

CONTRIBUTOR

A Police Officer Didn't Kill Philando Castile. Implicit Bias Did.

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Libby Otto is a teacher at Roseville Area Middle School - in the school district where Philando Castile was shot and killed by a nervous police officer, the guiltless man's slow death broadcast to thousands by his girlfriend on [Facebook Live](#).

"We have students who actually live right there where it happened," Otto says. "We have students related to both parties."

Needless to say, the mood in the school this past year was a challenge to break through. Students were angry, frightened, confused, uncertain, sad.

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And why wouldn't they be? Aren't we all feeling all of those things and more in the midst of this season of stereotyping?

Just days after Jeronimo Yanez, the police officer who killed Castile, was acquitted, and only one day after Castile's mother, Valerie, accepted a \$3 million settlement from the city, we learned about yet another police-involved, racially-tinged shooting.

This time, a St. Louis police officer shot one of his own colleagues - thankfully, not fatally - saying he "feared for his safety" during a stolen car investigation.

A *New York Times* story about that so-called "friendly fire" shooting said the case "again drew national attention to the role race plays in decisions by law enforcement officials to open fire."

Many people are calling for more training for officers and wide-scale police reform. Sensible asks, to be sure, but I have a hypothesis. I think that the kind of stereotyping that killed Philando Castile and left that St. Louis officer wounded at the hands of his fellow brother-in-blue begins much earlier than the police academy. That kind of bias, I believe, begins in grade school - as early, perhaps, as PreK - when students are stereotyped and stunted in the classroom by the teachers and administrators there to help them grow.

Consider [this write-up](#) in *The Root* about a new, but not surprising, Georgetown University report:

A study released Tuesday reveals what many of us already know: Black girls in the age range of 5-14 are viewed as less innocent than their white counterparts, revealing that race is often a factor in how a child's actions are perceived. "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood" was released by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Equality, and it builds on a similar study conducted by professor Phillip Goff in 2014 that found that black boys as early as age 10 are more likely than white boys to be misperceived as older, to be viewed as guilty of suspected crimes and to face police violence if accused of a crime. For a reference point, think of 12-year-old Tamir Rice.

The study found that survey participants believe that black girls need less nurturing, need less protection, need to be supported and comforted less, are more independent, know more about adult topics and know more about sex. These results have far-reaching implications and can be a contributing factor to the disproportionate rates of punitive treatment in the education and juvenile-justice systems for black girls.

In other words, how kids are viewed and treated in the classroom is directly related to what happens when those young people are grown-up - or just perceived as grown-up - on the streets of our American cities, in the corporate world, at the loan officer's desk — everywhere.

Stereotypes - when unchecked - are threats. Implicit bias - left unchallenged - is dangerous.

This is why the NUA works so hard to educate teachers, administrators and any adult who works with children in schools to recognize their biases and make a conscious decision to think differently.

Through culturally responsive pedagogy we help those who lack exposure to kids of color to see the culture that the children bring to the classroom as a strength and not a weakness or something foreign to be feared. We show them how to build relationships with the children and use their "culture," as it were, in the lessons. The teachers become less fearful that their ignorance will cause them to fail a child, and instead they "lean in" to engage.

We take the neuroscience of learning and use it in a way that enables people to change their beliefs. While they're doing that, they're engaging their students; and engaged learning is real learning. So at the end of the day, everyone is in a better place than where they started.

Students learn. Teachers learn, too — to see children as children, full of strengths and potential.

Imagine if the police officer who shot Philando had been exposed to that kind of pedagogy, that way of thinking. Imagine if all police had that as youth and then had it reinforced through sensitivity training before hitting the streets. Imagine if we were all exposed to people not like us and we forced ourselves to intentionally see past what society has told us about them.

You're not able because you're a woman.

You're not smart because you're poor.

You're a threat because you're Black.

Humans though we are, we can see past those things. It takes time and effort. But it is possible. The teachers who have been exposed to NUA training will tell you it's so.

"NUA training helped us center our focus," Roseville Middle School teacher Libby Otto says. "It's been so important for us to have someone to go to and say, 'These are the things that we have been seeing and what's the next strategy?'"

Teachers at the school rehearsed a lesson on police brutality, for instance, in an NUA daylong training session, before introducing it to their classes. And at the end of this school year teachers helped students stage a culminating celebration, highlighting student talents and interests.

The celebration was needed, Otto says, after such a tough year, and it was reinforcing of the truth that these Black and Brown youth *do* have talents, and *are* worthy of our investment.

"Planning the school celebration is just one way to show the things we learned from NUA," Otto says. "Understanding our students; pulling them from the informal knowledge they learn outside of school to further their formal learning in school, and paying attention to talents and gifts. NUA has helped us with all of that and I've definitely seen it help. Definitely."

If the NUA way can do that for teachers, it can do it for police, for judges, for hiring managers - for you.

Diversity, exposure, innovation and intentionality helps us all grow.

We owe it to Philando Castile to want that growth - and to do everything we can do to go after it.