could You Fail Math? Unmasking the Myth of the Model Minority

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604661.pdf>

## Handout: Print-Friendly Guide to Resources, Page 3 of 3

### Page 3



Video: “Who, Me? Biased?:  
Peanut Butter, Jelly  
and Racism”  
[https://www.nytimes.com/  
video/who-me-biased](https://www.nytimes.com/video/who-me-biased)



ADL: Educational  
Programs and Training  
<https://qrgo.page.link/BcSoj>



Learning for Justice:  
Professional Development  
[https://www.  
learningforjustice.org/  
professional-development](https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development)



Video: “Who, Me? Biased?:  
Why We’re Awkward”  
<https://qrgo.page.link/devi3>