

**Discussion Questions for**  
***Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Racism, Revised Edition***  
**(Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2020)**

Welcome to a guide of questions to support you as you read *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism, Revised Edition*. We're delighted you've chosen to read this book and encourage you to read with curiosity about both what you're reading and how you're responding to it.

We also suggest reading the book with at least one other person so that you can discuss what you're learning and hold each other accountable for taking action.

The first part of the book defines unconscious racial bias and then describes the conditions needed to be able to investigate and address it. The second part of the book provides examples of places to investigate for racial bias. Below we've included a sampling of questions and suggested action steps for each chapter.

## **INTRODUCTION**

- What do you expect this book to be about?
- What feelings come up for you when you think about reading this book?
- What outcomes do you hope to achieve from reading this book?

Action steps:

Start a journal where you track your reactions to the book and key actions you will take as a result of reading the book. Suggestions for what to notice and reflect upon:

- What examples/stories resonate with you? What examples/stories are unfamiliar to you? How does your racial identity influence your responses?
- What are you learning? What do you need to learn next? How will you continue this learning?
- What action steps will you take? (...to have an impact on yourself? ...to reduce the impact of racism on all of your school community, and in particular on your Black and Brown students, families, and colleagues?)

## **CHAPTER ONE: Do We Have A Bias Problem?**

- What do you know about the history of racism in this country? What are the sources of your knowledge? What are the sources of your lack of knowledge about racism in this country? What more do you need to learn? What sources of knowledge will you turn to?
- As you read about the various sources of unconscious racial bias (pp. 18–24), consider how they play out in your own lived experience. Identify at least three specific factors that have likely shaped your own unconscious biases.
- Consider the sampling of research about unconscious bias across different sectors. What examples of racial bias did you know about before reading this chapter? What examples were new to you? How has unconscious racial bias (your own and/or that of others) played a role in your own life experience? How does this influence your work in education?

#### Action steps:

- Set a learning goal for yourself about the history of racism in this country. Pick something from the Chapter One “Suggested Resources” section (pp. 177–178) to read or watch.
- Do some internet research to learn about the history of redlining in your community. (Do an image search, for example, of redlining + the name of a nearby city.)
- Read one of the studies referenced in this chapter; pay particular attention to the discussion and implications sections.
- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn’t been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*

## CHAPTER TWO: Start With Ourselves

- Consider the story of Tracey and Sarah’s interactions described in this chapter. What resonated with you from either (or both) stories? (You might review the subheadings on pages 36–46 to remind you of different reactions within the story.)
- Reflect on ways you have learned and internalized the (false) concept that people can be sorted into two mutually exclusive categories: good non-racist or bad racist. In what ways does this binary mindset show up in your own thinking and actions? ...in discussions in your school, district, or organization?
- Tell a specific story of a time you engaged in an activity, conversation, or reflection process from the perspective of this binary mindset (use the examples in Chapter Two as a model). In what ways did your conscious or—more likely—unconscious belief of this mindset impact you and your behaviors? In what ways did your belief in this mindset impact others?

Action steps:

- Notice when you see this bad racist/good anti-racist binary mindset in the news, social interactions, or in your own reflection. (This often shows up as a conflation of racism with character. For example: “I don’t have a racist bone in my body.” “He is not racist; he is a good man.”)
- Set an improvement goal for yourself (pp. 48–50). Identify the competing commitments that may interfere with your work towards this goal. If possible, identify a partner to support you in regular check-ins about your progress towards meeting your goal. What will you try?
- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn’t been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*

### CHAPTER THREE: Normalize Talking About Race and Racism

- To what extent is talking about race and racism at your school/organization a normal/everyday occurrence? Reminder: talking about “equity” or “diversity” is not the same as naming race and racism directly. (Rate on a scale of 1-5, where 1 means we never talk about race or racism and 5 means we talk about it regularly throughout the day in different contexts.)
- If it is not a normal part of your collective practice, what do you think are the reasons for that? When you reflect on this silence, how much of it do you attribute to a lack of **will**? ...how much do you attribute to a lack of **skill**?
- On page 55, Tracey and Sarah refer to the need to deliberately build skills to engage in conversations about race and racism. As yourself: what **skills** do I need to develop and what skills does my community need to develop to normalize talking about race and racism in our school and throughout our practice? What would this look like, sound like, feel like? What can I do to make that happen? Who else in my sphere of influence can I enlist to make that happen?
- How do we assess the level of will to talk about race and racism in our school? To what extent is this assessment centering the perspective of white educators? What do we need to do to increase the **will** to talk about race and racism in our school? What would this look like, sound like, feel like? What can I do to make that happen? Who is in my sphere of influence to make that happen?

Action steps:

- Rate on a scale of 1–5 the extent to which talking about race and racism at your school/organization is a normal/everyday occurrence. 1 = we never talk about race or racism; 5 = we talk about it regularly throughout the day in different contexts. Do you think colleagues whose racial identity is different from yours would give the same rating? Invite other colleagues to share their rating. What do you notice?
- Commit to increasing the amount your school community talks about race and racism in the next month (this could be in mixed-race groups or in racial affinity groups). How will you do this? What support do you need? How will you practice this skill? If you do not have experience with this and this is not currently happening at your school, what opportunities can you find to practice?
- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn't been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: Cultivate a Culture of Bravery**

- On page 78, we use the metaphor of a trust fall to describe the need for building trust in order to cultivate cultures of bravery. What metaphor do you use to describe the trust that you need to have with colleagues in order to engage in mixed-race conversations about race and racism? How does this metaphor help you understand both your role and your needs in building trust with colleagues to discuss and address racial bias?
- What is your experience with these conversations in the past? In what ways has the binary mindset (i.e. prioritizing intention over impact) been present in your past experiences with these conversations?
- How have you typically engaged in these conversations in the past? How has your racial identity and the racial identity of other participants informed how you have engaged? (If you haven't thought about your racial identity in these conversations, why is that?) What has been the impact of your style of engagement? On yourself? On others? What has been the outcome of these conversations? What do you want to be different in conversations going forward? What do you want to be the outcome of these conversations going forward? How will that impact the experiences of all students and in particular Black and Brown students? How will you know whether your community is achieving that outcome?

#### Action steps:

- Try using a protocol with an existing activity you engage in with colleagues. For example, when analyzing data, try using the [Data for Equity protocol](#). When engaging with

colleagues about a chapter of this book, try the [Save the Last Word protocol](#). Reflect on the ways (if any) in which the structured conversation protocol contributed to building trust. What would help you and your colleagues continue building trust to talk about race and combat racism?

- Consider the story of Ms. Wilson and her colleagues Mrs. Richards. Consider the “forty-eight hour rule” described in this chapter. In a culture of bravery, colleagues talk directly to each other about racial bias and how it may be showing up in student outcomes and adult interactions. To what degree does your school have a culture of bravery around talking about race and racism? What conditions would need to be in place in your school community for you and colleagues to practice a culture of bravery? What steps can you commit to take to cultivate this culture among faculty and staff? What steps can you commit to take to increase your own individual engagement in a culture of bravery?
- If you do not currently use norms with colleagues, commit to developing and using a set of norms to help build a culture of bravery.
- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn’t been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Whose Comfort Are We Prioritizing?**

- Consider your school, district, or organization’s current approach to exploring and addressing race and racism.
  - In what ways is your school, district, or organization silent? What are the benefits? To whom? What are the costs? To whom? In what ways is your school, district, or organization taking action? What are the benefits? To whom? What are the costs of this approach? To whom?
- For readers of color: On page 94, we reference the “racial battle fatigue” that Tracey experiences when engaging in conversations that deny his lived experience or question his full humanity. How do you decide whether and how to engage in conversations about race and racism in your school, district, or organization? What do you need to engage in ways that support your wholeness and your growth as an anti-racist educator?
- For white readers: In this chapter (p. 92), Sarah shares an insight that helps her want to build her stamina for staying in a conversation that makes her uncomfortable (usually because it involves facing the possibility that she is causing harm). What helps you stay in discomfort longer than you previously have so you can build your skills as an anti-racist educator? (Also, how did you respond when you saw the above step for readers of color? What feelings came up for you? How do you respond to being addressed as “white readers”? What do you learn from this response?)

Action steps:

- What is one step you can take to build your capacity to engage in exploration of race and racism and follow-up investigation and action?
  - Select one policy or practice, a recent communication, or a professional learning initiative about race and racism. Analyze whose stories are centered, whose comfort is prioritized, and what action came about as a result. What do you learn? How can you revise and improve the next iteration of whatever you examined?
  - *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn't been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*
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Chapters Six through Eight provide examples of places to investigate for racial bias. Below we share questions to consider for each of chapters six through eight individually and suggested action steps for the chapters collectively.

#### **CHAPTER SIX: Investigating the Racial Climate in Our Schools**

- What information do we have about how students of different racial identities experience the racial climate in our school, district, or organization? In other words, how do we know we are equally effective at establishing a safe and supportive environment with students of all racial identities? (For example, do students of all racial identities feel cared for and respected? Is our staff equally effective at creating meaningful relationships with students of all different races? Do students of all racial identities feel they are treated fairly?)
- If we don't have this information, why do we think that is? What will it take to prioritize collecting that information in order to act on it? How do we continually monitor feedback about students' experience in our school, district, or organization?

#### **CHAPTER SEVEN: Examining Instruction and Classroom Climate**

- What information do teachers collect about their effectiveness with students of different races? How can we normalize and support classroom-based curiosity and investigation into questions such as the following:
  - Which students tend to seek help from me? Are there any racial differences between students who do and do not seek help from me? How are my relationships with the students who struggle, but consistently do not seek help

from me? When a student who rarely comes to me for help finally does, do I try to empathize with them and build a relationship or do I jump right into problem-solving? For the students who do come to me for help frequently, are my interactions different with them than with other students who come to me for help less frequently?

- Which students feel empowered to fully participate in my class? Am I calling on some students more often than others? Do I have a system for calling on students/selecting classroom helpers/other classroom routines that ensures everyone has an equal chance of being selected?

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: Addressing Unconscious Bias in Academics**

- Are expectations for quality work the same for all students? How do we ensure fairness in assessment of and support for quality student work? Do all students receive “warm demander” feedback on their work that helps them achieve or exceed standards?
- Does academic content take into account the experiences of people of all races or does it center the experiences of white people as normal and the experiences of people of color as “other”? Does academic content (in books, activities, on the walls, etc.) provide “windows and mirrors” for all students?
- How do we ensure teacher assignments are not privileging the needs of some students over others? How do we ensure teacher assignments are not privileging the needs of white students and families over the needs of Black and Brown students?
- How do we ensure our selection processes (for advanced classes, for awards, for leadership opportunities, etc.) provide equal opportunity for all students?

Action steps for chapters 6–8:

### **Investigate the Impact of Racial Bias and Act to Reduce It**

- What area of school experience will you begin to investigate? Why?
- What data will you collect about impact? Why that data? How will you disaggregate the data so you can investigate the potential impact of racial bias?
- How will you seek to fully understand whatever problem you’re investigating? How will you check your assumptions?
- Who will be involved? Why? What perspectives tend to be missing in your context and what can you do to ensure these perspectives are heard and valued?
- What will you change and how will you know whether your change is an improvement?

- What skills do people need to build in order to be able to make the change? How will you support educators to build those skills? What resources or people can you seek out for support and feedback?
- How might resistance to change show up? How can you prepare yourself and the community for this pushback? What skills and mindsets will you and others need to develop and sustain?

### **Work to Ensure That Investigations Such as the Above Become a Normal Part of the Routine of Improvement**

- What systems and structures will you establish to embed this focused inquiry work in the ongoing work of the school/district/organization?
- How are problems currently framed? Are they framed using the language of responsibility or blame? Commitment or complaint? How will you reframe the problem to presume students' capacity and brilliance and to increase educator agency?
- What steps will you take to ensure that you and your colleagues continue investigating the impact of racial bias on students and families over the long-term? How will you ensure impact is prioritized over intentions in school planning?
- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn't been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*

### **CHAPTER NINE: Reframing the Problem**

- Consider a problem that you and/or colleagues discuss. Now consider the problem from multiple perspectives. How might Black or Brown students in your class frame this problem? How might a family of color frame the problem?
- Deliberately write the problem from a strongly deficit-based approach? Now deliberately write the problem from a strongly asset-based approach. Read the different statements of the problem. How does reading those two different framings give you insight into the way you're currently framing the problem?
- How might you frame the problem from a responsibility orientation vs. a blame orientation? (See page 160)

Action steps:



- Write down why you think the problem you identified above persists. Do a formal root cause analysis of the problem. Collect data that you can disaggregate by race to illuminate the problem. Conduct empathy interviews with focus groups or individuals from a variety of races to learn more about their experience of the problem. Compare your findings to your original assumption. What is the same, what is different? What did you learn from digging into the root cause of the problem?
- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn't been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*

## **CHAPTER TEN: Go Slow to Go Far**

- How do you assess the developmental needs of your school, district, or organization related to exploring race and racism and examining the impact of unconscious racial bias on students? What do different members of your school community know and what are they able to do? Who is doing the heavy lifting related to building this capacity? How can you ensure that educators of color are not burdened with more than their share of the responsibility?
- Consider your own developmental journey of exploring your racial identity and the impact of racism on your life and work. What has helped and is helping you to develop and grow as an anti-racist educator? What were the barriers?
- How do you cultivate a growth mindset related to your racial identity development and your exploration of the impact of racism in your school? Reflect on a learning experience—a moment that may have felt like failure in the moment but led to learning. How do you translate that learning into action today?

### Action steps:

- What agency do you have to support your school's exploration of race and investigation into the impact of racism on student learning? List the different ways that you have agency to take action. Some readers have agency to make changes on a department or school level; others exercise agency with a small circle of people or within a single classroom. Write a list of next steps to take to build your own capacity and the capacity of others to reduce the impact of racial bias on students. Include steps to engage others in leadership with you.
- Reflect on your reflections and action steps from earlier chapters in the book. What has changed in your practice as a result of reading the book? What has changed in the experiences of students of color in your care? What hasn't changed and needs to? What will you do to make this change?

- *Check in with yourself in a month to see if you have followed through with any of the above action steps. If not, ask yourself why this hasn't been a priority for you. What is the impact of prioritizing this learning? What is the impact of not prioritizing this learning?*