This article examines the role of implicit bias in adolescents’ reading lives, first through an examination of how implicit bias affects the literature young readers encounter and then through practical strategies aimed at helping adolescents and teachers confront their own biases.

I took a seventh grader to introduce me to the Bechdel test. I recommended Nicola Yoon’s *Everything, Everything* to a middle school girl—I’ll call her Marley—when she asked me if the novel passed this test.

“I can’t stand to read things that are totally boy-centered,” she said. “I mean, it can be a lot about boys, but that can’t, like, totally be what it’s about.”

The Bechdel test, Marley went on to explain, is named for the US graphic novelist and cartoonist Alison Bechdel. To pass the test, a work of fiction must contain at least one scene in which two or more women (preferably named characters) discuss something other than a male. Marley, a big fan of superhero movies, was bothered that most of her favorite films, and many books, could not pass the test, though she noted that movies such as *Finding Dory* and the recent remake of *Ghostbusters* scored well.

“A lot of the books teachers suggest are mainly about girls thinking about boys,” Marley told me. “But you’d be surprised. Like, for example, everybody thinks *The Selection* is just about this boy-crazy world, but it passes the test just fine.”

I had to think hard about *Everything, Everything*, which is, in fact, largely about an adolescent girl falling in love with a boy (I was relieved to recall scenes in which the girl speaks to her mother and nurse about other topics). More importantly, Marley got me thinking about the messages literature sends to young readers that educators might not even suspect.

Students who read from the canon of works regularly encounter historical examples of bias in the fiction they read; I suspect that many teachers consider the bias of authors’ voices in the texts they teach. I also believe that many English teachers are adept at helping young readers consider context and purpose, whether those become important when Theseus compares Helen of Troy’s beauty negatively to “a brow of Egypt” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or when teaching, say, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Bias that presents itself clearly or that is front and center in a work is worthy of—and frequently prompts—discussion and opportunities for reflection in English classes.

What interested me about Marley’s response was that she had keyed in to an area of bias I, with nearly 25 years of experience in schools, had missed entirely. Her response drew out an implicit bias in my thinking and reading. What else, I wondered, had I missed?

To get to the answer, I convened a group of a dozen seventh- and eighth-grade girls (randomly selected according to their availability—the group included different races and academic levels) and asked them to tell me about other trends they noticed in the fictional works they read that I may have missed.

Here are just three of their immediate observations:

- **Liza’s answer:** In many works of fiction, and especially in fantasy, strong girls are presented as being strong because they have older brothers (who usually bully them in some way). Girls rarely glean strength from growing up with sisters.

- **Jasmine’s answer:** The skin color or race of Caucasian characters is almost never discussed in an initial description, while the skin color of minority characters is not only pointed out but is usually linked to food; these characters have skin the color of coffee, caramel,
cappuccino, chocolate, mocha, or almonds. One girl called this the “coffee shop effect.”

- Marissa’s answer: Too often, minority characters in young adult novels are, in Marissa’s words, “white people wearing costumes.” In other words, Marissa suggested that she could see through what she took to be authors’ attempts to make one character a minority just for the sake of having a minority character, with no authentic experience in the background. That’s not to say, the other girls chimed in, that all minority characters needed to speak in different dialects, eat different food, or come from poverty, but rather that they needed to be “real.”

Such observations tell us a great deal. First, they suggest that adolescent readers of genre fiction are, in fact, critical observers of the worlds authors create.

Second, they provoke important questions for educators. Is bias in fiction inescapable? What is the role of teachers in helping students consider and react to implicit bias in fiction? If our goal is to encourage critical reading and textual analysis, what activities or assignments might encourage and reward the sort of critical observation achieved by the girls with whom I spoke? And, importantly, what role can young adult literature play in broadening the exposure of students to a variety of voices and perspectives?

Voice Matters: Explicit and Implicit Bias in YA Fiction

Recent research has found substantive links between reading fiction and increased empathy, with increasing attention in this area being paid to adolescent readers of young adult fiction. A 2014 study (Vezalli et al.), for instance, found that reading and discussing specific scenes from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* increased empathy for immigrants, refugees, and others among test groups. Shira Gabrieli and Ariana F. Young found that when adolescents read selected passages from *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* they identified more strongly with character traits associated with wizards or vampires, respectively (the effect is not limited to fantasy worlds; a study by Judith Y. Singer and Sally A. Smith found similar results using Jacqueline Woodson’s *From the Notebook of Melanin Sun*).

So, reading creates more empathetic humans. With that finding in mind, consider the ramifications of explicit bias in the world of publishing and YA literature:

- A 2015 count of YA literature found that 65 percent of books for readers 12–18 years old feature female protagonists, while 36 percent of those written for readers 9–12 years old do (Sutton).
- A survey of more than 600 YA book covers in 2012 found that over 90 percent of covers featured a white character; nonwhite characters appeared on less than 1.5 percent of covers (Hart).
- A 2014 review of YA books found an increase in LGBT characters in books produced by major commercial publishers, but the total number of those books was only 24 overall (Lo).

The connection is not hard to make: young people can only apply their empathy through the study of fiction if they’re actually exposed to a variety of characters and situations. Certainly much can be made of the problem explicit bias presents for students who do not see themselves reflected in what they read, but just as important is the danger of presenting other readers only with characters who look or speak like they do. All reading promotes empathy—though research suggests that literary fiction with rounded characters does a better job of promoting empathy than formulaic stories within genres (Kidd and Castano)—but general empathy for others, while important, is not a substitute for the specific experience of grappling with values, situations, and perspectives different from your own.

Explicit bias presents a challenge to every teacher of reading. We make choices between a canon of works mostly written by white males and the variety of voices available through other texts. We decide how our community of students and parents will respond to works featuring characters or voices that have traditionally been marginalized, from LGBT perspectives to stories featuring different religions or characters with disabilities, for instance. Often, this challenge manifests as an
immediate practicality for a classroom teacher, who might feel that he or she has the time and resources to have kids read either *Animal Farm* or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, but not both.

Given those challenges and the time it takes to unpack explicit bias with students, it might seem that confronting our implicit biases while reading is a daunting task. Implicit biases, which are rooted in our unconscious thinking and often stem from response ingrained over a lifetime, are difficult to ferret out, difficult to confront, and often leave us feeling defensive and unsettled. They are disputable and may be directly contradictory to our stated beliefs.

It’s not difficult to find research on implicit biases and to present students with the findings to spark a discussion. For instance, when I asked my small group of middle school girls if they agreed that girls could lead as well as boys, they unanimously answered yes. Then I shared the findings of a research study titled *Leaning Out: Teen Girls and Leadership Biases* (Weissbourd). The report found not only that both boys and girls expressed bias against female leaders in the professional world but also that white teen girls often showed bias against other white teen girls as student leaders. Importantly, the report found that “awareness of gender discrimination may be related to less implicit, unconscious bias against girls as leaders” (3). In other words, we can reduce our implicit bias when we recognize that the bias may exist; the difficulty lies in gaining that recognition to begin with.

As a further example, I asked the girls to read a passage from Ursula LeGuin’s classic novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which none of them had previously encountered. After reading the passage, I had the girls describe their image of Ged, the main character, to a partner, then share with the group. By and large, the girls described Ged as a male teenager. Some had visualized hair color or body type and shared those images; others looked to the text more literally and told the group they couldn’t know that information from this passage. None mentioned race. When I asked outright what race they imagined Ged might be, all of the girls stated that they pictured him as white.

“It’s a fantasy book,” Kali said. “They’re always about white people. So I just thought of him as white.”

Then, as a group, we searched the title of the book using an online search engine and looked at images on the Internet. The girls noticed quickly that older book covers portrayed the characters as white (as did a movie version of the book), but more recent illustrations showed Ged as having darker skin. I then shared a passage that describes Ged’s skin as “red-brown” (42) with the girls.

“Is it important for us to get Ged’s skin color correct?” I asked the group.

Jasmine raised her hand. “I’m not really sure. I mean, this is a made-up thing, right? It’s a fantasy novel. So just because he has dark skin doesn’t mean that he’s, like, Asian or Indian or something like the real world.”

“But if the author didn’t want us to think about that,” said Sarah, “why would she even mention it, you know?”

“So maybe we’re supposed to, like, assume some stuff because of his skin color?” asked Jasmine. “That doesn’t seem very fair.”

“It’s not about fair,” said Marissa. “That’s just what happens to people with dark skin.”

We went on to view other YA novel covers and discuss how characters are portrayed. The students found particular room for discussion in viewing the covers of Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor and Park* (Is it clear that Park is Korean?), Rick Riordan’s *Kane Chronicles* books (Can we tell from the cover that the characters are of different races?), and Thanhha Lai’s *Inside Out and Back Again*, which silhouettes the main character and obscures her race.

I asked the girls to write an example of one implicit bias they thought they might bring to reading on a sticky note and to put them anonymously on a wall of the room in which we met. The following are a few of their responses.

- “I think I assume that characters are white until I know they aren’t.”
- “I always think of characters as skinny.”
- “I think that names of characters tell me how they look.”
- “I don’t know if I have implicit bias but I probably do and don’t know it.”
- “I guess I assume that certain characters are poor (skin color).”
- “I read this book called *Grasshopper Jungle* about a boy who was maybe gay and I couldn’t finish it because I didn’t like reading about it.”
These were the same girls who had adeptly pointed out examples of implicit bias from their own reading. In our discussion, the girls themselves recognized this fact: they were annoyed by the implicit biases of authors, but they also brought their own biases to reading.

Lessons in Implicit Bias: Three Ways to Work with Students

Being deliberate about implicit bias in our reading helps our students become better readers and thinkers, but it also helps us become better teachers. Listening to the implicit biases of our students—and recognizing our own—helps us better direct classroom activities and discussions to come to fuller understandings of texts.

Consider, for instance, these three classroom practices.

1. Identity charts

An identity chart is a common and simple way to bring both explicit and implicit differences to the surface. The simplest version of such charts looks like a standard concept map: A student writes his or her name in the center of a page, then draws lines out to various aspects of personality ranging from interests and hobbies to geographic, gender, racial, or other characteristics. Figure 1 is a sample identity chart from an eighth-grade student (with the name removed).

A key to setting up success in reading using identity charts is to recognize some elements of implicit bias in the context of what we bring to texts as readers. This task serves multiple purposes: it grounds the task in our class work, it actually creates better readers, and it also brings my own areas of implicit bias to the fore so that I can consciously engage with students throughout the year as the person I am.

The following, for instance, are some of the observations of a ninth-grade English class after sharing identity charts at the start of the year:

- Some of us listed race on our charts and some did not. (My question for the class: How does our awareness of race as a piece of our identity change the way we read?)
- Most of the white and Hispanic students in this class listed a specific country as part of their identity, while most African American students identified themselves by race. (My question: How do our understandings of place of origin and race combine to affect our reading point of view?)
- Some of us used adjectives on our charts and others used only visible activities or characteristics. (My question: How do authors decide how to describe and introduce characters to us?)

We keep our identity charts on the first page of a writer’s and reader’s notebook. Throughout the year, we might refer back to the charts, add to them, or make new charts for literary characters.

![Identity Chart](image-url)
in the works we read. Figure 2 is a student’s identity chart for Esperanza, the narrator of Sandra Cisneros’s novel The House on Mango Street.

2. Discussion questions

One of my favorite discussion techniques is the fishbowl strategy, in which three to five students sit in a small circle in the center of the room while the rest of the class sits in an outer circle and takes notes. Only students in the center circle may speak (this rule extends to the teacher!), but once a center circle “fish” finishes speaking, anyone (including the teacher) may politely tap the person on the shoulder and take that seat. In a productive fishbowl, most of the students enter the circle, different points of view are expressed, and students take notes that prepare them for future writing or discussion assignments.

Such discussions also offer avenues to talk about implicit bias without taking a confrontational stance. Probably the worst version of implicit bias discussion would result in accusatory statements (“I just don’t believe any of the white kids in this class can relate to this book”). But making the point of discussion to talk about the nuances of an issue, we invite students to consider one another’s point of view.

I sometimes ask students to write discussion questions or statements themselves, but in areas that might raise deep-seated tensions, I usually control the question bank myself. The following are a few discussion statements I keep handy for such occasions (I often prefer statements to questions because they spark more discussion):

- There are aspects of this character’s background important to a full understanding of the character that a casual reader might easily miss.
- This character (or story), as good as it is, plays into some common stereotypes and misunderstandings.
- This character (or author) brings both explicit and implicit bias to the story.

In a recent fishbowl discussion stemming from Katheryn Erskine’s Mockingbird, we discussed these statements. At the end of the discussion, I reserved ten minutes of class for students to fast-write in response to the question, “What experiences or understandings do you bring as a reader to this particular story that might change how you understand the story?”

Toby (age 12), a student in the class, responded with the following:

I always thought of people with Asperger’s as weird. I guess I’ve had a few kids in my school with this or something like it. I know it changes how I read this book, but I got really into Caitlin’s story and the way she told it, so I think that can help me look at things a different way instead of just the way I always saw it.

3. Graphic organizers

Maybe the simplest organizer for considering implicit bias is a Venn diagram. Because the goal of incorporating bias into our thinking is to produce richer bridges between ourselves and others (whether they are characters, groups, or real people), the Venn diagram offers a simple binary approach that nonetheless connects us.
Saying What We Don’t Mean

Figure 3 is a Venn diagram completed by Kaya, who was studying To Kill a Mockingbird. Kaya’s teacher had her fill out one circle with Scout’s characteristics and another with her own. The space between was reserved for places in which the two girls’ experiences or characteristics overlapped.

Kaya’s class then studied, in literature circles, a number of young adult works featuring African American characters; included among the choices were Sherri Winston’s The Kayla Chronicles, Bil Wright’s When the Black Girl Sings, and Jacqueline Woodson’s Brown Girl Dreaming. Later, the class wrote poems related to these books. The following are the opening lines of Kaya’s poem:

White and black,
Age nine and age thirteen,
From the country and from the city,
Both Southern,
Both tomboys,
Both girls,
Both more than people see.
I can’t know you, but I can understand you . . .

Final Thoughts

Literature is important in part because it opens for us areas of human experience we might not access otherwise. We shouldn’t make the mistake of believing that all aspects of that experience lie close to the surface or that we can capture them with a simple list of themes on a whiteboard; each student brings unique biases to the act of reading—and so do authors, and so do we. “In order for students to examine their own beliefs,” notes Melissa B. Schieble, “teachers must make their assumptions and ideals transparent.”

Yet it’s important to note that lessons in implicit bias should not be framed or received as instructions to feel guilty or condemnations of entire groups as racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudiced. Writing in the New York Times, Daniel A. Yudkin and Jay Van Bavel note the criticism of the idea of implicit biased raised in the most recent presidential election but also note that research shows that “implicit bias can be overcome with rational deliberation.” It does not necessarily lie within a teacher’s power to expose each individual’s implicit biases, nor would we want that power, but it is within our power and responsibility to offer every student an opportunity to recognize implicit bias, both in his or her own reading life and in the literature we bring to school, and thus to make the implicit explicit.

It’s not a crime to communicate what we don’t mean. It is, however, a shame not to take the time to examine our communication and to try to say what we do mean, which includes the message that the reading life of every adolescent is important and valued.

Works Cited


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<th>READWRITETHINK CONNECTION</th>
<th>Lisa Storm Fink, RWT</th>
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<td>In this lesson plan, students analyze the concepts of identity, stereotyping, and discrimination by reading picture books; identifying how these concepts are dealt with in each book; and discussing concrete actions to stop discrimination. <a href="http://bit.ly/20qIKQY">http://bit.ly/20qIKQY</a></td>
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NCTE affiliates have selected these outstanding high school teachers who have demonstrated excellence in practice to receive the 2017 High School Teacher of Excellence Award. The awards will be presented at the Secondary Luncheon during the 2017 NCTE Annual Convention in St. Louis, Missouri. Information about the award can be found on the NCTE website at http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/hste.

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Arizona English Teachers Association (AETA)
Theron Hopkins, Inspire School of Arts and Sciences, Chico, CA
California Association of Teachers of English (CATE)
Shirley A. Rutter, Weeki Wachee High School, Weeki Wachee, FL
Florida Council of Teachers of English (FCTE)
Amber M. Simmons, Brookwood High School, Snellville, GA
Georgia Council of Teachers of English (GCATE)
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Geryl Lobert, Chippewa Hills High School, Remus, MI
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Caitlin Chiller, Whitehall School District, Whitehall, MT
Montana Association of Teachers of English Language Arts (MATELA)

Deborah Ward, Burke High School, Omaha, NE
Nebraska English Language Arts Council
Lou Ventura, Olean High School, Olean, NY
New York State English Council (NYSEC)
Lena Moore, Sheridan High School, Thornville, OH
Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (OCTELA)
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