



Discussion Questions for Elementary School Teachers for *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classroom*

- In *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There*, Milner stresses the importance of teacher-student relationship building. He offers ways for teachers to build relationships with students. Identify and discuss some strategies and practices that Mr. Hall, Dr. Johnson, Mr. Jackson, and Ms. Shaw used to build relationships with their students. Which practices do you find to be applicable and relevant to your own work? How have you been able to develop relationships with your students? Did the relationship building make a difference in student engagement and achievement? How do you know?
- At the core, the teachers in *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There* are establishing relationships with students to address the achievement gap and what Milner calls the opportunity gap. How does he define the opportunity gap?
- In chapter 1, Milner outlines five central tenets to assist teachers in closing the opportunity gap regarding diversity, especially for the classroom. These five areas are: (1) rejection of colorblindness, (2) understand and transcend cultural conflicts, (3) recognize the limits of meritocracy, (4) reject deficit mindsets and low expectations, and (5) reject context-neutral mindsets. Define and discuss each tenet. What are or might be some challenges to each of these in practice? What are or might be some benefits of each in practice? How have these five tenets shown up in your own practices as a teacher?
- In chapter 1 on pages 42–44, Milner provides a chart that summarizes the five tenets mentioned above. Consider the instructional consequences that he links to each of the five. Which instructional practices identified have you seen at your school?
- When Mr. Hall (chapter 2) began teaching, he intended to “just teach science” and not acknowledge or worry about the influence of race and diversity of his students.

His mind-set and its accompanying practices frustrated some of his Black students, who urged him to “get to know” them. What does Mr. Hall do to “get to know” the students and how does that inform his practices with them?

- The importance of sharing powerful stories with students is a theme that was consistent throughout the book. Mr. Hall (chapter 2), for instance, shared personal stories with his students that seemed to resonate with them. He shared experiences about his wife and children and even about his past childhood experiences related to having grown up living in poverty. Do you believe sharing personal stories and experiences with students is inappropriate? Why or why not? What personal stories could you share with your students to help them connect with you and see you as a real person?
- Unpack and discuss the difference between equity and equality. Discuss Mr. Hall’s practice of equity on pages 58–62. What are some pros and cons to how he adapts his practices to different students based on their needs? What do you think about his decision to provide “multiple opportunities” for student success?
- Review, reflect, and discuss the questions regarding race in the charts on pages 73 and 74 (chapter 2). What did you consider or think about that you had not in the past? What did you learn from and through the reflection about race?
- What did you learn from Mr. Hall (chapter 2) that you would like to adopt and/or adapt in your (1) classroom and in your (2) school? Be specific.
- In chapter 3, Dr. Johnson discovered that her colleagues, parents, and even many students did not believe issues of race or diversity were important in her mostly White and affluent school. Do you believe that race and diversity are critical aspects to understand in mostly White schools and classrooms? Why or why not?
- Have you or any of your students, colleagues, or parents been confronted with or concerned about any of the bulleted points on page 81 (chapter 3) regarding how issues of diversity emerge in predominantly White schools? If so, what was the concern and how did you or they address or respond to it? If they did not respond to the concern, what could they do to respond or address it?

- Teachers and society in general tend to have a difficult time discussing issues of diversity and especially race. Why? What are some benefits of having open dialogue regarding race (and diversity)? What are some challenges to these discussions? How might these discussions influence, benefit, or hinder student learning opportunities?
- What are some “cultural conflicts” that Dr. Johnson (chapter 3) experiences? How does she work through these conflicts?
- Dr. Johnson (chapter 3) used her identity and experiences to establish connections with her White students. By showing differences and similarities, Dr. Johnson created safe and welcoming spaces where students reflected on social realities regarding opportunities and privilege. What has your experience been creating welcoming spaces to facilitate student reflection? What are some of your strategies?
- On page 95 (chapter 3), read the section “Snapshot of Dr. Johnson’s Teaching of Multiple Texts.” What do you learn about Dr. Johnson’s teaching approach? What are the strengths and weaknesses of her teaching style? What would you adopt and adapt from Dr. Johnson’s practice to your own?
- Readers learn that Dr. Johnson’s (chapter 3) freshmen English classes were “taken” from her when she first began teaching at Stevenson High School because her White students complained to the principal that she was a racist. Do you agree or disagree with the principal’s decision? Why or why not?
- What did you learn from Dr. Johnson (chapter 3) that you would like to adopt and/or adapt in your (1) classroom and in your (2) school? Be specific.
- Mr. Jackson and Ms. Shaw (chapter 4) both recognize assets that their students bring into the classroom. What are some of the assets that they identify and recognize in their students? List some assets that your students bring into the classroom. How do you know that they have these strengths?
- Mr. Jackson (chapter 4) stressed that he had found that race was and was not important in his work with his students. In what ways did he believe race was significant and in what ways did he believe race was insignificant? Why? Do you believe race is significant or insignificant at your school and in your classroom? Why?

- How does Mr. Jackson (chapter 4) describe the power structures among students at his school? Have you found a similar power structure at your school?
- Have you found that some African American students do not achieve because they fear that they might be perceived as “acting White” or that they may be seen as uncool? Provide examples to either support or refute the “acting White” thesis. See pages 114–116.
- Do you believe Mr. Jackson (chapter 4), as an African American male, is at an advantage at Bridge Middle School because the majority of his students are African American? Why or why not?
- Mr. Jackson (chapter 4) incorporated aspects of popular culture into his work as a teacher in order to develop curriculum, teach, and build relationships with students. On page 125, Milner outlines six aspects of popular culture that students may have interest in. Which, if any, of these do you also have interest in? How might these be used to either (1) develop the curriculum, (2) teach, and/or (3) build relationships with students?
- How does Mr. Jackson (chapter 4) learn about student interests in popular culture? How would/have you learn(ed) about student interests in popular culture?
- What did you learn from Mr. Jackson (chapter 4) that you would like to adopt and/or adapt in your (1) classroom and in your (2) school? Be specific.
- Although Mr. Jackson and Ms. Shaw (chapter 4) are both African American teachers and taught at Bridge Middle School, they had very different perspectives about the role and influence of pop culture. Ms. Shaw for instance, rejected the role and relevance of it. Still, both teachers are successful. How would you compare and contrast the mindsets and practices of Mr. Jackson and Ms. Shaw? From your perspective, which educator seems to connect with students more? Be specific.
- Ms. Shaw (chapter 4) has a “motherly” way about her and some of the students saw her as an ‘other-mother.’ She had been teaching for several decades in the same school and even attended Bridge Middle School herself. In what ways does she demonstrate this parental role?

- Unpack the interaction that Ms. Shaw (chapter 4) has with Christine on pages 133–134. How is Ms. Shaw able to calm the student down before she goes to In-school Suspension? How would you have handled a similar situation with a student?
- Christine (chapter 4) makes it clear that she does not “like” the teacher who has sent her to the office, see pages 133–134. Are you concerned that some of your students do not participate in learning because they do not “like” the teacher or even the school? How can teachers help students move beyond likeability in order for them to be successful in the classroom?
- Review and discuss the summary chart on pages 145–146. How relevant and applicable are these strategies, tips, and mindsets to your own classroom and school? Be specific.
- What did you learn from Ms. Shaw (chapter 4) that you would like to adopt and/or adapt in your (1) classroom and in your (2) school? Be specific.
- In chapter 5, many of the six White teachers showcased have good intentions. What are some of their challenges and what are some of their strengths and successes?
- In chapter 5, one White teacher voiced her concern about the low number of African American role models available to the African American students in her school. She worried that her African American students would not be able to relate and connect with African American teachers in the same way that White teachers had connected with her. At your school, how many racially diverse teachers are there? How many diverse students are there? What about in your district? Do you feel this is the right balance?
- Milner supports Beverly Tatum’s belief that a “positive sense of ethnic identity not based on assumed superiority or inferiority is an important task for *both* White people and people of color.” In what ways can White and nonwhite teachers benefit each other in terms of more deeply understanding the teaching and learning exchange?
- In chapter 5, one teacher with a majority of African American students in her class commented: “A couple of times I gave them a choice of assessments, written or

verbal, and they almost always chose to tell me verbally.” What are some problems with allowing the African American students to do the alternative assessment? How might the verbal assessment hinder the students’ progress given broader structural expectations for assessment? In short, what are some pros and cons to the assessment?

- What did you learn from the six teachers (chapter 5) that you would like to adopt and/or adapt in your (1) classroom and in your (2) school? Be specific.
- What do you think can be done to better prepare teachers to teach all students well in schools across the U.S.?
- On pages 184–192, Milner outlines several interrelated practices and suggestions to increase, build, recognize, and sustain relationships. Identify the classroom level suggestions on pages 185–188. Which of those strategies have you already used in your efforts to build relationships? Which might you adopt and adapt? What classroom level activities and strategies not mentioned have you employed to build relationships?
- On pages 188–192, identify the school level recommendations that resonate with you. Which of these would you like to see adopted and adapted? Why? What would be required to implement the recommendation for the entire school?
- Overall, what are the major implications of the book? What are some implicit and explicit lessons that you find transferrable to your classroom and school?