



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

CONFRONTING THE -ISMS

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

OVERVIEW

Students will use a diary to track their biased thoughts and responses to people who appear different from them. Then, they will reflect on how those biases affect their fair treatment of others.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students develop a greater understanding of how their personal biases impact their behavior
- To encourage mindfulness awareness and greater attention to fairness in responses to others

TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Sessions

LEVEL

- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- Journal
- Pencil/pen

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Students will:
- Identify times when they reacted in a biased manner
- Consider where biases come from and how they impact behavior

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to reflect on your week. Can you identify any times you engaged in biased thinking? What thoughts did you have? What may have influenced those thoughts/responses (e.g., culture, family, media)? How did your thoughts affect your behavior toward the other person(s)? How might understanding and acknowledging our biases help us to behave more fairly?

INSTRUCTIONS

DISCUSSING BIAS AND FAIRNESS

Inform students that some research has found that adults and children tend to favor members of their own groups (e.g., people of the same race, religion, age, etc.), which can lead to unfair outcomes.

- How Bias Affects Fairness:
 - In one study, participants were given 10 raffle tickets and were asked to share them with someone. The recipient was a stranger, but participants learned about the recipients' political views. Participants gave more tickets to the recipient when the recipient shared their political views
 - Research has also shown that people are more likely to punish someone who behaves unfairly when that person does not share the same group identity. Thus, biases in favor of individuals who seem to look like us or believe the same things we do can lead to irresponsible or unfair decisions and behaviors. In schools, students may vote for a student simply because of a shared identity (like gender or race), which would be unfair.
- Fair Versus Unfair: Spend some time with students identifying other examples of fair versus unfair behavior. (For examples, see below). You may provide students with the definition of fairness provided below or use a definition that you find more appealing.
 - Fairness means seeking just relationships between and among persons. It involves

- (a) (cognitive) capacities to recognize injustice when it occurs and to discern what a just distribution of resources (e.g., attention, time, support, opportunity, material goods) and responsibilities might look like in the situation; striving to take others' perspectives—such as being appropriately sensitive to their sociocultural and historical contexts; and recognizing and addressing one's own biases;
 - (b) (affective) capacities to feel concern and/or indignation when injustice is encountered;
 - (c) the motivation to strive to promote justice and
 - d) (behavioral) capacities to fine-tune one's actions to address the needs of various parties and the broader context, and in the public sphere, to avoid partiality (favoritism) when needed.
- Fair behaviors: Giving all students an opportunity to talk during a discussion, taking turns with the basketball if multiple students want to play and/or forming a larger team, an openness to work with students from different backgrounds
 - Unfair behaviors: Cutting a student off during a discussion because his/her accent bothers you, refusing to have a female player join your basketball team during gym class, or assuming someone cheated because of their background.

INTRODUCING THE DIARY ACTIVITY

Remind students that everyone has biases, and let students know that this activity is meant to help them recognize their own biases so that they are better able to confront such biases and learn to treat others fairly.

- For one week, have students keep a “Mindwatch” diary of their immediate, biased thoughts and responses to people who are different from them (e.g., assuming someone is going to shoplift simply because of their race, getting mad at someone because they don't speak English well, etc.). The diary entries should not deny or censor their initial reactions, but should record them accurately.
- Special Note: Diary entries are not to be collected and read, simply checked briefly in class for completion.

REFLECTING ON BIASES

When the week is over, ask students to write a reflection that includes:

- The biases they noticed (e.g., race, weight, gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, disability, religion, regional differences, nationality),
- The origin of their thoughts/responses (e.g., culture, family, media)
- A description of how their reactions affected their behaviors toward others

CLOSURE

As a class, consider what students might take away from this activity. You might use the following questions:

- After reflecting on your journal entries, did anything surprise you?
- How might understanding and acknowledging our own biases help us to treat each other more fairly?

- Identify one thing you will take away from this activity?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Have you noticed any differences in student behavior after this activity? Do they use the language of “fairness” more frequently? Do they act more fairly?
- How might you better support students who have a hard time acknowledging their own biases?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Research](#) finds that adults and children tend to show bias in favor of individuals who share their group identity (e.g., people of the same race, religion, age, political ideology, etc.). For instance, people tend to [share more with in-group members](#), individuals who share a group identity, compared to out-group members, individuals who do not share the same group identity. The group identity may even be quite trivial, such as a group name given to students who were split into teams based on a minor preference (e.g., a preference for pizza versus hamburgers).

Furthermore, there is some [evidence](#) that third-parties punish out-group perpetrators more harshly than in-group perpetrators when they share group membership with victims. In one [study](#), 6- and 8-year old children were assigned to one of two groups based on their color preference prior to engaging in a game. Children learned of their group identity (blue or yellow team) and spent some time making a team-colored hat. During the game, children also learned about a selfish “actor” who refused to share. Results showed that both 6- and 8-year-olds were more likely to pay to punish members of a different color team compared to same-color team selfish actors.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Although [research](#) shows that humans have a preference for fairness, our personal biases may influence our behavior in ways that we don’t always recognize. Teaching students to recognize their own biases and to understand how such biases can impact their behavior may also lead them to pay greater attention to the fair treatment of others. Such attention can help reduce automatic and unfair responses and create a more positive school environment where all students feel valued.

SOURCE

[The Self, Virtue & Public Life](#), a three-year research initiative based at the University of Oklahoma. Original lesson was adapted from Learning for Justice’s lesson called “[Confronting the isms.](#)”