



MINDFUL REFLECTION PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING CULTURALLY

"Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try."

—Atul Gawande

OVERVIEW

This reflection protocol helps teachers unpack their interactions with students and prompts them to generate alternative explanations of student behaviors.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- During a staff or grade-level team meeting
- For staff professional development
- For individual reflection about students, families, or colleagues

TIME REQUIRED

- 30 minutes (for the initial reflection)
- Reflection time may vary—ideally this is a continual process

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- Paper & pen, audio recorder, or computer for capturing reflections

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

School staff will:

- Examine their own assumptions, prejudices, and biases and consider how they affect their interactions with and expectations of their students
- Objectively describe behaviors without interpretation or evaluation to consider alternative explanations
- Develop culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate ways of responding to better support the student, family, or staff

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Before you begin the mindful reflection process outlined below (whether on your own or with a colleague or small group), pause, take a few deep, conscious breaths, and consider the following:

- Am I ready to reflect on my attributions (explanations of other people's behaviors)?
- Am I prepared for the emotional risk of considering my implicit biases (or unexamined prejudices)? How will I navigate feelings of vulnerability if they emerge?
- Am I committed to unearthing any beliefs, behaviors, or communication patterns that might be perpetuating racism, power, or privilege? Why?
- Is there a critical friend I can debrief with to get feedback?

INSTRUCTIONS

GETTING STARTED

- Bring to mind a challenging interaction (or series of interactions) with a student.
- Draw on the following framework to begin unpacking your assumptions about your experiences with the student.
- Use the steps and questions below to practice distinguishing objective description from interpretation and evaluation (both of which are influenced more by culture and experience).

- For example, description is about what actually occurred—what you see or hear (e.g., Shelley raised her hand five times during the lecture and talked with her seatmate two times), while interpretation (inferring meaning behind the behavior) and evaluation (attributing positive or negative significance to the behavior) can be influenced by our past experiences and cultural lenses. “Shelley really needs attention” or “Shelley is really interested in this topic” (interpretation), and “I don’t like that,” or “I appreciate her energy and initiative” (evaluation).
- Keep in mind—evaluation assigns a positive or negative attribute to the behavior, while interpretation makes an assumption about what the intent was behind the behavior. Evaluative statements are inherently interpretative.

STEP 1: EXPLAIN THE ATTRIBUTIONS THAT YOU HAVE ABOUT THE STUDENT

- Describe what you and the student said and did.
- How did the student react to your actions or comments?
- Collect notes on multiple days and at different times of the day.

STEP 2: WRITE OUT OR REFLECT ON YOUR FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS WHEN WORKING WITH THE STUDENT

- Take into account the potential for misinterpretations resulting from deficit thinking, prejudice, and overgeneralizations.
- How does this student make you feel? What are your worries or fears?
- What are your assumptions? Why do you find the student problematic?
- Have you evaluated, interpreted, or described the behavior?
- Try to rewrite the examples in descriptive terms.

STEP 3: CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS BY REVIEWING YOUR DOCUMENTATION AND REFLECTIONS

- Review the explanations and reflect on why the student may be doing what he or she does. Look for patterns in your behavior and the student’s behavior.
- What are your expectations for the situation? How is the student not meeting your expectations? In what way is the behavior interfering with learning?
- List alternative explanations or interpretations of the student’s behavior.
- What external factors and/or personal factors could be influencing the student’s behavior? What recent changes have occurred in the student’s life, disability, acculturation, and so forth?

STEP 4: CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

- Share your reflections with a colleague, parents, and/or community members. Meet with parents to learn more about expected and observed behaviors in the home.
- Share your list of alternative explanations or interpretations of the student’s behavior with a colleague, parents, and/or community members.

- Meet with the family to learn more about their perspective in understanding the behavior. Do they notice the same behavior at home? Do they find it problematic? How do they interact with the student at home? Have there been any major changes or upsets in the home?
- Be open and responsive to the family's ideas and perspectives. Seek to understand rather than to judge.

STEP 5: MAKE A PLAN

- How will you change or respond differently?
- Brainstorm ideas on how to change the environment, your actions, and/or expectations for this student.
- Experiment with responding differently. Note what happens. Reflect on your feelings as well as the student's response.
- Frequently communicate with the family. Ask whether family members have noticed a difference. What have they been trying that works?
- Consult with colleagues, parents, and/or community members while you experiment to check your assumptions and interpretations.

STEP 6: REVISIT THIS PROCESS TO REASSESS YOUR ATTRIBUTIONS AND YOUR PROGRESS WITH THE STUDENT

- Notice when you are overgeneralizing, attributing behavior within a deficit perspective, or behaving in prejudiced ways toward certain students.
- Remember that this process is a continuous one, so revisit the steps periodically to continue your growth and understanding of students.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did you and/or your colleagues respond to this reflection process?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- Do you notice a shift in your approach to the student after engaging in this reflection?
- Do you see any changes in your relationship with the student?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Research shows that [mindfulness can help combat bias](#). Even a brief mindfulness training can [reduce our implicit biases](#) and make us more aware of our assumptions.

One way this works, researchers have found, is by weakening the [cognitive biases that contribute to prejudice](#). As we become less susceptible to “cognitive biases” (automatic, systematic errors in our thinking), we may be less likely to make quick judgments about others—and ultimately improve our relationships with our students and colleagues.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Multiple studies point to [discipline disparities](#) and lower [academic outcomes and behavior evaluations](#), and [disproportionality in special education](#) for students of color when compared with white students.

Despite educators' best intentions, they can't always be aware of their assumptions and/or their implicit biases, especially when an intense work day isn't necessarily conducive to pausing and reflecting on one's daily choices.

It's important for teachers to engage in reflective processes that prompt them to shift away from some of their default behaviors—and potential biases. Just as teachers keep thoughtful running records of students' behaviors, they can benefit from tracking their own behaviors, assumptions, and communication patterns in the classroom.

Teachers' growing awareness of their daily behaviors can affect the quality of education their students receive—and is a crucial part of building a just and equitable society.

SOURCE

Dray, B. J. & Wisneski, D. B. (2011). Mindful Reflection as a Process for Developing Culturally Responsive Practices. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 44(1), 28-36.

Teaching Tolerance describes Dray and Wisneski's Mindful Reflection Process in [this article](#), and it is also featured in Chapter 3 of Zaretta Hammond's book [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#).