

Introduction

Early in our collaboration, when we were working with aspiring principals, Tracey sent Sarah an email that made her sit up and take notice. We were both members of the teaching team in the School Leadership Program at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Tracey was a doctoral student seeking to work with school leaders, and Sarah was a new lecturer in the program. In the two months we had been working together, this was the first time we had had an exchange like the one in that email.

We were reflecting with our teaching colleagues on an intense, all-day workshop that our students had co-led and co-facilitated. During the workshop, students had broken into racial affinity groups and then reported back to the whole group on their discussions, which included feelings of frustration, anger, defensiveness, shame, fear, resignation, and pride. As a teaching team, we were considering the question of whether we should plan a structured debriefing of the experience. Tracey felt that it would send the wrong message to students. He felt that we needed to demonstrate to students that conversations about race are a normal part of our work as educators. For this reason, we shouldn't treat these conversations differently than we would treat any other conversation. Rather than stopping to debrief each time, we should just keep having them. When Sarah disagreed with this approach, Tracey's email reply pointed out that in a discussion about how to process a workshop about race, shouldn't a white woman seek to understand a black man's dissent first before disagreeing with it?

The directness of the email brought Sarah up short. She immediately realized that (a) Tracey was right, and (b) this was not a conversation for email. In her reply, Sarah agreed and asked if they could meet. Thus, on a gray Sunday afternoon, the two of us met on a mostly empty campus for a conversation

that made both of us anxious. Tracey remembers assuming that he would likely be kicked off the teaching team. He knew the email would generate a response, and he had thought long and hard before pressing “send.” He finally told himself he was tired of choosing the safe action, the action that wouldn’t rock the boat. Continually muffling his real thoughts in order to preserve harmony was exhausting. He wanted to be able to express how he felt without self-censoring.

In her work as a teacher and principal, Sarah was used to black families and colleagues seeing her as an ally. She’d taken the job at Harvard on the condition that she could infuse discussions of race and racism into all coursework, from budgets to supervision. In weekly planning meetings for class, Tracey had been a valuable collaborator. He regularly suggested lesson plan ideas that led to probing, meaningful reflection in class. While Tracey’s email was hard to read, she knew there was a great deal to learn from his feedback.

On that October afternoon at the school library, we formed a partnership. Tracey took time to meet with Sarah during a week when by all accounts he had no time to spare. Sitting across a table with a tall cup of coffee in front of him, he placed his laptop and books aside and answered Sarah’s questions with patience and in detail. He asked repeatedly, “Is there anything else you want to ask about?” Despite the pull of schoolwork that needed to be completed, he remained until she’d asked her last question. After the meeting, Sarah thanked Tracey and then went home and did something Tracey had never experienced from a white person before. She wrote up what she’d heard and the insights she’d gained from listening to Tracey and emailed him to let him know what he had taught her and to ensure she hadn’t misheard him.

Over the course of the year, we (Tracey and Sarah) formed a friendship. We were both former principals who missed teaching. In between grading papers and planning for our class, we reminisced together about the challenges of supervision, discovered we had both felt like horrified grandparents when chaperoning the school dance, and compared war stories about that single teacher who had resisted change the most. Few people understand the experience of being a principal, and it was reassuring to hear that we’d faced so many similar challenges.

We also formed a connection over our common concern that the US school system does not serve all students equally well. Too many black and brown students in this country are deprived of a quality education. This injustice is

what drew each of us to education and eventually into school leadership. We wanted to lead schools that would break the pattern, provide excellent teaching, and produce equally high levels of performance for students of all racial backgrounds. Even though our schools had been very different—one a more traditional high school, the other a progressive elementary school—our goals were the same. As school leaders, we saw ourselves as foot soldiers in the ongoing civil rights movement.

Looking back on our time as principals, we feel proud of the work we did at our respective schools, indebted to inspired teacher leaders who championed this work with us, and humbled by the complexity of the work. While we each saw growth that made students, teachers, and parents proud, we both also recognized that we didn't have all the answers. In particular, we didn't have all the answers for how to help our schools directly address racism and its impact on our students and ourselves. We wished that instead of learning through trial and error, we'd been given some guidance on this subject or, frankly, even just one example to follow.

Looking back, we can see that the key lesson we needed to understand—and that we've been trying to convey to principals since then—is that reducing the effects of racism on students requires deep change in how educators view themselves and their work. In the language of change management, this is an adaptive rather than a technical challenge.¹ Adaptive challenges require changing mindsets rather than simply skill sets. Rather than define our schools as bias free, we need to start from the opposite assumption. Despite our very best intentions, racial bias is alive and well in schools. If we as educators are not addressing this bias, it will undermine the progress educators are trying to make. To reduce the effects of racism on students, we all need to create an environment where teachers and administrators can talk openly and courageously about race, identify where racial bias interferes with school goals, and take decisive actions to uncover, address, and eliminate the impact of racial bias from school systems, policies, and practices.

This is the guidance we wanted to provide as we entered our roles as instructors in a school leadership program. We wanted to help our students—aspiring principals—learn from our strengths as leaders for increasing racially equitable outcomes, but we also wanted our students to learn from what we wished we'd done better—opportunities missed and hard lessons learned. With our teaching colleagues, we planned lessons on the history of explicit

racist policies that have created racially segregated schools, how to work on our own personal racial identity development, how to have courageous conversations about race with colleagues, and how to conduct root cause analyses of racially disparate learning outcomes.

As graduation approached and our students accepted school leader positions around the United States, we reflected on the year, together with our teaching team. In particular, we considered whether our students were prepared to combat racism at their future schools. We concluded that we couldn't be sure. We didn't have clear evidence of skill development across the cohort. We should have required more concrete application of the skills we discussed, more practice. We also grappled with the question of whether we were reaching everyone, especially the students in our class who were silent during discussions about race. Even with those who were most engaged, we weren't confident that we'd given them the tools they needed to help their faculties deeply examine, understand, and address the racial inequities at their schools. This recognition ultimately led to us collaborating on a book to fill this void in the field.

Shortly after our students graduated, Tracey proposed that we continue to have regular conversations about how to help school leaders address racism in their schools. Tracey was moving to serve alongside principal supervisors in the Houston Independent School District, while Sarah continued teaching aspiring principals at Harvard. Our pattern was to talk on the phone while Tracey was driving home in traffic and Sarah walked laps around a local track.

In one early conversation, as Sarah was stumbling over her words, Tracey said, "Sarah, there's this thing that white people do—this dance—when they are worried they're going to say something racist. You're doing that now. Don't worry. I already know you're racist. And I think the world of you. So just say it." Sarah understood she had internalized racism—that she couldn't escape it in the deeply racist society we live in—but it was still startling to hear this so directly from Tracey.

It was this frankness that helped us—and continues to help us—learn from each other. Sarah shares her raw thoughts openly with Tracey and listens closely as he describes his experiences. As a black man with experience teaching white people about racism, Tracey understands race, racism, and whiteness. His questions and patience help Sarah notice the ways her perspective has been shaped by a lifetime of societal messages that establish whiteness as the norm and everything else as less than or other. He doesn't hesitate to

point out her internalized racism and to tell her how difficult their conversations can be for him as well.

Tracey values Sarah's perspective because, in his experience, he does not often get the opportunity to hear the unfiltered, inner thoughts of white people on topics of race and racism. He used to think that white people were intentionally holding back in conversations about race, but through many unfiltered conversations about race with Sarah, he's come to understand that many white people truly don't believe they have something to contribute to conversations about race. They're not putting up a front. They honestly don't see themselves as having a racial identity. He has also come to realize through these conversations that white people can find dialogues about race and racism very intimidating and anxiety producing, especially when they are in racially heterogeneous settings, out of intense fear of saying the wrong thing, looking ignorant or, even worse, being seen as racist.

Over the years, our conversations haven't exclusively focused on race. We've heard about each other's families and college exploits. We've also learned about each other's quirks and habits. After hearing about Sarah's irregular vacuuming and dusting schedule, Tracey confessed to being a neat freak and warned he would have to don a space suit before coming over for brunch. At the same time, he also confessed to enjoying the local Zombie 5K race where he and other runners got splattered with mud and fake blood. Looking over Tracey's shoulder as he perused his Facebook page, Sarah gasped when she saw a picture that included a former boyfriend . . . getting married. After Tracey's wife put him on a vegan diet, Tracey and Sarah bonded over tempeh and buffalo cauliflower. Sarah learned that Tracey and his wife have an unusual number of shoes, when she helped them with last-minute packing on their way to spend the summer abroad. Tracey responded to Sarah's last-minute plea for editing help from a café in New York City during a family vacation.

As we've worked together, we've noticed some common patterns we hear when talking to school leaders about racism. White leaders fear being seen as racist. Leaders of color fear the backlash from defensive white people. People of color like Tracey usually have their guard up from too many conversations that go poorly and end up with everyone tending to a distraught white person, while the ongoing, daily struggles of the people of color go unnoticed. White people like Sarah typically enter these conversations on the defensive.

As Sarah can attest, she's often spent whole meetings trying to prove she's not racist while on tenterhooks the entire time for fear she'll say something that indicates she is. With everyone's defenses up, it's no wonder that most educators enter these conversations with nervousness and sometimes dread.

A HELPFUL APPROACH

Over the years, we have discovered a concept that can shift these dynamics: unconscious racial bias. This is the concept that, throughout our daily lives, we all absorb and internalize prejudices that influence our automatic actions and beliefs. The absorption of these biases is not a conscious process and in fact, can run counter to what we think we believe. Framing our work with the concept of unconscious racial bias allows us to decouple intention from racism. It allows us to focus on what's most important: the impact on students. An understanding of this concept provides an opening where we've previously seen only closed doors. The two of us have found that when we teach about unconscious racial bias, many white people are more willing to engage, stay in the conversation, and consider the possibility that their behaviors might unintentionally cause harm to students. In this context, white people we've worked with seem able to move past guilt and shame to a more productive perspective. People of color benefit from a deeper understanding of unconscious racial bias because, as with white colleagues, people of color have also absorbed the same negative images and social cues that produce a preference for the "socially valued group."

We believe that unconscious racial bias *is* unconscious racism. However, we also recognize that "racism" is such a loaded term that it is not a helpful starting place for conversation. Putting educators on the defensive isn't a winning strategy for helping people learn. While we believe white people need to be able to talk about racism and the ways they directly benefit within a racist society, we also believe this is a developmental process. Language can be a barrier. If the phrase "unconscious bias" allows more people to enter the conversation, we're going to use it.

Are there downsides to using the phrase "unconscious bias" instead of "racism"? There are. Naming this as an "unconscious" process may allow white people to feel they can absolve themselves of responsibility and urgency to engage in anti-bias work: "I can't help it. These biases are in my unconscious."

We all risk falling into the trap of what researcher Bonilla-Silva calls “racism without racists.”² In addition, framing the concept of bias as implicating everyone *equally* erases the differential ways that racism affects white people and people of color. White people can choose to walk away from the topic and remain personally unscathed. People of color, on the other hand, do not have such a luxury; they will be directly disadvantaged by bias in their daily lives. So, while we’ve all internalized racial bias, the outcomes of this bias affect us in very different ways.

At the end of the day, as two people responsible for teaching school leaders, we’re pragmatists. We have one clear goal: to eliminate the negative impacts of racial bias on all students. Black and brown students feel the impact directly. White students absorb the unconscious bias as bystanders from adults they’ve come to trust. Like many principals, we are concerned for students and urgently seek a solution.

Most teachers in the United States are white. Many white people shut down when discussing racism. We’re looking for a strategy that works, not an opportunity to make a statement. Teaching about the unconscious nature of racial bias provides a valuable entry point into a conversation that most schools simply do not have. We’ve seen this approach unlock doors that have been slammed shut, and we want to share this key that we found to be helpful.

As we’ve moved into new professional roles, we continue to pursue this work—Tracey as a professor of educational leadership, and Sarah in developing and supporting school principals around the country. We’ve led workshops on addressing unconscious racial bias based on the ideas in this book. At one point, when we co-presented about this topic at a workshop for administrators and their higher-education professors, participants kept jumping up to take pictures of our PowerPoint slides. We were a little taken aback (our graphics weren’t *that* good) and marveled at it later. However, it confirmed what we had been experiencing in other settings. School leaders want to address racial inequities in schools and don’t know how. They’re looking for guidance. The concept of unconscious bias can serve as a valuable tool.

We wrote this book to support the leaders we continue to meet who seek to interrupt the patterns of racial inequity at their schools and who feel isolated in that endeavor. We want to share the lessons we’ve learned that we wish someone had shared with us when we were entering the principalship. We don’t have all the answers. We still regularly engage in very uncomfortable

and courageous conversations with each other to deepen our racial understandings. It's hard work. We're glad to be in it together and invite our readers to join us in this community.

WHAT'S IN OUR BOOK

We did not write a how-to book. We do not prescribe a specific set of directions. The following chapters do, however, provide an order of operations. To determine that order, we worked backward. To reduce the impact of racism in our schools, school leaders need to create the conditions for faculty to talk about race and their own unconscious racial biases. This requires that school communities name and discuss race with the explicit intent of learning together rather than judging each other. Chapters 1 through 5 describe the conditions and skill building necessary for teachers to productively examine data to identify where racial bias is impacting student learning. In chapters 6 through 8, we describe ways to examine school climate and academics for signs of bias. The goal of these chapters is to help readers develop a mindset of inquiry into racial bias in the same way that effective teachers continually examine their reading or math practice for ways to get better. Thus, we recommend processes for ongoing inquiry rather than specific solutions to implement. In chapter 9, we discuss some of the common hurdles and pitfalls of examining data and the ways biases show up in this seemingly objective endeavor. We round out the book with a discussion about how to sustain the work in the long term, which includes addressing resistance, maintaining a growth mindset, and practicing self-care.

A Detailed Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 provides an overview of unconscious racial bias and its impact on multiple sectors of our society. School leaders are better equipped to address current racial inequalities when they understand their history and how racial bias continues to influence student outcomes. Research shows that people of color continue to be systematically deprived of equal opportunity to acquire and/or accumulate wealth, health, safety, and education. While some of this is due to conscious racism, increasingly researchers document the ways in which people discriminate based on race without consciously seeking to do

so. Chapter 1 includes examples of unconscious racial bias across our society, including in education. It's undeniable; unconscious bias negatively impacts students.

How do leaders help their schools reduce the effects of unconscious racial bias? We recommend leaders first examine their own mindset. Without this step, leaders might leap into action, committed to tackling racial inequalities in their schools only to be jolted backward or off course when first attempts don't go well. In order to gain the persistence and mindset necessary to do this work, we all need to engage in the deeply introspective and at times unsettling work of examining how we view ourselves and the educators we work with. Most of us have internalized the idea that people fall into two categories: racists with malicious intentions or nonracists who are the rest of us. We refer to this as the racist/nonracist binary. Confronting this binary in ourselves helps us free others from this mindset.

In chapter 2, we describe this racist/nonracist binary and how this duality plays out in our work as leaders. We use ourselves as exhibit A. We describe how this binary mindset shows up in a conversation about students and threatens to disrupt progress and collaboration. Before leaders can help others, they first need to tackle this deep-rooted binary mindset in themselves. In this way, they learn to see themselves and colleagues as learners on a continuum of growth instead of as either racists or nonracists.

Once leaders understand the ways their own mindsets influence their leadership in addressing racism, they can turn to the work of supporting their staff in this work. One question a leader can begin with is, "What is my school's capacity to talk about race?" For most white teachers around the country, race is a taboo subject. Talking about race in mixed-race settings simply isn't common for people of any racial background, so leaders need to start by building these skills. Chapter 3 describes the ways most educators typically avoid talking about race in schools and the importance of making it a normal, everyday practice. A central practice in this effort is working on racial identity development. Exploring our varied racial identities is a critical antidote to the false concept of colorblindness.

As with any significant school improvement effort and especially for efforts pertaining to race, success hinges on the culture leaders establish at their school. Strong leaders create cultures where people speak their truths, face

their flaws, and count on their colleagues to do the same. In chapter 4, we describe what is involved in cultivating a “culture of bravery” so educators can face and address racial bias together.

Regardless of racial background, few of us have experience giving and getting feedback about unconscious racial bias, and even fewer have experience that is positive. This poses a considerable challenge for a leader. When a leader can’t describe or picture what success looks like, knowing what moves will get there is challenging. In chapter 4, we share a vision of what it looks like when community members are able to talk directly to each other about their biases. It’s inspiring to witness. We also examine a few common pitfalls that these school communities and their leaders will likely face.

Chapter 5 describes one of the most common forms of resistance in this work: the need to keep white people comfortable. Principals and others leading this work need to be particularly aware of the ways that they may be pulled into centering white people’s comfort and, in so doing, avoid some of the hard conversations that need to happen. Centering white comfort manifests in a variety of ways. People in positions of power may simply never get around to scheduling the work or may never empower others to lead it. Some white people may avoid facing their racial biases by shutting down in conversations, or by maintaining the conversation at a superficial level. Leaders need courage to recognize and face resistance firmly and clearly. They also need to be alert to the fact that the resistance may not just come from their staff; it may also come from within themselves.

In chapters 6 through 8, we describe a variety of places to look for the impact of racial bias. Some readers may balk at this approach. Why would you fish around for bad news? However, we already know there’s bad news. Everyone in school buildings has breathed in the smog of unconscious racial bias. We start with the assumption that while it may be unwanted, it is alive and well in all schools. The goal for educators is find out where and how it may be influencing their work. To do this, we examine data about students’ experiences and learning in school. Chapters 6 through 8 provide examples of the types of data educators might collect regarding school climate, classroom climate and instruction, and overall academic program.

Educators need data for two reasons: to help us see the biases we don’t realize we have and can’t see on our own and to help us monitor whether the changes made in practice actually lead to improved outcomes for students. While

awareness stimulates motivation to make changes, data measure whether in fact those changes are making a difference. What ultimately matters is not how enlightened we are as educators but rather the impact our actions have on the students we serve.

Throughout the process of examining data, educators need to be alert to the ways biases can influence interpretations of the findings. Chapter 9 describes the difference framing can make. Too often, we all let ourselves off the hook. We have a choice. We can see student achievement data as a reflection of innate student capacity or as a sign that something in teacher practice isn't hitting the mark. This chapter addresses the tendency to distance ourselves from the problem and instead place blame on students. As with other improvement efforts, addressing unconscious racial bias requires that educators cultivate a collective sense of ownership and develop the capacity to take personal responsibility for their impact. The way leaders frame the problem matters.

Finally, this work is challenging and ongoing. We need a plan for the long game. The final chapter includes strategies for maintaining momentum over time. In the face of resistance, it can be tempting to doubt our skills and direction. It is helpful to remember that this work is a developmental process and we're going to need to crawl before we walk. One strategy that leaders can't forget is the need for self-care. We each need to find a trusted colleague who can listen, help us problem solve, and most of all, sustain us.

Throughout the book, we reference articles and authors whose work we've used in workshops and classes. We include many of these in a list of suggested resources at the end of the book. We hope the list provides some initial ideas for readers who want to explore this work more deeply, as well as some useful texts or videos appropriate for use in meetings at school with staff. It is by no means comprehensive but rather serves as a jumping-off point for discovering the right resources for your own learning and that of your staff.

A SPOTLIGHT ON RACIAL BIAS

While biases exist about many different aspects of identity, this book focuses exclusively on racial bias. This is not because we think other forms of bias are less important. We know that no single aspect of identity can ever be completely separated from other aspects. There's merit in understanding the range of biases and the ways they intersect—black girls experience bias in a different way from

black boys, gay Latino boys experience biases that straight Latino boys do not, and so on. Intersectionality is a critically important concept worthy of investigation and reflection.

However, what we've noticed is that when people consider race within the context of multiple identities, they often avoid it or give it a very light touch at best. Most educators—most Americans—do not have experience talking about race and particularly the impacts of racism within mixed-race, professional settings. This lack of experience, combined with what many feel is a loaded topic, may explain why people so often avoid discussing this aspect of intersectional identities. Over and over, we've seen groups avoid talking about race when given the option to examine other aspects of their identity. This dance of avoidance would be humorous to watch if it weren't so damaging.

This avoidance has consequences. *Achievement and opportunity gaps disproportionately affect students of color*. For this reason, we've chosen to focus this book exclusively on racial bias. However, the methods of exploring and addressing bias that we describe in this book are applicable to a range of biases. We expect that deepening expertise about unconscious racial bias will help educators see the importance of examining a full range of biases.

The examples in this book come from a range of schools. Many are from the different schools where we each served as principal. When we draw from our past experiences as leaders—each at more than one school—we have tried to ensure that the people we mention individually are not recognizable, even to themselves.³ Other examples are from schools we've visited or leaders we've interviewed, taught, worked with, or supported in some way. In several chapters, we highlight examples from one school, Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, DC. The leaders of this school have a clear vision and laser-like focus on engaging staff in ongoing racial identity development and discussions of the impact of racial bias. We think seeing multiple examples from this school's approach provides a valuable model.

Principals rarely talk to each other about race, let alone principals with different racial identities. As coauthors, we've been reaping the rewards from the conversations with each other for several years, and we want to share that with school leaders. We hope reading this book feels like joining a conversation with two passionate colleagues who tell it like it is. Through the ups and downs of leadership, we've longed for like-minded colleagues. We're glad you've chosen to learn with us.