

DISCOVERING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS: ENGAGING ALL FAMILIES

**By Cheryl Robinson, Supervisor of Minority Achievement-Arlington Public Schools
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The act of involving racially and ethnically diverse families remains elusive for many school communities. Perhaps it's time to look within and to acknowledge that unconscious or implicit biases influence the ways educators engage with families. Everyone has biases. Some are helpful. Others are not. Unconscious biases are preconceived ideas that a person is either unaware of or cannot admit (DiAngelo, 2012). These subconscious thoughts are learned through our experiences and are so deeply rooted that we may be oblivious to them. The unconscious biases that result from split-second thoughts may be the root of differential treatment and discriminatory practices. While reading about this topic may make some readers uncomfortable, I urge you to continue.

Acknowledging and addressing behaviors that result from unconscious biases has the potential to improve teacher-family relationships. If you think this does not apply to you, think again. Although Americans consider themselves to be unbiased, when unconscious stereotypes are measured, "90% of Whites (Moule, 2009) and 50% of Blacks (Myers, 2014) associate negative traits with Black images." Beginning early in childhood, white children and children of color preferred white dolls (Ahuja, 2009; Davis, 2007). In 2010, child psychologist and University of Chicago professor Margaret Beale Spencer, a leading researcher in the field of child development, was hired as a consultant by CNN. Her team tested 133 children from schools that met very specific economic and demographic requirements. The tests showed that white children responded with a high rate of "white bias," identifying the color of their own skin with positive attributes and darker skin with negative attributes. Dr. Spencer said even black children have some bias toward whiteness, but far less than white children. (CNN.com, May 14, 2010).

Experiences influence thoughts and thoughts lead to action. We generally do not behave in ways that are in conflict with what we believe. "The human brain is wired to create a sense of safety and order. In order to achieve this goal, parts of the brain seek conditions which confirm or support beliefs that already exist. Situations involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors create discomfort. In order to reduce the discomfort and regain balance, the brain actively and unconsciously, creates expectations that confirm the embedded beliefs" (Gawronski & Strack, 2012). This process results in indirect and often subtle behaviors known as micro-aggressions. The consequences of these actions can be as significant as more blatant forms of racism (Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004).

Relationships between parents and teachers are driven by unconscious biases that affect student learning positively or negatively. Unconscious biases result in subtle and overt acts that are readily identified by parents, though often unnoticed by teachers and administrators. No one is immune to the stereotypes and images which are continuously shared through media and interactions with friends, colleagues and loved ones. Despite our "best intentions, educators discriminate in ways big and small" (Mullainathan, 2015).

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AT WORK

A popular activity often sponsored by Parent Teacher Associations and supported by staff are book fairs. They raise money and are thought to encourage reading. One unconscious bias or assumption is that "normal" families buy books. Those who choose not to participate are sometimes seen as having little

interest in learning and might be thought of as unusual or strange. If these assumptions exist, each could limit the possibilities for designing an event that includes a greater number of families.

There are many reasons parents may choose not to participate in a book fair. Families with limited disposable income may choose to use the school library, free e-books or public libraries. Other families may choose not to purchase books in order to reduce the use of paper or to save space. Still others may choose not to participate because the books include text and images that do not represent the racial, ethnic, or gender diversity that is representative of their family or community.

In order for these families to choose to participate in the book fair, staff and PTA members may need to intentionally provide options that cater to the interests and needs of a broader audience.

Family engagement activities are often designed based on the personal needs, beliefs and expectations of staff. When the life experiences of the staff differ from those of the families, and when staff are not aware of or choose not to acknowledge the variances, a form of incongruence occurs. This, coupled with little or no awareness of the internal biases that affect the process, creates a vicious cycle. The lack of personal awareness fuels a sense that staff knows best. This perception silences the voices of the intended audiences and is perceived as a general disregard for their wants and desires. Parents who feel this way choose not to participate. Some say that they feel unwelcome and uncomfortable. Others report that the efforts don't meet their needs, or that they are inauthentic. When families members choose not participate, staff perceives these behaviors as a blatant disregard for their hard work. Families are then blamed for not participating. As a result, the generalizations about unengaged parents continue because the stereotypes that staff harbors appear to be substantiated.

Family engagement that meets the needs of diverse populations challenges long standing ideas that are often articulated by well-meaning staff. How many times have you heard colleagues blame a certain group of parents for not caring enough to be involved in their children's lives or that parents of specific identities don't care about education?

Misinformed educators may provide reasons such as work schedules, multiple jobs and transportation as factors that thwart family engagement. Some comment that families avoid schools because of years of negative experiences. While these statements may be a part of some families' experiences, they may say more about staff perceptions than the families' realities. It is likely that those who make such comments are unaware of the ways race and culture influence experiences and the conscious and unconscious thoughts we have about others. Our biases may lead us to assume that various factors are in play when this is not factual.

No one is immune to stereotypes fueled by unconscious thoughts. Educators of all races and backgrounds absorb a steady diet of negative messages. Without purposeful planning, we are likely to behave in ways that negate the experiences of others. "It is important to understand that the system of advantage is perpetuated when we do not acknowledge its existence" within ourselves, as well as within the institutions we serve (Tatum, 1997).

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Acknowledging the impact of the biases that we all have is the first step in creating engaging purposeful activities for families. Uncovering deeply rooted feelings and beliefs, of which we are unaware, can be unnerving and can result in feelings of shame, blame, and guilt. These feelings are natural when we

begin to acknowledge thoughts that are in conflict, and thereby affect the ways we interact with families. The power to improve is within our grasp. Here are a few ideas for starters:

1) Start by Looking at the Person in the Mirror

- Take the implicit bias test (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>)
- Accept that biases may never be eradicated. Knowing that they exist provides an opportunity to consciously question actions and to behave in ways that can enhance family engagement.
 - “Move out of your comfort zone. You can only grow if you are willing to feel awkward and uncomfortable when you try something new.” (Tracy)
 - Create a personal plan to address the results of your assessment.
 - Challenge your own assumptions (Define what this means for you...Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?)
 - Learn more about the experiences of others. TED talks are an excellent way to start.
- Conduct a cultural audit climate survey (King & Goodwin, 2004) and then review it with your staff and look for areas of improvement.
<http://www.pacer.org/mpc/pdf/CulturallyResponsivePI.pdf>

2) Expand Your Sphere of Influence: Design It So That They Will Come

- Invite colleagues, community partners and parents who are currently active designing and implementing family engagement activities to join the journey. Repeat the steps above.
- Plan for and acknowledge feelings associated with change. This is the critical step that is often omitted and results in failed attempts to change policies, practices, and school culture. Change is often viewed as a loss of the familiar or the loss of power. Both can elicit fear. A colleague once explained that the word F.E.A.R. was best used was an acronym for False Evidence Appearing Real. Isn't that the case with many of our stereotypes, prejudgments, and thoughts about others?
- Build capacity in staff to support a more inclusive model of family engagement. Plan for sustained dialogue that ensures that:
 - ✓ Office workers know the importance of demonstrating an open and welcoming environment for ALL families and possess the skill set to create that environment.
 - ✓ Those currently involved in school governance are not only aware of the strategies and procedures for creating and sustaining shared power, but also understand the benefits of distributive leadership.
 - ✓ Members of ALL groups are aware of strategies for advocacy, leading change, and addressing resistance to change.
 - ✓ Members of under-represented groups have access to empowerment opportunities and change-making avenues.

3) Restart Conversations that Includes all Stakeholders

- Effective family involvement includes acknowledging families as equal, authentic partners in the design of processes which support children's academic, social, and emotional well-being. It involves families of all hues, education levels, and structures serving as decision makers and co-designers.
- Create focus groups for each of the groups of families you hope to work with more effectively. Other methods for creating a conversation could include telephone surveys or

- town hall meetings. Use this information to create a collective philosophy of family engagement and a method to achieve the shared vision.
- Co-construct meetings that yield results. This begins with establishing inclusive norms for each meeting and includes creating consensus on meeting times; meeting places topics for discussion, systems of accountability, timelines and ways to measure successes and additional strategies for soliciting voices that represent the entire student community.
 - Meet parents where they are. The ways families contribute to schooling may differ. Some parents are most interested in finding ways to help their own children succeed; others prefer fund raising or performing tasks that support the teachers and programs. Advocacy may motivate those wishing to influence institutional policies and procedures that impact the greater whole.
 - Constantly revisit and revise plans based on input from families. Parent engagement activities should be as dynamic as the families asked to participate in them.

Helpful resources:

- **Project Implicit** by Harvard University <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- **Cultural Audit Climate Survey, *Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement*** <http://www.pacer.org/mpc/pdf/CulturallyResponsivePI.pdf>
- **How to Overcome Our Biases: Walk Boldly Toward Them** https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them/transcript
- **Color Blind or Color Brave by Mellody Hobson** https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave

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