

CHAPTER 2

MINDSETS

“No one can escape having prejudice, no matter how ‘woke’ they may be. The way someone becomes an ally is by recognizing their ignorance and realizing they’ll never be exempt from prejudice.” – Nina Murphy, age 16



MINDSETS

Source: NWEA, 2023. Used with permission.

I was a seventh-grade math teacher in a large, urban school district. I'd become disgruntled from the large class sizes with up to 40 students and a limited supply of textbooks and manipulative tools for students to explore math concepts. I felt that in any given day I was adjusting my lessons to engage the wide range of academic diversity in my classes; covering math skills that spanned first through 10th grade.

I was elated to receive an offer to join the Teacher's Paradise (a fictitious name for a public school in a large, urban district). Though not an official lab school, this institution of learning was an experiment in the city. The hypothesis was that if class sizes were reduced to between 10 and 15 students, and teachers were provided an extended day for paid, daily professional development (which included teacher planning and collaboration time), and students had access to the best equipment, tools and resources, then increased student outcomes would be inevitable.

Like any great experiment, one must consider the variables being tested and the control used. And, of course, anything designed to improve student outcomes should take the students into consideration. The families of students in Teacher's Paradise had been rooted in the area for nearly half a century, forming very rich and close-knit community of generations of families in housing built specifically for African Americans. By the time I began teaching there, the public housing was slated for a multi-year evacuation and demolition plan. My students knew that their families were going to be uprooted, and for older students the future seemed uncertain and bleak. The neighborhood was rapidly gentrifying, and many of my students were being forced out of the only home they'd ever known. But the district assured us that they were working to correct a pattern of injustice. (Update: At the time of writing this book, that neighborhood has been gentrified. The school district is working with the city's public housing to lease part of the remaining housing to the school district in order to build a \$120 million high school.)

The community had developed a reputation that undoubtedly caused outsiders to hold preconceived notions of the types of people who lived there—poor, black, uneducated. In fact, when I told people that I was going to join the Teacher's Paradise, they were quick to warn me about the dangers I'd face day-to-day. The people warning me of Teacher's Paradise had a belief that poverty was a culture and a choice. They failed to see how the community that housed Teacher's Paradise was the result of a "condition or symptom of the structural inequities built into our social and economic system" which promoted deficit thinking about our students and their academic capability. (Hammond, 33)

I taught alongside four other teachers in my wing of the school—a white woman, two white men, and a black man: all middle-aged with well-established careers as educators. Collectively we taught about 75 young people. In an ideal Teacher's Paradise this distribution would have been fertile ground for a holistic approach to learning, and with such a low student to teacher ratio it would be easier to build a culture of high engagement and empowered students in intellectually curious spaces.

Within a few weeks at the Teacher's Paradise, I felt that my students had taken ownership of our homeroom and were really starting to trust that learning could be fun (again). My colleagues and I would greet our students in the hallways each morning and hold classroom meetings to start the day. We had processes in place that showed students we were all part of an engaged and collaborative learning team. I thought Teacher's Paradise was heaven compared to what I'd experienced before.

EVEN PARADISE ISN'T PERFECT

I've taught and coached math in many different types of schools. I've delivered workshops in hundreds of schools across the nation. I've worked with

veteran teachers, those new to the profession, and everyone in between, in the most prestigious institutions to the most underserved learning environments. I've been inside the classrooms in public and private schools, Bureau of Indian Education schools, independent Turkish schools, Hasidic Judaism schools, Afrocentric academies, Montessori—just to name a few school settings among many. Through all my experiences, I've learned one truism-- no matter how good (or bad) a school is, there's always very effective and strong teachers and, contrarily, there are always teachers that have a lot of room for growth-- Teacher's Paradise included.

Families entrust their students to educators for an equitable education. Families hope and believe that teachers have “unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students”. (Gay, 2018, p. 52) Ideally, teachers use knowledge from their lived experiences in concert with those of their students to make content accessible, engaging, and meaningful. In best case scenarios teachers and students are partners in learning, making it a “simultaneously personally validating, academically enriching, socially empowering, morally uplifting, and pedagogically transforming” experience. (Gay, p. 273) Teachers typically have good intentions with our students, but once the classroom door closes only the teacher and students really know what happens.

I am generally trusting of others and give them the benefit of the doubt, but something within kept me from believing in Mr. Wilson's jovial front and perpetual smiling and laughter. Then one day my suspicion was affirmed. I just so happened to walk past Mr. Wilson's math class during my break when I overheard him call our students “little monkeys and devils”. I stopped dead in my tracks and was so shocked I could not move. I was visibly shaken and could not disregard the blatant disrespect toward our young people. Mr. Wilson had been on this earth for about sixty years, and I'm sure he knew about our country's history of comparing black people to monkeys, and the scientific efforts to deem black people as less than human, thus comparable to animals. Teacher's Paradise had a virus that was infecting our ecosystem.

BIAS COMES WITH BAGGAGE

Calling the students monkeys and devils was a “small, seemingly innocuous, brief verbal, denigrating, and hurtful message [given] to people of color.” (Hammond, p. 112) I'm really glad that I overheard this **microaggression** because although in my homeroom we had a classroom environment where every voice was affirmed and appreciated, my students never told me what Mr. Wilson had done. Students are “often reluctant to discuss their experiences, impressions, and thoughts about racial discrimination, ethnic inequities, and cultural hegemony.” (Gay, 2018, p. 269) Students need a classroom environment that makes them feel valued. After all, how much appreciation

and value would you feel if you were jokingly referred to by a derogatory term?

Assaults on a child's cultural identity are a threat to their academic identity. Mr. Wilson had a negative mindset about black students that threatened the intellectual potential and esteem of our students. (At the end of this chapter, you will learn a four step protocol to reframe an unhealthy mindset.) How might being called monkeys reshape a student's academic identity? Students may not have foresight to see its consequences on their academic identity for years to come, which is why the onus is on educators to understand its impact.



"I would even go so far as to say that assaults on a child's cultural identity is the *destruction* of their academic identity." -Educator

What Mr. Wilson did is not uncommon in K-12 schools. In fact, at the time of writing this book another white, male teacher at one of the top schools in the same school district as Mr. Wilson, "hung a Black doll by its neck from a cord at the front of his classroom then argued with a Black colleague who was offended." (Issa, 2022) Students, teachers, families, and community members were outraged at such a blatant act of racism occurring while our nation was in the midst of a racial reckoning. Nina Murphy, a student at the school, shared this reflection on the importance of talking about racism--

"When George Floyd was murdered, I was upset. The feeling you get watching a police officer kneel on a Black man's throat isn't describable. It's like a mix of disgust, generational fear, anger, and sadness. Even though I was upset by what I saw, I wasn't surprised. When you grow up with outspoken Black parents, and when you go to a school that talks about racism, you aren't surprised when you witness extreme racism. My White classmates were allowed to talk about it in class, and they had similar sentiments. They, too, felt disgusted. However, many of them mentioned that they didn't know things like this happened a lot, or they said they didn't think there was a lot of racism left in the world. So a lot of them had a newfound zeal and inclination toward activism. I was, and still am, happy that they are learning about police brutality and racism. I've even educated some of my friends about race issues, but it shouldn't be the burden of the educated to educate."

Just as a part of me was happy, another part was surprised. It was hard to fathom how a teenager, even a White teenager, could be so incredibly ignorant and blind about racism and police brutality. I can't imagine going through life without a strong understanding of how racism affects many aspects of life. Even if I could grasp that concept, I would never have the luxury of living my life in pure race bliss. As a Black girl, I don't have the luxury or privilege of assuming racism "isn't that bad" anymore. Just as a part of me was surprised, another part was disappointed. It shouldn't take watching someone suffocate a Black man for people to realize that Black people are still oppressed."

Source: Before the national outrage: Why young kids need to be taught about racism, *Nina Murphy*, <https://www.nwea.org/blog/2021/beforethe-nationaloutrage-whyyoung-kidsneed-to-betaught-aboutracism/>, 2021, NWEA Used by permission.



"Nina's story is very powerful. White people need to do better at understanding the privilege beneath the idea that they are "color blind" and think that racism has been solved. The fact that this account comes from a Black girl in high school is a powerful way to convey these ideas." -Educator

Between 2020 and 2022 in the United States, most public-school students did not attend in-person classes but learned online. Some parents found remote learning to be useful in shielding their children from racism in the classrooms (Fernando, 2021), which was occurring with greater visibility. In fact, there seemed to be an uptick in the reporting of overt racism toward students by teachers in K-12 schools. A simple internet search of "teacher calling student monkey" over the past year yielded these headlines in the news:

- NC Teacher Calls Black Students 'My Little Monkeys'
- Black Preschooler's 'Monkey Award' From Teacher Slammed by Mother
- Michigan school suspends teacher for worksheet comparing Obama to monkeys
- Teacher resigns after racially 'insensitive' comment to Black students
- Racial slurs and 'monkey noises' targeted California high school cheerleaders at football game

- Riverside teacher placed on leave after mimicking Native Americans during math class
- School District Sorry After Students Make Gorilla Noises at Black Player



“I feel like calling your students monkeys goes beyond a microaggression. That just seems like aggressive racism.” -Educator

OUR MINDSETS IMPACT OUR STUDENTS

I’ve used examples of microaggressions to introduce the entry point of mindsets because everything begins in our mind. My intent was to elicit an emotional response from you so that we could get to the inner-outer work of having equitable mindsets. A student’s academic identity can be undermined by a teacher’s **mindset** and how a teacher interacts with that student—the words they say and behaviors they exhibit. Mindsets are a set of mental attitudes that determines how one will interpret and respond to situations. According to Zaretta Hammond, “when teachers frame student differences as deficits rather than assets, a microaggression is ignited for the student”. (Hammond, 113)

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“Microaggressions are the subtle, everyday verbal and nonverbal slights, snubs, or insults which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to people of color based solely on their marginalized group membership.” (Hammond, 47) Microaggressions are not limited to people of color, and also show up through the lens of sexism, ageism, ableism, ethnocentrism, and sizeism—just to name a few. Microaggressions in schools show up as microassaults (misuse of power and privilege), microinsults (cultural insensitivity), or microinvalidations (nullification of students’ funds of knowledge), each of which are further defined and elaborated upon by Hammond in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*.

“Research on microaggressions and discrimination finds negative effects on both mental health, including depression and anxiety (Keels et al., 2017; Nadal et al., 2014), and physical health, including rates of cardiovascular

disease (Calvin et al., 2003). Other work finds that trauma resulting from racial microaggressions can have negative impacts on racial identity development, self-esteem, and relationships with others (Nadal, 2018). Some targets of microaggressions can have trouble determining whether a microaggression really occurred (Sue, 2010), while others hesitate to respond to microaggressions because they are worried how their peers might respond (Yosso et al., 2009).”

There is a large segment of our student population with more to overcome because they have multiple marginalized identities. Their need for teachers with cultural humility and raised consciousness about anti-racist teaching is of utmost importance, less we continue to perpetuate environments that stifle the academic potential of students. “If biased teacher expectations are directly or indirectly communicated to students, they provide precise information about educational investments that perceptions of student traits do not. ... Biased expectations could be incorporated into students’ own beliefs, thus influencing their investment decisions. This is especially concerning for disadvantaged students with little prior information on the returns to educational investments. Finally, while a teacher’s perceptions reflect their current views of abilities or traits, their expectations are prone to becoming self-fulfilling prophecies ...” (Gershenson, 2016)

LET’S F.A.C.E. IT

In this section you will identify the facts and name the feelings that came up for you after reading the examples shared so far in this chapter. Perhaps you learned that there is historical context in the United States around Black people being referred to as monkeys (fact) and that you felt uneasy and a bit conflicted because in your culture “devils” is a term of endearment (feeling). Maybe you felt that I made assumptions about you, the reader, because a certain population wasn’t included in chapter one’s stories. Or, it is possible that everything you read resonated with you because you’d seen or experienced something similar, and you feel affirmed knowing that you aren’t the only one. Either way—you felt something, so let’s identify those feelings.

The intent of this section is to build your emotional intelligence and help you gain more awareness of the feelings that arise as you do your equity work. We’ll look at the F-A part of the F-A-C-E It reflection that I introduced in the beginning of this book:

- Facts and Feelings: Identify the facts and name the feelings that arise in you from those facts
- Agree and Argue: State what you agree with and what you would argue
- Connections: Draw parallels to your own experiences
- Epiphanies: Record your “aha’s” and takeaways

How you feel matters. Feelings that are not acknowledged or expressed can become suppressed. When we suppress feelings that are heavy and unpleasant, we risk taking on actions and behaviors that are destructive to ourselves or others. When we suppress feelings that are light and loving, we deny others the truthfulness of our humanity. Feelings matter because they bring invitations for action. When we feel tired, it is an invitation to rest. When we feel angry, it is an invitation to revisit our boundaries. When we feel grateful, it is an invitation to expand our life force. The feelings that arise when you do your equity work are invitations to act toward growth and change—for you and/or for others.

For this exercise, I want you to be honest and name the feelings that arose in you after reading the examples shared so far. If you are unable to identify a word to express how you feel, begin by asking yourself: *What stood out to me? How did I react to what I read?*

Here are specific questions to probe your thinking:

- When I called Mr. Wilson’s name calling a microaggression, how did that make you feel?
- How do you respond when you hear colleagues making racist or sexist comments in school?
- How many of your students are like Nina? Why? How does that make you feel as their teacher?
- What feelings are coming up for you? Hopeless? Curious? Perplexed? Confused? Annoyed? Frustrated? Inspired? Intrigued?

FACTS AND FEELINGS	
What were the facts and initial reactions you had to the people, situations, and/or topics covered in this chapter so far?	
FACTS	FEELINGS

Facts and feelings next steps:

Based on your responses in this section, what do you want to make sure the facilitator addresses when you and your team engage in professional learning?



These exercises are affirming to me because I've had many of the same experiences as the teachers and as the students around low self-esteem in math, as well as difficult situations with intentional and unintentional racism with colleagues. This reflective work also leaves me uneasy. I'm wondering if any of my actions or words are slipping through the cracks around equity because it hasn't been top of mind lately. What microaggressions have I participated in? Have I been in situations where I've been too easy on people or let things go that put equity for our kids at risk? Lastly, I'm excited (and a little nervous) to dig deeper. Addressing big feelings and big topics like equity and racism are hard (but worth it).

Agree and Argue

Doing equity work requires having hard conversations, and I want to help you be best prepared to engage in difficult dialogue. It's okay to disagree with others, including me. Our differing opinions are what help to strengthen our relationships, when we seek first to understand and then to be understood. Let's help you get ready to share your point of view with clarity and compassion.

In this section I want you to begin unpacking your equity mindset. The first step is to identify the things that you agree and disagree with in order to illuminate your values and beliefs. To define the things that are inherently important to you and the opinions you stand on, you'll identify things that sounded sensible to you in chapter one, as well as the things with which you disagree. The second part of unpacking your equity mindset will be exploring your academic identity later in this chapter.

AGREE AND ARGUE

Recall the situations, topics and stories shared so far in this chapter. List at least five things with which you agree, and explain why you agree with that story, topic, or item shared.

I AGREE with	because

Reflect Further

Who might not agree with you? Why? How would your perspectives differ? What might they say about your point of view?

BECOMING AWARE OF MY BIAS

I want to take you to my first year of teaching and show you how much I needed the entry points for equity back then. For some educators, the first year of teaching is hard and the learning curve is steep. I saw very quickly how adept students are at testing limits; a normal part of their development needed in order to learn boundaries. The first year of teaching for me was a crash course in classroom management, which was all about boundary setting. Success is relative, so finding those things that you're really good at and hinging on them is critical to your survival as a first-year teacher. Finding a few things that you do well can compensate for all the trial and error that comes from being a novice. So, in my first year I focused on what I knew best aside from teaching math, and that was how to be a girl, based on my experience as a young girl navigating middle school. I saw myself in the girls in my classroom—their behaviors and ways of thinking, and as a result I ended up paying them a lot more attention than the boys. I often called on girls a lot more than boys because I remembered what it was like to be

overlooked as a young girl in math class. I was biased, and here is one way my bias showed up in my classroom:

- **A missed opportunity for equity:** I often predicted that the boys would not score as well as the girls on tests, noting that the girls had better reading skills and work habits, which would influence their scores.
- **An equitable mindset:** A colleague helped me understand that my prediction was an assumption. The helped me better understand the negative impact gender biases and stereotypes had on students' engagement and learning.

Note: Girls and boys were gender pronouns that were socially accepted and used by society during the time of this teaching experience.

If my prediction about student performance were backed by data it would be less wrong, less biased, less harmful. But it was an inequitable mindset that got in the way of me affirming the intellectual capabilities of all students. My intention was to encourage girls that I felt were at a disadvantage because of their past experiences with being looked over in math class, but the impact was that I made the boys feel invisible. I saw myself in action (through observations and videotaping) and witnessed how my behavior impacted student engagement levels. I needed to change my mindset because my bias was fueling a greater narrative of restricting access and opportunity to the boys in my classroom. When we adopt equitable practices of inclusion, we not only increase engagement among students, but also strengthen ours and our students' academic identities.

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REFRAMING YOUR MINDSET

“Imagine being a student who is seen only through the lens of his or her deficits: as the student who can't sit still in class or disrupts class with outbursts. Now, imagine how it would feel to be that same student, yet instead you're seen as the child who has more energy than anyone else and therefore can get much more done, or as the child who smiles at everyone and is always in a good mood. This is how asset-based approaches change perspectives in the classroom.” -Diana Turk, *An Asset-Based Approach to Education*

You might be wondering what to do if you work with a teacher like Mr. Wilson, or if you notice other teachers using language or exhibiting actions and behaviors indicative of a deficit-based mindset toward students. It is important to approach any interactions with deficit-focused colleagues with

the intent to learn and share, not to change anyone. Trying to change someone creates barriers to the doors to conversation that inquiry can open. Please note, while some actions and behaviors may need to be explicitly called out, particularly if they put students' or fellow educators in danger, other ways of thinking should be allowed time and space to grow.

Deficit thinking refers to the idea/worldview that particular students fail in school because the students and their families have “deficits” that impede their learning (e.g., limited education, poverty, minority status).

Shifting from a deficit to asset-focused mindset first requires a shift in perspective. Here are four simple but powerful ways to guide someone through a mindset shift. These four steps help you avoid trying to fix, change, or save students, and encourages greater empathy and understanding of students' lived experiences.

Making a Mindset Shift

- 1. Name the issue.** Allow the person to articulate what the issue is and why they think it exists. It is important for the person to identify the things that they don't like, that bother them, or that are problematic, from their point of view. If it's not stated or seen, then it can't be reframed.
- 2. Assume good intent.** Next, explore reasons why the issue might exist, but from an unbiased and nonjudgmental stance. Avoid blaming the student or feeling pity or sympathy for them. Instead, empathize with that student's lived experience. For example, if the problem was that a student is constantly disruptive in class, assume that the student wants to engage productively in class and explore reasons that might be preventing the student from doing so.
- 3. Identify the needs.** Now, step fully into the student's shoes and gain empathy for their actions and behaviors by identifying the student needs (i.e., emotional, physical, psychological, mental needs, etc.,) that are not being met. Explore reasons why the student reacts in certain ways when their needs are not met. What might change if those needs are met for the student? Keep in mind that a student's needs are neither good nor bad. The strategies they sometimes use to meet their needs can come across in ways that have an unexpected impact on others.
- 4. Reframe the issue.** Now, revisit what was shared in step one and retell it from a more compassionate perspective, taking into account what the

student needs and what actions, behaviors, and choices the teacher can make to help meet those needs.

Here is an example of an educator shifting from a deficit to asset-focused mindset using the four steps.

Making a Mindset Shift

NAME THE ISSUE.	ASSUME GOOD INTENT.	IDENTIFY THE NEEDS.	REFRAME THE ISSUE.
<i>The parents of my lowest performing students don't seem to care about school. They don't respond to my emails and notes.</i>	<i>Maybe there are things I don't know that explain why we aren't connecting. I am a parent and I know life gets busy and I can't make all of my kid's events, but I try my best because I want the best for my kid. Maybe my students' parents are in similar situations.</i>	<i>A community literacy specialist come to our last staff meeting and told us that an estimated 50% or more of the students' caregivers could not read beyond a 3rd or 4th grade level. I realized that almost all my emails and letters home were at the 8th grade level. No wonder I wasn't getting responses from parents!</i>	<i>My students' parents want the best for them, and I have to work to make sure I communicate in a way that is easy for them to understand.</i>

REFLECTION:

What feedback would you give this teacher about their reframing?

Now, apply these four steps to yourself. Think of an issue that you have had to reframe your thinking about. Complete the following table. Share your thinking with a colleague that may provide additional insight for you.

Making a Mindset Shift

Name the Issue.	Assume Good Intent.	Identify the Needs.	Reframe the Issue.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The first two tenets of equitable and excellent education are using an asset-based mindset and holding high expectations of students, specifically:

Practices of an equitable and excellent education

1. Using an asset-based mindset
2. Holding high expectations of students
3. Offering rigorous instruction for all
4. Creating a welcoming, inclusive, and affirming environment
5. Building relationships with the community

In what ways are you upholding an equitable and excellent education for your students? The following reflection will help you assess your understanding of the intersection between mindsets, academic identities, and equity.

REFLECTION

1. How are mindsets connected to academic identities?

2. How are mindsets connected to equity?

3. Can you think of an inequitable experience that a student experienced? In which ways was their academic identity undermined?
