Bias—The Enemy of Diversity and Objectivity for Educational Leaders

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Abstract

All people have biases and prejudices in some form. As educational leaders, school administrators must guard against their potential biases and prejudices in order that they are able to treat employees objectively and fairly, and create an environment for diversity to flourish. Explicit bias refers to the attitudes of school administrators that are knowingly and intentionally based on prejudices and societal stereotyping of individuals because of variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual preference. Implicit or unconscious bias means that school administrators unknowingly possess attitudes about staff members based on prejudices and stereotypes prompted by variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual preference. In the broadest sense, diversity means putting aside biases and having individuals work objectively together with others they may view as "different" for whatever reasons. Objectivity means that school administrators are judging employees, and prospective employees, on factual information and merit.

Key words: school administrators, bias, prejudice, objectivity, diversity, evidence-based decision making

1.0 Context

All people, including school administrators in their roles as educational leaders, have biases which impede their ability to see people accurately and treat them fairly (Thiederman, 2008). Formation of biases begins at an early age and is significantly impacted by those around us, as well as various forms of media. Holistically, bias means that a school administrator has attitudes, opinions, and views about an employee that are **not** evidence-based, are inflexible, and are formed because the person is a member of a categorized group (e.g., race, ethnicity, and gender).

Biases cause school administrators to misjudge employees' capabilities, limit employees' contributions to committees and task forces, and impede quality decision making. School administrator biases can also cause unfair performance evaluation ratings and unjust decisions regarding career development, promotion, and work assignments of employees. The pool of candidates solicited for a job opening may be limited because of an administrator's biases, as well as determining who is interviewed and ultimately hired for a position. Biases can also lead to violations of state and federal laws and governmental employment guidelines, which may have legal repercussions (Evans, 2017; Wilkie, 2014).

2.0 Definitions[1]

Biases of school administrators come in two forms: (1) explicit and (2) implicit. *Explicit bias* means that attitudes of school administrators are knowingly and intentionally based on prejudices and societal stereotyping of individuals because of variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual preference. The stimulus for prompting explicit bias is often a perceived threat to an individual's personal values and beliefs.
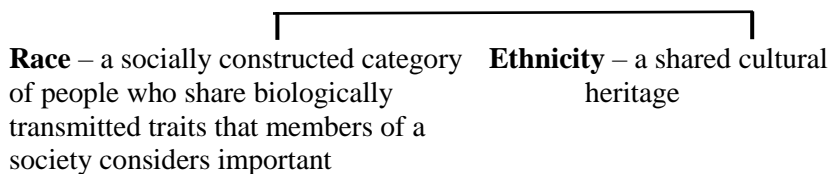
Implicit or unconscious bias means that school administrators unknowingly possess attitudes about employees based on prejudices and stereotypes prompted by variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual preference. Such unconscious biases affect an administrator's understanding, actions, and decisions (Kirwan Institute, 2015). These unconscious biases have a critical and problematic effect on school administrators' judgments (Gino, 2017).

Both explicit and implicit biases can cause a perception of favorability, such as that older individuals are "wiser" than younger people. More frequently, though, both explicit and implicit biases are referenced to negative attributes—women are driven too much by their emotions in decision making.

Prejudice is a rigid and unfair generalization about an entire group or category of people (e.g., race). In its simplest form, prejudice means to "prejudge." *Stereotype* is a specific form of prejudice that is a simplified description attached to each person from a group or category of people (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender). Prejudices and stereotypes represent attitudes, while *discrimination* is biases displayed through actual behavior and actions. *Institutional prejudice and discrimination* mean that biases are engrained into the operations of schools, the district, or board of education. As an example, a board of education may have an affirmative action policy, but not advertise or post teacher openings in colleges and universities that predominately serve people of color.

Racism is the belief that one racial category is innately superior or inferior to another (e.g., White to African American or Asian to White). *Ethnicity* refers to a group with a shared cultural heritage (e.g., Vietnamese American or Jamaican American). The diagram presented below compares race and ethnicity (Macionis, 2012, p. 320).
Race Compared to Ethnicity

Race – a socially constructed category   **Ethnicity** – a shared cultural
of people who share biologically   heritage
transmitted traits that members of a
society considers important

There is an old adage that "two heads are better than one." On a micro-basis, this adage assumes that more perspectives are better when addressing problem solving. Better yet is the adage that advocates "diversity is the foundation on which sound decisions are made." Diversity among individuals composing a committee or task force is a driver in obtaining objectivity on issues through the collectiveness of the multitude of perspectives generated. Having diversity among employees, and consciously managing it to maximize input perspectives, results in better decisions.

In the broadest sense, *diversity* means putting aside biases and individuals working objectively and effectively together with others they may view as "different" for whatever reasons. *Workplace diversity* means that all human resource management and development practices strive to be free of biases for categories such as race, color, national origin, gender, sexual identity, and disabilities. Such diversity means "understanding that there are differences among employees and these differences, if properly managed, are an asset to work being done more efficiently and effectively" (Bartz, Hillman, Lehrer, & Mayhugh, 1990, p. 321). Workplace diversity attempts to be inclusive of employees from various groups and perspectives to authentically and meaningfully involve them in decision making processes (Bartz & Rice, 2017). *Objectivity* refers to school administrators gaining insights from various staff members as an information base for generating solutions to problems and making quality decisions. It is judging people on the basis of factual information and the merits of their work. It includes hard data (factual) as a component in decision making. Objectivity also incorporates the evidence-based approach to decision making.

3.0 Explicit Biases – Controlling Them

A frontline method for a school administrator to curb explicit bias is "self-censoring," thinking before speaking. School administrators need to condition themselves to mentally inventory their explicit biases and identify stimuli that trigger them. When processing this information in the brain, the school administrator should focus on separating emotion from facts. It is also helpful to do a role reversal—putting oneself in the shoes of the other person.

Being sensitive to social norms sometimes prompts school administrators to sanction themselves from expressing an explicit bias. They realize that it would be "the wrong thing to say" in a particular setting and that uttering the statement would make them look foolish. Because biases are often formed on the basis of categories such as race and ethnicity, positive interaction with members of the perceived "outgroup" will aid in reducing explicit biases (Pettigrew, 2016). As Pettigrew (2010) notes, "intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice [bias]" (p. 2).

A lack of *cultural competence*—understanding the attitudes, practices, context of behaviors and verbalizations, and respecting differences of stereotyped groups—can cause a school administrator to engage in an explicit bias (Bass & Bass, 2008). This is more likely to occur when the school administrator is in a power position, which is often the situation. School administrators are cautioned to be aware of the *collective explicit bias effect*; aggressive reactions and behaviors generated by the group dynamics and interactions with others who have the same explicit biases.

4.0 Implicit Biases – Identifying Them

Open-mindedness is a key for school administrators in making objective quality decisions through soliciting input from a broad representation of employees. Discovering implicit biases and managing them with respect to being tolerant of employees who have different values and perspectives is crucial. As Ross (2014a) states, "When we are aware of our biases and watch out for them, they are less likely to blindly dictate our decisions" (p. 2). This can be challenging because implicit or unconscious biases are, by definition, not immediately known to school administrators (Segel, 2017).

The Implicit Associations Test is an example of a self-assessment as a beginning point for identifying implicit biases. Systematically soliciting feedback from employees is also a useful and practical approach because it is based on people seeing and interacting with a school administrator in the actual work setting. This approach eliminates the transfer inference from an "outside" assessment such as the Implicit Associations Test. Assuming that this feedback from the present employees' approach is reliable, its validity to the school administrator's situation is very likely to be credible. Using the 360 degrees (both subordinates and superordinates) approach for soliciting feedback is ideal.

As Covey (2016) notes, "Until we see ourselves from the outside objectively, we will automatically project our motives on the other people" (p. 37). Conditioned conscious self-evaluation, through systematic reflections on actions toward employees who are members of categories based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age (including generational differences), is useful for addressing Covey's axiom. Regarding self-discovery of implicit biases, Ross (2014b) states that "checking in with ourselves and learning to watch ourselves in action can bring patterns to the surface" (p. 14). While employees from these aforementioned categories are usually easy to identify, school administrators may also question themselves if appearance factors (e.g., attire, facial hair, arrangement of hair, and style of clothing) can be a source for triggering their implicit biases. The net result for a school administrator practicing conditioned self-evaluation is bringing to the surface and recognizing the stereotyping which prompts implicit biases (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

5.0 Diversity – Managing It[2]

> "Workforce diversity means creating an inclusive
> environment that accepts each individual's differences,
> embraces their strengths, and provides opportunity for
> all staff to achieve their full potential"
> (Anti Discrimination Commission Queenland, 2013, p. 1).

Human resource management practices that result in a mix of employees on factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender are a basic, but important, starting point. However, diversity has to do with more than these three factors and should consider other characteristics such as educational background and related experiences, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and geographical experiences (Brookins, 2017). Even if a considerable number of the previously-listed characteristics are not achieved to attain a desirable mix, meaningful diversity can occur among existing employees. Guiding principles for effectively utilizing workforce diversity are:

- Understanding that there are differences among employees and these differences, if properly managed, are an asset to work being done more efficiently and effectively;
- understanding that differences among employees create a more diversified workforce with a broader range of perspective attributes;
- capturing the richness of differences of employees and utilizing these differences for their betterment, resulting in more effective decisions that improve student learning at the school and district levels;

- understanding that people are different and if properly nurtured and cultivated, these differences are a positive force;
- striving to create a work culture that is heterogeneous and utilizes maximum participation of all individuals to their full potential; and
- demonstrating mutual respect, acceptance of others, and the desire to work for the common good of students, at the school and district levels (Bartz & Rice, 2017).

Diversity nurtures creativity and innovative ideas (Thiederman, 2008). It improves morale and job satisfaction and prompts employees to feel ownership in their school and district (Bartz, et.al., 1990). Diversity creates an inclusive culture that effectively assimilates staff members that are not part of the dominate group in the work environment. Diversity creates a climate in which the opportunity for experiencing social capital is enhanced and fosters the development of new skills for employees. When these new skills are internalized and applied, human capital is expanded to the benefit of the employees and their students.

6.0 Objectivity and Evidence-Based Decision Making—Using Them

> "Objectivity in the workplace means using fair criteria for making decisions concerning employees. Decisions are based on hard facts and evidence, not the personal judgement of one person or a group. Objectivity aims to eliminate decisions based on personal bias, cultural differences and any other criterion that cannot be measured or proven" (Marquis, 2017, p. 1).

Vermeulen (2014) notes that "Good leaders don't let their emotional bonds cloud their judgement. Sound strategy requires objectivity" (p. 2). Human management resource functions such as advertising or posting positions, hiring, interviewing, job assignment, and performance evaluation must represent the epitome of objectivity. State and federal laws require such, as do sound ethical practices. Training of school administrators must occur on a regular basis to achieve the aforementioned objectivity. School district policies (e.g., board of education policies) and administrative procedures must engrain fair treatment of each employee.

Over the past decade, data driven decision making represents a popular trend in PreK-12 education. This trend was prompted, at least in part, by critics—including politicians—indicating that educational leaders make far too many decisions based on feelings and intuition rather than factual data and information. The need to objectively interpret and use "big data" was prompted in the USA by the federal legislation No Child Left Behind's use of summative student achievement and demographic data. Flowing from this need to have objective processes for decision making predicated on the huge data sets was evidence-based decision making.

The evidence-based decision approach used for decades in the medical profession has been adapted to PreK-12 environments. Evidence-based decision making is defined as "Making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources by: (a) **Asking**—translating a practice issue or problem into an answerable question, (b) **Acquiring**—systematically searching and retrieving the evidence, (c) A**ppraising**—critically judging the trustworthiness and relevance of evidence, (d) **Aggregating**—weighing and pulling together the evidence, (e) **Applying**—incorporating the evidence in the decision making process, and (f) **Assessing**—evaluating the outcome of the decision taken" (Sackett, 1996, pp. 1-2).

Kavanaugh and Levenson's (2016) observations set the tone for evidence-based decision making for schools when they note "Limited funding and increasing demands have led to reformed public budgeting practices, requiring governments [schools] to *do more with less*. One way to accomplish this is doing more of what works and less of what doesn't, using evidence to tell the difference between the two" (p. 17). As Honig and Colburn (2008) note, "Administrators [schools] increasingly face policy demands to use *evidence* in their decision making" (p. 578). They also indicate that these demands are often caused by federal and state policies.

The evidence-based decision making process uses a broad range of multiple input sources such as: (a) information generated by practitioners and the general citizenry through their knowledge and experiences, (b) social science best practices research, (c) student achievement data, (d) demographic data, (e) school improvement team efforts at the building and district levels, (f) results of evaluations pertaining to curriculum and school reform approaches, (g) feedback from parents and community-wide planning groups, and (h) "contemporary policy design" that is required by federal and state programs (Honig & Coburn, 2008). Evidence-based decision making does not rely solely on "hard data," but includes a broad array of information and data sources. Ultimately, evidence-based decision making has substantial merit and the potential to improve education in general and student achievement in particular.

7.0 Concluding Thoughts

School employees deserve to be treated fairly and objectively, and to enjoy an environment free of biases and prejudice. Coupling such an environment with effective implementation of diversity will result in employees being more creative and innovative, thus enhancing decision making. With utilization of the evidence-based approach to decision making, schools and school districts will therefore more effectively serve students and improve their learning. School administrators, as educational leaders, are key to making the aforementioned occur.

8.0 Footnote

[1]All definitions except diversity are from: Macionis, J.J. (2012). *Sociology*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

[2]For more in-depth analysis of diversity see: Burrell, L. (2016). We just can't handle diversity: A research roundup. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 2016, 71-74; Dobbin, F. (2016). Why diversity programs fail and what works better. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 2016, 52-60; Harvard Business Review. (2016). Designing a bias-free organization. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 2016, 63-67.

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