

The Unspoken Curriculum Discussion Guide

About the Unspoken Curriculum

There's implicit bias and racism in the education system which can have a drastic effect on all students from a very early age, especially for Black youth. The systemic bias they experience in schools (including cultural insensitivity, disproportionately harsh punishment, lowered teacher expectations, diminished resources) has the cumulative effect of reducing their enthusiasm, academic motivation, and overall mental health.

Through their personal experiences and interactions with teachers, administrators, other students, and the education system at large, students learn how they're perceived, what's expected of them, what resources they do and do not have access to, and nuances of their level of respect and power in society.

The Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation is addressing mental health risks and impacts for Black students, and all students, by speaking "The Unspoken Curriculum" out loud. We are working to reduce the stigma of talking about students' real experiences, and at the same time inviting our communities to join us in rethinking and reforming the lessons Black students learn in school.

The Unspoken Curriculum



Purpose of this Discussion Guide

The goal of "The Unspoken Curriculum" is to:

- Combat the stigma of mental distress caused by implicit bias by helping Black youth as well as parents, teachers, and administrators recognize the signs of trauma and distress
- Inspire youth to feel confident and empowered to talk about their personal experiences publicly in the classroom and privately with mental health experts, protect their mental health, and seek additional support when they need it
- Advocate for meaningful change in the classroom by rethinking and reforming the lessons Black students learn in school
- Drive measurable action among youth as well as adults in the education system and beyond who play an integral role in shaping the experiences that set the tone for each young person's future

The purpose of this discussion guide is to inform conversations with youth and young adults on increasing education and awareness about mental health. *For additional resources and support, please visit the BLHF website: <https://borislhensonfoundation.org/unspoken/>.*

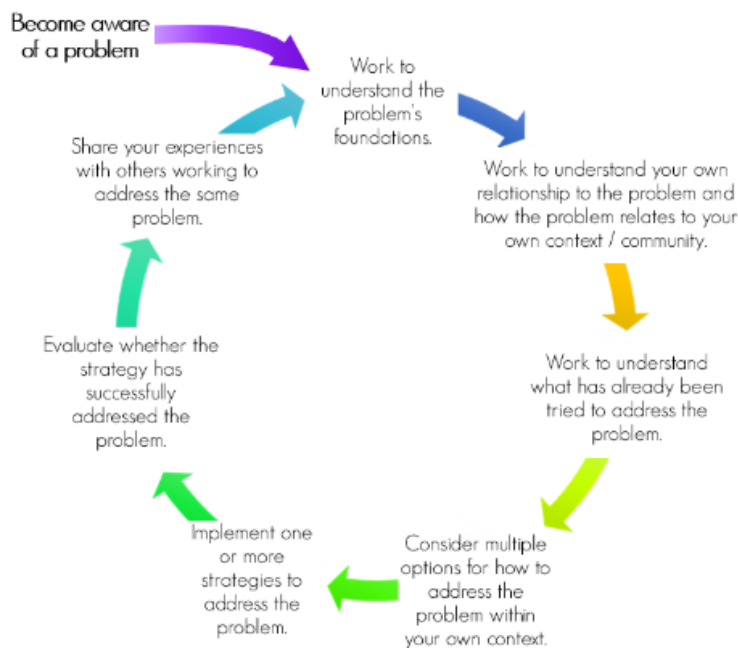
Inequality in the U.S. Educational System

The things children learn about themselves in school aren't all in the lesson plan, but they are lessons that they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Everyone has a stake in the mental health of Black youth, yet many people do not acknowledge implicit bias in the education system that severely disadvantages Black students. As a result, there is no full ownership for the inequality in educational outcomes. The 'fourth grade failure syndrome' is a phenomenon that scholars have identified as the start of the achievement gap.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Black students make up 16% of enrolled students, but account for 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of student arrests. Forty-eight percent of Black students also receive one or more suspensions throughout the duration of their academic career.¹ Through their personal experiences and interactions with teachers, administrators, other students, and the education system at large, Black students learn how they're perceived, what's expected of them, what resources they do and do not have access to, and the nuances of their level of respect and power in society.

So how do we address this? According to [Project READY](#), a three-year program aimed at creating professional development for school librarians and other educators focused on racial equity, it is important to keep the following cycle image from Project READY in mind as you engage in conversations about mental health. As with any problem, understanding the problem's foundation and its universal relationships allow for effective strategic solutions. As an example, it's important to recognize that many of us will experience a mental illness at some point in our lives. So, speaking and acting from a place of compassion and acceptance, rather than fear and ignorance, establishes the needed environment for social change.



Discussion Starters

The following discussion/sentence starters can be used in private or group conversations around mental health and should be adjusted and customized according to your specific conversation.

In addition to encouraging students to talk about their mental health more freely in the classroom, we also want to ensure that students feel empowered to ask their parents and teachers for resources, tools, and support – including private conversations with mental health specialists, social workers, and counselors. These mental health experts are equipped to handle the varying levels of trauma individual students may be experiencing.

If you are facilitating a session, we recommend playing/watching this [short clip](#) as a conversation starter around “The Unspoken Curriculum.”

Here are some prompts to guide reflection:

- What are your initial thoughts after watching the video?
- Have you experienced implicit bias/racism at school? If so, how? Why do you think we refer to this as “The Unspoken Curriculum?”
- How do you think this type of bias affects Black students and other students of color?
- How does this type of bias affect white students?

Additional questions/exercises to generate discussion include:

1. What does stigma mean? What does implicit bias mean?

Stigma: An attribute that is discrediting and reduces the barrier someone faces to a tainted, discounted one.

Implicit Bias: This is when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge.

2. What does stigma around mental health/illness look like?

Stigma can exist within societies, institutions, and individuals, including people who are living with mental illness themselves. Stigma often takes the outward form of discrimination when people are treated differently or denied rights because of their mental illness. How many of us know someone who has experienced a mental illness?

3. What does stigma mean to you?

Possible answers/prompts may include: · Embarrassment/shame · Feeling “different” · Lower self-esteem/confidence · Feeling alone · Any others?

4. What are the pros and cons of talking about your mental illness experience?

Recommend listing answers in a chart or worksheet, and facilitating a discussion surrounding benefits and costs of disclosure. Possible answers/prompts include:

- Potential Benefits of Disclosing: · You don't have to worry about hiding the mental illness and/or explaining confusing behavior to others. · You don't have to spend as much energy keeping it a secret. · Others may be able to provide additional support. · Others may be coping with similar situations, and you can provide mutual support. · You could feel less alone.
- Potential Drawbacks of Disclosing: · You take the risk of being vulnerable. · Others can say unkind things to or about you, your loved one/family. · You, your loved one and/or family might be excluded from social activities. · Having shared the information, you may worry more about what others think of your family.

5. What experiences in your life, your work, or your family inform what you believe about mental health?

Possible answers/prompts may include: · Hearing negative comments about people with mental health problems · Hearing people make fun of therapy or suggest that going to therapy is a negative action · Cultural biases about mental health · Being told not to talk about mental health.

6. How is mental health portrayed in the media? Do you think it influences your peers' perceptions of mental health?

Possible answers/prompts may include: · The media shows exaggerated and/or inaccurate images of mental illness · The media provides incorrect information about mental illness. · This can perpetuate a negative stigma surrounding mental illness

7. What are some tips for talking to others about mental health?

Possible answers/prompts may include:

- Show empathy. If someone shares with you that they have a mental illness, they are opening up to you in a big way. Ask questions, show concern. By talking openly about mental illnesses, it becomes easier to ask for help.
- Be nice. It sounds very easy to do, but be open and caring and let that shine through. Your language and tone of voice are more important than you think.
- Listen. Being there for your friend, family member, or student can make a world of difference. As much as you can, try not to find and share a solution to the problem. Focus on asking open-ended questions and listening to what they need to tell you.

8. What are some tips for talking to others about mental health?

Possible answers/prompts may include:

- "Thanks for opening up to me."
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "I'm sorry to hear that. It must be tough."
- "I'm here for you when you need me."
- "I can't imagine what you're going through."
- "How are you feeling today?"

9. Do you think your cultural background influences how you think about mental health? If so, how?

Possible answers/prompts may include: · Attitudes surrounding mental illness in your community · Access to mental health resources in your community

10. How can we make sure “The Unspoken Curriculum” doesn’t continue to be taught in schools?

Possible answers/prompts may include: · Ensuring educators understand “The Unspoken Curriculum” and how they can actively take steps to ensure they are not perpetuating it · Openly discussing “The Unspoken Curriculum” with children, youth, and young adults · Ensuring resources are provided to Black students to close the gap that exists in educational spaces

11. What solutions would you like to see to make sure mental health is being prioritized?

Possible answers/prompts may include: · Openly discussing mental health · Openly sharing mental health resources · Encouragement from teachers, parents, or other authority figures to prioritize one’s mental health

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Additional Resources

Provided by the U.S Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Mental Health America (MHA).

Resources	
Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation	https://borislhensonfoundation.org/
Information About Mental Health	http://www.MentalHealth.gov
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	http://www.SAMHSA.gov
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)	http://www.nimh.nih.gov
Additional information you could use to host a conversation in your community	http://www.CreatingCommunitySolutions.org
Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Mental Illness	
Suicide Prevention Resource Center	http://www.sprc.org
The Institute of Medicine’s <i>Preventing Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities</i>	http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/Preventing-Mental-Emotionaland-Behavioral-Disorders-Among-Young-People-Progress-andPossibilities.aspx
Addressing Bullying	http://www.stopbullying.gov
National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention	http://www.promoteprevent.org
Find Youth Info	http://www.findyouthinfo.gov
Million Hearts	http://millionhearts.hhs.gov/index.html
Addressing Public Attitudes	
Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion	http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov
Voice Awards	http://www.samhsa.gov/voiceawards

Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day	http://www.samhsa.gov/children
Evidence-Based Practices for Treatment	
National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices	http://nrepp.samhsa.gov
National Center for Trauma-Informed Care	http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic
Children’s Mental Health Initiative Technical Assistance Center	http://www.cmhnetwork.org
Recovery Support Services	
National Consumer Technical Assistance Centers	http://ncstac.org/index.php
Homeless Resource Center	http://www.homeless.samhsa.gov
College Drinking: Changing the Culture	http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov
Therapy Directories for the Black Community	
Therapy for Black Girls	https://providers.therapyforblackgirls.com/
Therapy for Black Men	https://therapyforblackmen.org/
Association of Black Psychologists	http://www.abpsi.org/find-psychologists/

¹ [Source: US DOE, OCR data, 2014 & 2016](#)