



University of  
**BRISTOL**

# Unconscious Bias in Schools

Reasons, Research and  
Reactions

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## *Let's start with an activity*

A father and son were involved in a car accident in which the father was killed and the son was seriously injured. The father was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident and his body was taken to a local morgue. The son was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital and was immediately wheeled into an emergency operating room. A surgeon was called. Upon arrival and seeing the patient, the attending surgeon exclaimed "Oh my God, it's my son!"

Can you explain this?

# *Another activity*

On a piece of paper, write in a column to the left the 6 people you trust the most outside your family.

Then, make a tick beside each person who is similar in terms of your own

- Nationality
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Native language
- Religion

# What this seminar is about



## **UNCONSCIOUS BIAS – WHAT RESEARCH SAYS**

- Where does it come from?
- How is it studied?
- What are the consequences?



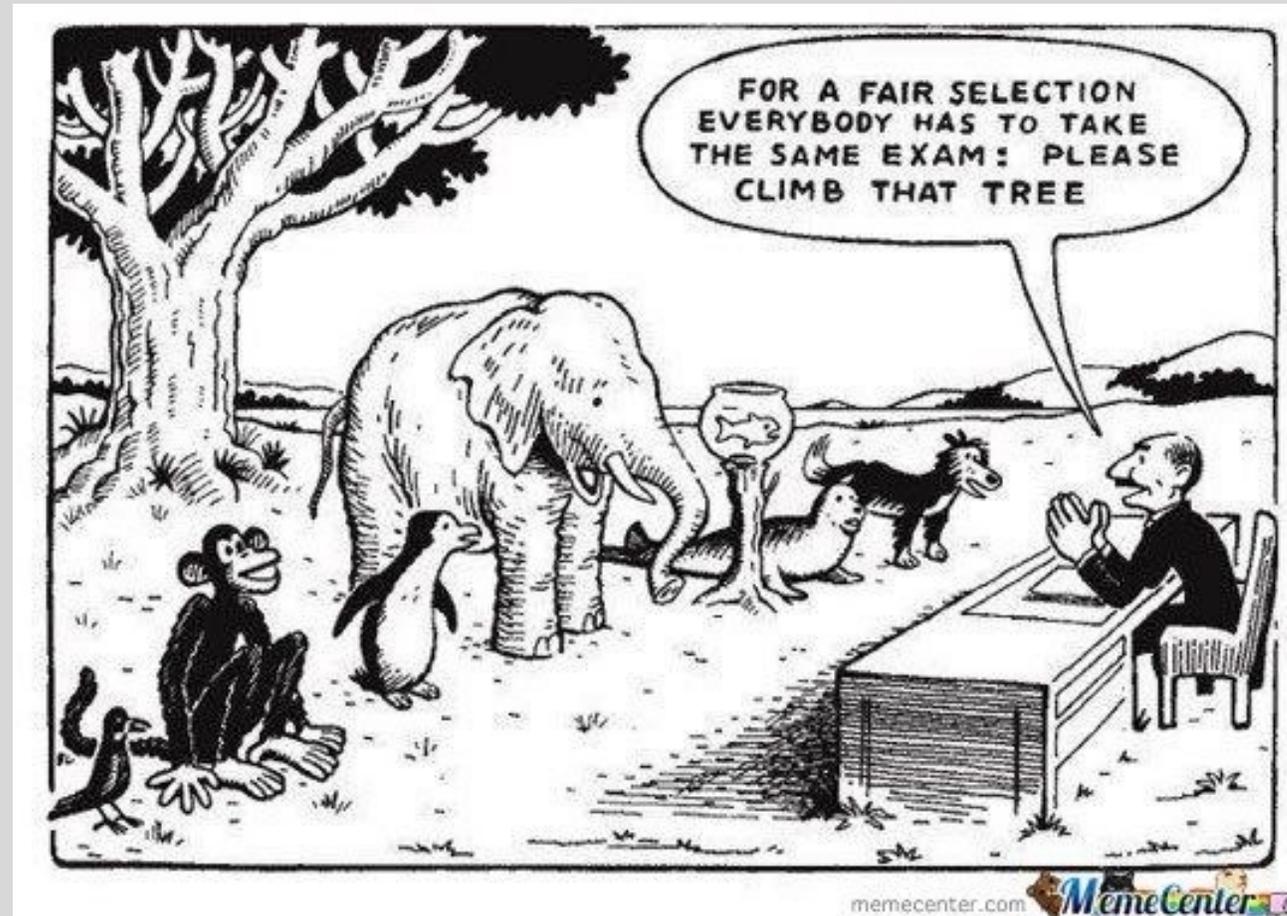
## **UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING**

- What does it look like?
- Does it work?



## **YOUR VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES**

# The wider context and why we care



# Gender gap in school attainment

## A-level data shows record grades and biggest gender gap in a decade

**Number of students reaching A or A\* doubles in 12 subjects since 2019 and girls beat boys in top maths grades**

The Guardian 10<sup>th</sup> August 2021



## Girls overtake boys in A-level and GCSE maths, so are they 'smarter'?

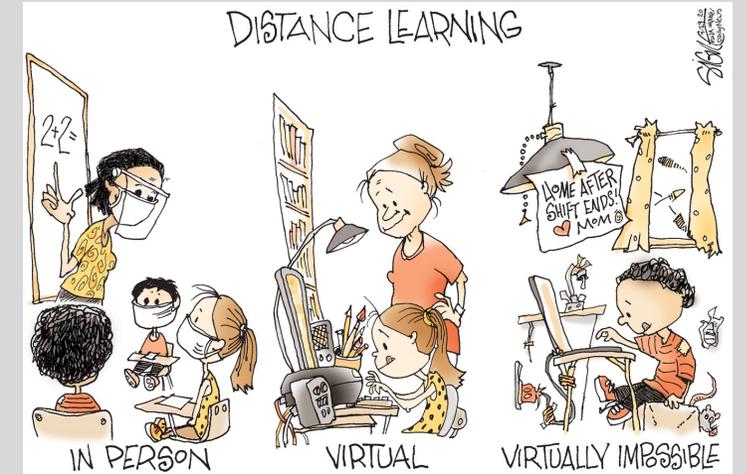
The Guardian 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021

# Socioeconomic gap in school attainment

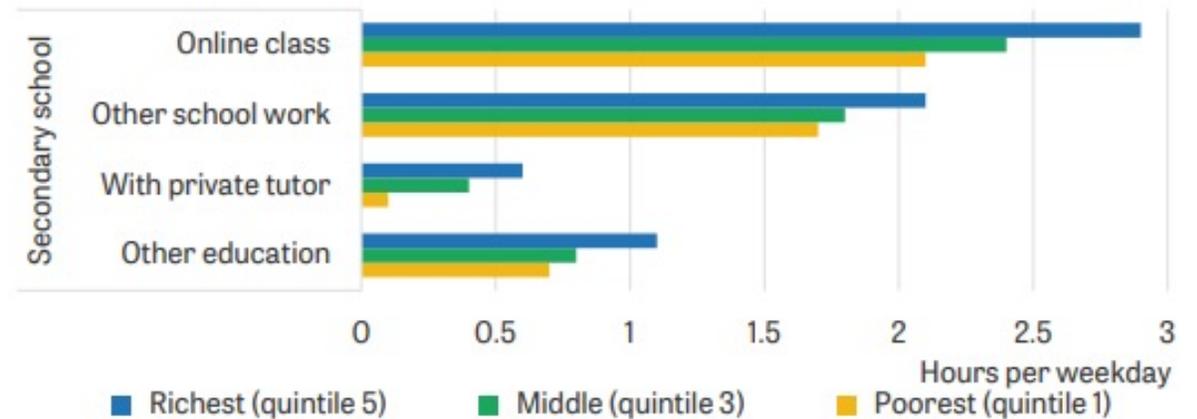
“At secondary school, by the time they take their GCSEs, disadvantaged pupils (those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years) are over **18.1 months of learning** behind their peers. This gap is the same as it was five years ago.”

“Children with a high persistence of poverty (those on free school meals for over 80% of their time at school) have a learning gap of **22.7 months** – twice that of children with a **low persistence of poverty** (those on free schools meals for less than 20% of their time at school), who have a learning gap **11.3 months.**”

Hutchinson, J. et al. (2020)



Children’s daily learning time during first national lockdown in Spring 2020



Source: Andrew et al (2020).

Blundell, R. et al. (2022)

# Ethnic gap in school attainment

## Government report (Gov.uk, 2022):

“Attainment 8-scores for the academic year 2020-21:

- Pupils from the Chinese ethnic group had the highest score out of all ethnic groups (69.2)
- White Gypsy and Roma pupils had the lowest score (22.7)
- Across all students the score is 50.9 (out of 90)
- Black Caribbean score 44, and Mixed White/Black Caribbean 45.0
- White British pupils score 50.2.”

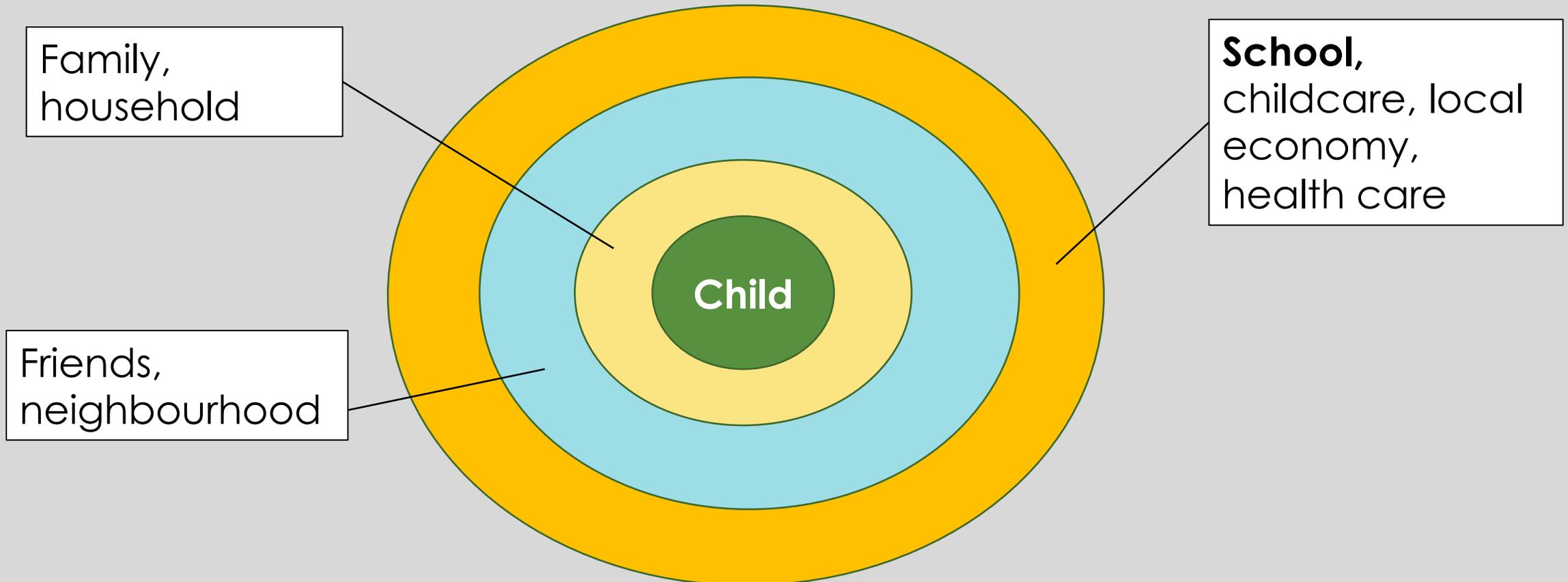


## Intersections with social class and gender:

- In some ethnic groups, gender gap is much larger
- White working-class boys are particularly unlikely to attend university (Baars et al, 2016)

# Where do inequalities come from?

Who and what influences a child's development and their school attainment?



# How much of inequalities is due to schools?

- Boys and children of socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be placed in **low ability groups**.
- Being in a low ability group **decreases academic self-esteem, self-image, enjoyment of school and attainment gain**.
- Boys and Black Caribbean students are more likely to be **excluded from school**.
- But, **supportive teacher-student relationships** have positive influence on social skills, behavior and attainment of students, especially for students with 'at-risk' backgrounds.



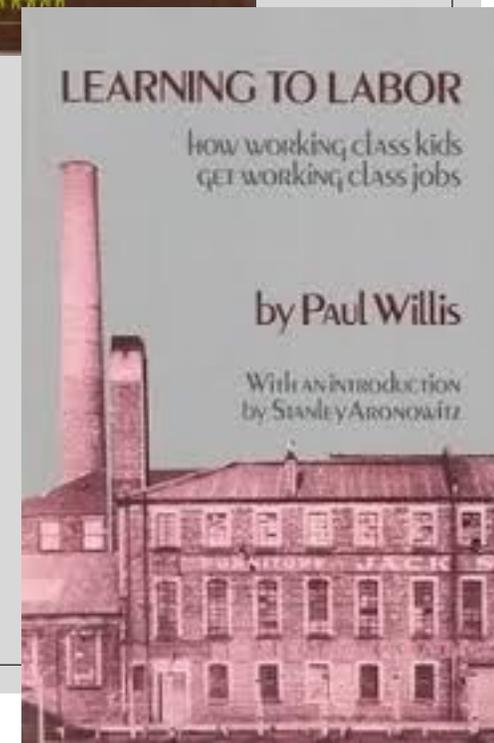
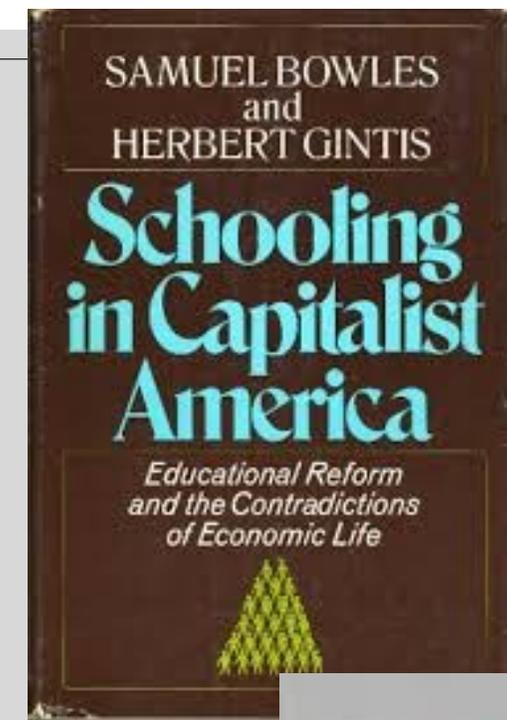
“But these children are placed in lower ability groups because their attainment is lower than that of the others!”

**At same levels of previous attainment/scores in subject-specific ability tests,**

- ❖ boys and students from high-risk families are more likely to be **placed in low ability groups**.
- ❖ boys and children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to **receive lower marks**.
- ❖ boys and children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to **receive negative teacher judgements about their abilities and whether they will go to uni**.

# The role of behaviour, habits, attitudes

- **Schooling in Capitalist America** (1976): Meritocracy does not exist, there is a 'hidden curriculum',
- Schools teach students how to behave according to their future role in society: working-class students learn to obey authority and middle-class students learn to lead and be independent.
- **'Counter school culture'** (Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*): famous study of 12 White working-class boys in 1970s
- The boys develop anti-school attitudes and behaviours to rebel against the suppressive school system but this in turn seals their future as working class.

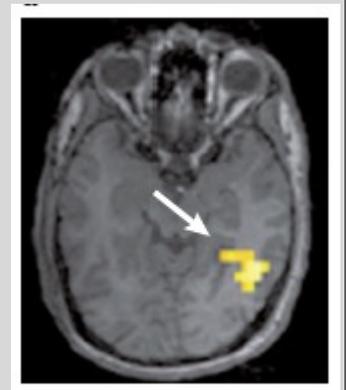


# Unconscious bias (UB): what it is and why it exists



# Unconscious bias (UB): Implicit social cognition

- **Implicit cognition:** past experiences, stereotypes and attitudes influence people's judgements in a way that is not conscious to them
- Implicit cognition works **automatically** and activates automatic behaviours
- Neuroscience shows prejudice and stereotypes are **learned fear responses**
- **That it's a fear response means it is learned and therefore can be changed**
- It is measured with an **Implicit Association Test (IAT):** categorisation task where words or images are rated as "pleasant"/"unpleasant", "good"/"bad" with fast reaction times.



# Implicit association test (IAT): example 'gender-career IAT'



Figure 1a: Gender-career IAT, training round 1



Figure 1b: Gender-career IAT, training round 2

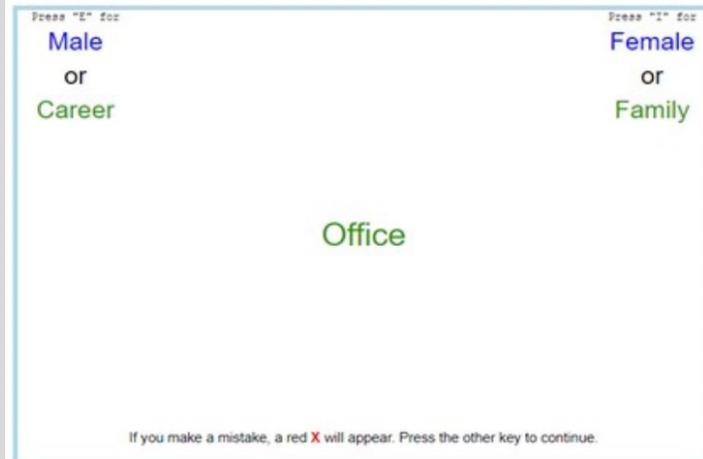


Figure 1c: Gender-career IAT, stereotypical pair

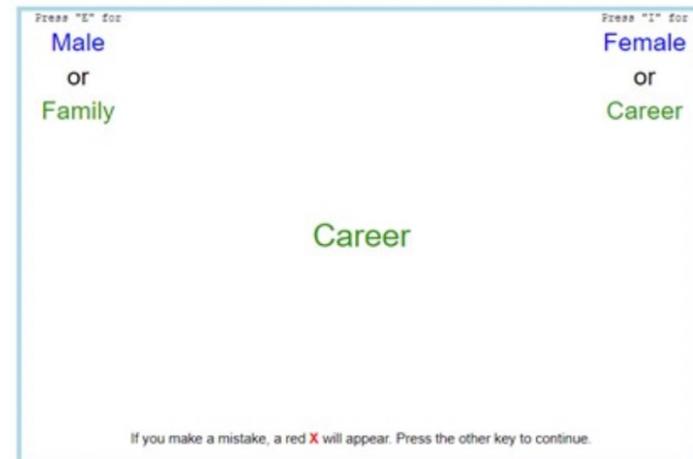
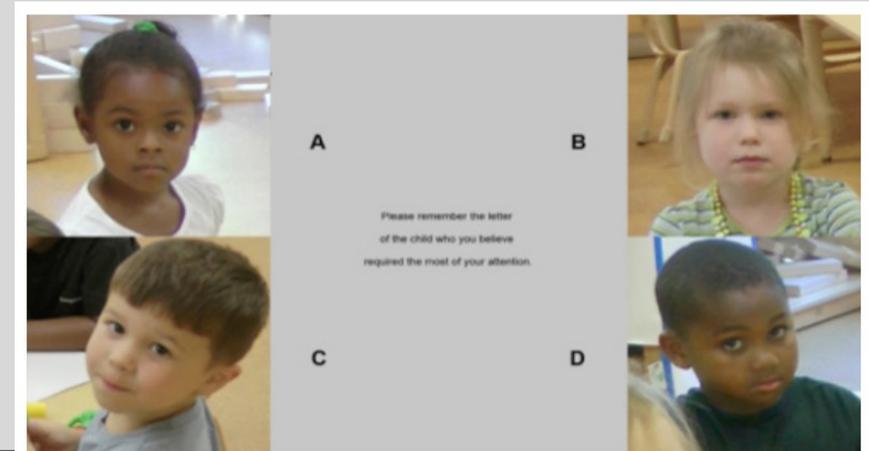


Figure 1d: Gender-career IAT, non-stereotypical pair

# One of many example studies

Study at Yale University (Gilliam et al. 2016):

- Is there a relationship between early educators' implicit bias regarding sex and ethnicity, and behaviour expectations of pupils?
- Participants viewed series of short videos showing preschoolers and had to press a key when perceiving a behaviour that 'could become challenging'; **in fact, there was no challenging behaviour in the videos clips.**
- Findings: participants spent more timing gazing at boys and Black children.



# Other unconscious influences

## Horns effect

When one bad thing clouds your opinion of an individual.



## Halo effect

When one impressive thing affects your opinion of them.



## CONFIRMATION BIAS



# Activity: *Conscious reflections*

Thinking of your class, make a list of each student's initials and ask yourself:

- **Did you talk to that student today?**
- **Do the student have an adult in the school that they trust?**
- **How do you usually give feedback to the student?** Is it detailed and constructive (“to get better at X, do Y and Z”) or just descriptive (“well done”, “that wasn’t so good this time”)?
- **Then, take a note of each student’s gender, ethnic background, socioeconomic background, SEN-status, and perhaps other ‘non-academic’ characteristics. Do you see a pattern?**

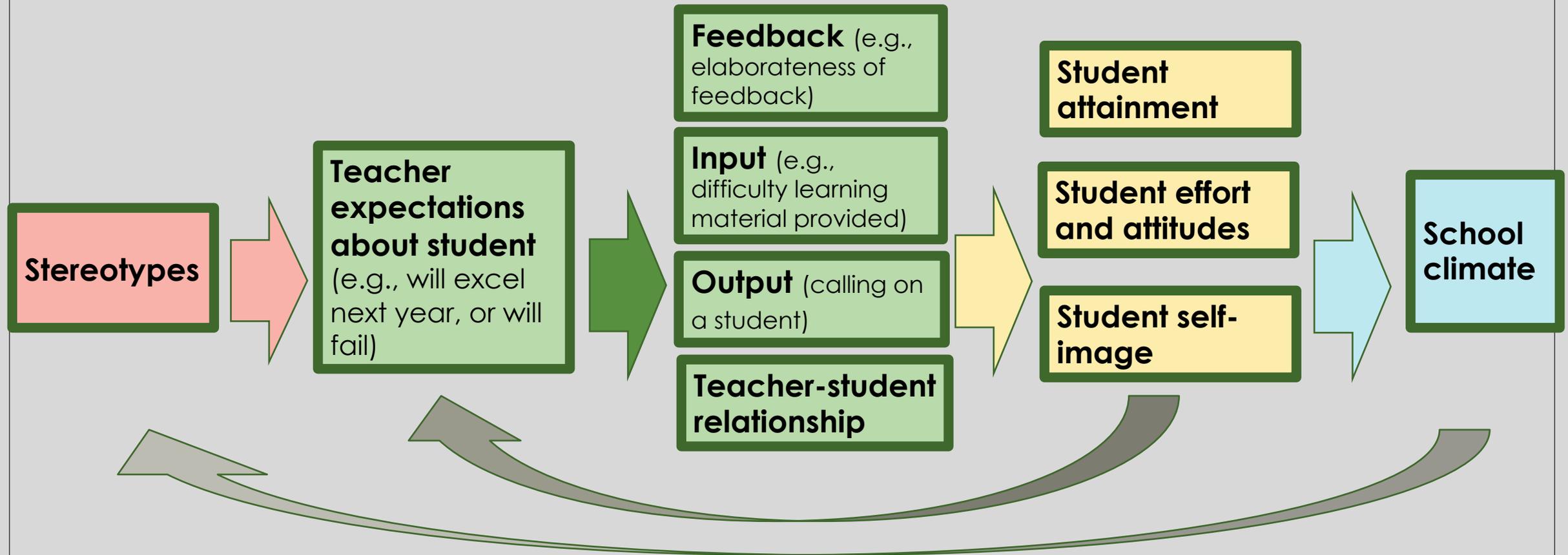
What are the consequences of biases?

# Pygmalion study

- **Famous study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968)**
- Pygmalion effect = teachers' expectations of pupils' abilities influence the school performance of the pupils
- Experiment in which teachers were misled in thinking random group of pupils had outstanding abilities



# Chain reactions and feedback loops



# Unconscious bias **training**: *does it work?*

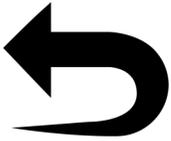
- Not all unconscious bias training has been shown to be effective
- What seems effective? Techniques that **'show' rather than 'tell'** people their biases; activities that develop skills to deal with bias
- Let's look closer at some interventions that seem to work...



Sources: Equality and Human Rights Commission 2018; FitzGerald et al 2019



**Intentional strategies to overcome biases** – participants are instructed to implement strategies to override or suppress their biases.



**Exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars** – participants are exposed to exemplars that contradict the stereotype of the outgroup.



**Identifying with the outgroup and imagining contact** – participants perform tasks that lessen barriers between themselves and the outgroup.



**Inducing emotion and empathy** – emotions or moods are induced in participants

Unconscious bias training:

**what seems to work**

## *Activity: How can this be implemented in your classroom and school?*

In groups, read the working sheet that summaries an example of an Unconscious bias training and use this information to discuss ways in which unconscious bias could be reduced in your classroom and school.

Write down 1 aspirational way to reduce bias and 2 practical ways that can be quickly and easily implemented.

Note that most studies are from the US and were not conducted with teachers. You may have to **be creative and do 'long stretched' transfers** when thinking of ways to reduced bias in classrooms and schools.

Note also that examples often refer to bias towards ethnic minority groups but you try to think of ways to **reduce bias towards a range of groups** (boys, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, etc.)

# A critical word

- Unconscious bias should not be used to justify racism and discrimination, and to take away responsibility from structures, authorities and institutions, or overtly biased people!
- Focusing on the processes in the brains of individuals bears the risk of underestimating and downplaying the role of society and institutions.



# Some take home messages

UB contributes to gender, ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities in education.

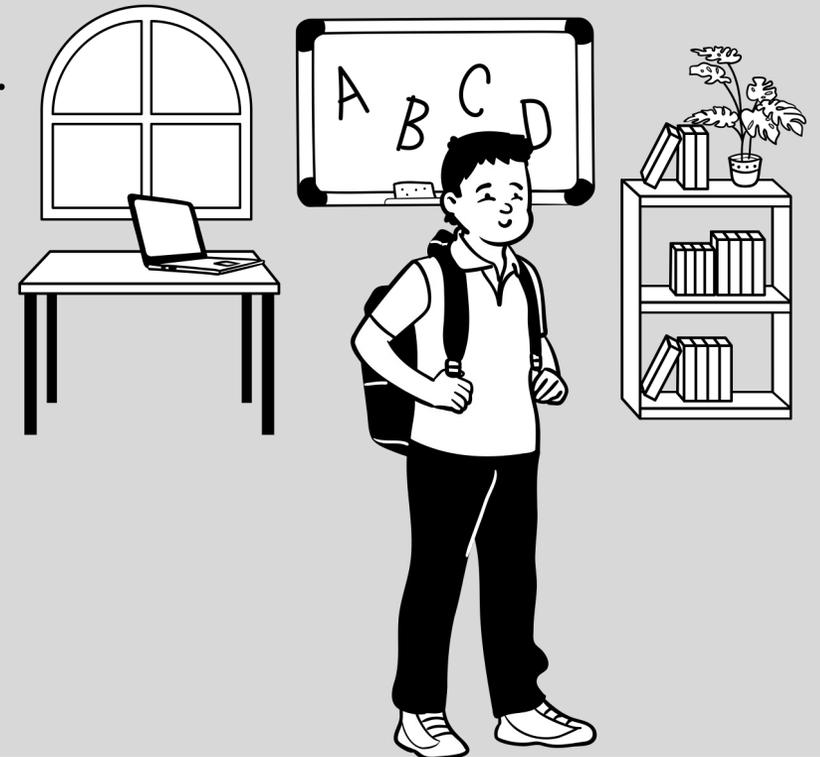
UB is learnt which means it can be changed.

There are lots of little things in everyday life and work that can be done to start tackling UB.



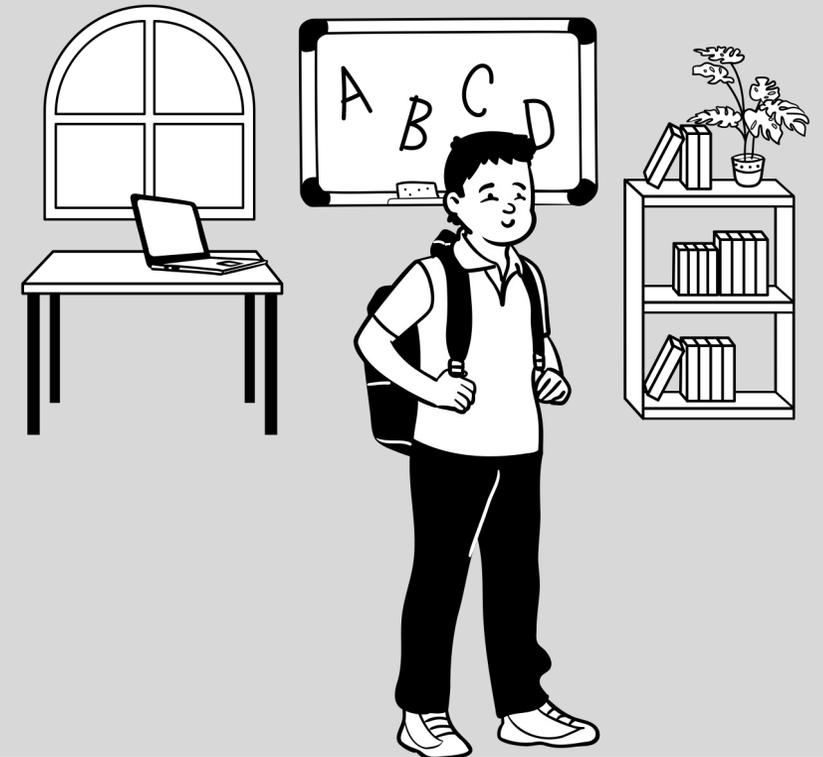
# Some practical ideas (from the research)

1. Take your time when making judgements.
2. Have very specific marking criteria.
3. Engage in collaborative marking and cross-marking.
4. Discuss student cases with colleagues from another school.
5. Keep grading anonymous.
6. Create warm and supportive relationships with students (and don't assume it's your students' responsibility to create and maintain them).
7. Think of counter-stereotypical examples, recall their 'stories' in detail.



# Some practical ideas (from the research)

8. Create games in class in which you as teacher have to team up with the disruptive, 'difficult' students.
9. Let the most disruptive, low performing students tell you their personal, pleasant and unpleasant school experiences.
10. Think of the characteristics you have in common with each of your students (remember your own school experience or those of a friend, for example).
11. Before you make decisions or even every day before you go to school, formulate and speak out your intentions (e.g., to be fair to a certain student).
12. Don't grudge.



**Thank you 😊**

**Please leave some feedback so that I can improve this seminar.**

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# Further readings and links



## Some practical readings

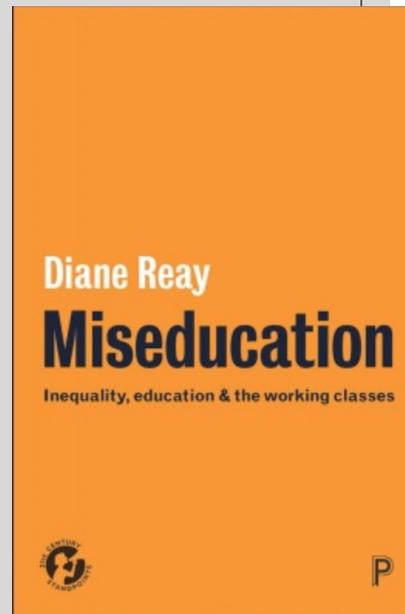
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- Scott, T. (2021) Implicit bias, disproportionate discipline, and teacher responsibility for instruction as prevention, Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 65:4, 291-300

## Theoretical (sociological readings)

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- Willis, P. E. (1977). *Learning to labour : how working class kids get working class jobs*. Saxon House.

## Other media

- Take an Implicit Association Test here: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Channel 4 series 'The school that tried to end racism' <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-school-that-tried-to-end-racism>



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