



## Journal for Multicultural Education

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Jacqueline Darvin, (2018) "Becoming a more culturally responsive teacher by identifying and reducing microaggressions in classrooms and school communities", Journal for Multicultural Education, Vol. 12 Issue: 1, pp.2-9, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-03-2017-0020>

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# Becoming a more culturally responsive teacher by identifying and reducing microaggressions in classrooms and school communities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – There is more to culturally responsive teaching than selecting multicultural texts and designing inclusive lesson. This paper aims to support teachers in becoming more culturally responsive by guiding them in how to recognize and respond to microaggressions in their daily interactions with students, colleagues, and parents.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Microaggressions have been defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color”.

**Findings** – When classroom interactions contain microaggressions, students are damaged in both seen and unseen ways. Interactions between teachers, students and parents afford powerful occasions to analyze classroom communication and provide windows into the nature of student–student, student–teacher and teacher–parent relationships.

**Practical implications** – Regardless of where, when, why or how they occur, these interactions provide brief opportunities for culturally responsive teachers to demonstrate that they respect their students’ home and community cultures, accept who their students are and honor the education that they receive both inside and outside of school.

**Social implications** – Becoming more adept at recognizing and addressing microaggressions is one way that teachers can become more culturally responsive. For students, being able to identify and respond more effectively to microaggressions creates greater opportunities for all students to think critically and engage in social action.

**Originality/value** – This paper presents an original viewpoint on identifying and reducing microaggressions in classrooms and school communities.

**Keywords** Gender, Ethnicity, Education, Identity, Equity, Communities

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

Culturally responsive, relevant, appropriate, responsible, inclusive, congruent, compatible and sensitive are all terms used to describe teaching that strives to meet the needs of diverse students. Whichever term one prefers, culturally responsive teachers consciously attempt to bridge divides between students’ experiences in their homes and communities and those in their classrooms and schools. Culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogies are not new areas of inquiry or debate, and many prominent scholars have written about them. I propose in this article that there is far



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more to culturally responsive teaching than selecting multicultural texts and designing inclusive lessons. Part of becoming a more culturally responsive teacher involves effectively recognizing and responding to microaggressions in daily interactions with students, colleagues and parents.

Imagine a situation in which students are giving oral presentations in front of a class. One of the students is an English language learner (ELL) and is very nervous about speaking in front of her peers. She begins her presentation tentatively and is having difficulty being heard or understood by her classmates because of her soft voice and thick accent. From somewhere in the back, an unidentified male student yells, “Honey – We can’t understand a damn thing you’re saying.” The other students all laugh as the ELL student turns red with embarrassment. What should the teacher do?

In the previous example that could easily occur in any classroom in America, the teacher is placed in a precarious situation. The implicit racism, sexism and linguistic discrimination underlying the student’s biased comment is thinly disguised by the offender complaining about the ELL student’s *accent*, thus making his inappropriate, disrespectful complaint appear more legitimate and acceptable. Some teachers faced with this situation might choose to ignore the offensive comment, while others might choose to focus solely on the classroom management aspect of one student interrupting another student, while ignoring the subtle racist nuances underlying the comment and not addressing them explicitly. I propose that the teacher doing either of these two things is detrimental to both the ELL and the other students in the class.

Conversely, addressing this and other similar acts explicitly with the class and engaging in thoughtful dialogue about them protects the most vulnerable students and, at the same time, shields the more powerfully positioned students from the detrimental effects of unknowingly or knowingly engaging in offensive actions and statements about which they may be oblivious to their impact. Having teachers that consciously identify microaggressions, facilitate thoughtful class dialogue around them and address them appropriately both within their lessons and beyond them will serve to improve the nature of individual exchanges, as well as the overall cultural climate of the classroom and school. The remainder of this article will define and explore microaggression, a term that is exemplified in the previous vignette, and focus specifically on how teachers can become more culturally responsive by effectively identifying microaggressions and helping to reduce them in their classrooms and school communities.

### Defining microaggressions

Microaggressions have been defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 271). The definition and study of microaggression (Nadal *et al.*, 2014; Solorzano *et al.*, 2000; Boysen and Vogel, 2009; Sue *et al.*, 2009) has been further expanded to include other forms besides those against people of color, including those that specifically target Latina/o Americans (Nadal *et al.*, 2014) and those microaggressions related to gender, sexual orientation and disability (Sue *et al.*, 2007). The majority of research in this area to date has been with adults and college students, so further study on microaggression still needs to occur in secondary and elementary classrooms. When daily classroom interactions routinely contain microaggressions, students at any grade level are likely damaged in both seen and unseen ways.

### Explicit vs implicit bias

When we think about bias in school, we usually think of clear and obvious instances of explicit bias, including students using racial or ethnic slurs, making offensive jokes, calling each other pejorative names, such as “gay” or “retarded,” using profanity or bullying one another verbally and/or physically. Teachers witness explicit biased incidents frequently and are typically savvy on how to handle these situations. There is now a tremendous amount of attention paid to bullying and cyber-bullying in school, and both students and teachers have become more adept in recent years in preventing and addressing explicit bias. As [Boysen and Vogel \(2009, p. 13\)](#) point out, however, “Explicit bias is overt and intentional. In contrast, implicit bias tends to be subtle, automatic, and often occurs without the perpetrator’s intention or awareness”.

Implicit bias, which includes various forms of microaggression, is more common in daily interactions *inside the classroom*, where it frequently flies below the radar, often unnoticed by teachers and students alike, but insidious nonetheless. [Boysen and Vogel \(2009, pp. 14-15\)](#) examined implicit classroom bias and provide the most common responses that the participants, college professors, had to bias in their classrooms. They included turning the bias into a topic for discussion, providing a rebuttal, direct confrontation, correcting ignorance, ignoring it, asking the students who expressed the biased remarks to produce counterarguments themselves, private confrontation outside of class, referring the incident to a campus judicial organization, the teacher attempting to model nonbiased behaviors himself, responding nonverbally by raising his or her eyebrows and allowing an awkward silence to linger, telling the student expressing bias to leave the class and connecting the incident to course topics. Some of these responses were perceived by the students as being more effective than others, a topic that will be further explored later.

### Examples of teacher-to-student microaggressions

Being consistently ignored by a teacher, being told that “the most qualified student should receive the writing award,” being told by a teacher that “I don’t see color” or complimented for “speaking good English”:

[...] may all constitute teacher-to-student racial microaggressions because they communicate denigrating hidden messages to the students: “You’re not important enough to be noticed”; “People of color are less qualified”; “I don’t notice color, so I can’t be racist”; and “You’re not a true American but a foreigner” ([Sue et al., 2009, p. 183](#)).

In a study of teacher-to-student racial microaggressions by [Solorzano et al. \(2000, p. 65\)](#), African American student participants discussed feeling invisible in the classroom and that “their experiences as African Americans were omitted, distorted, and stereotyped in their course curriculum”. Other examples of microaggressions included instances when faculty “maintained low expectations of them, even in the face of contradictory evidence” (p. 66). Student participants in this study discussed microaggressions that occurred beyond the classroom walls as well. One such example was when a black student was walking down the hallway and upon encountering a white faculty member, the white teacher told her, “Oh, I should have locked the door. My purse is in there.” The student commented, “I was just thinking to myself, wow [...] maybe she should have kept that to herself or something like, oh, I reminded you that you should lock your door” (p. 68). Other students in this study felt that their very presence in certain areas of the school, such as the library, was unwanted. A black student noted about going to the library to study during finals:

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[. . .] when we walked in there looking for someplace to sit down, it's like [. . .] they've never seen Black people before in their lives, or they've never seen Black people study before (p. 68).

### Examples of student-to-student microaggressions in school

An example of a student-to-student microaggression related to gender, rather than race, recently occurred while I was observing an eighth-grade class having literature circle discussions in English class. The students were choosing parts for a role-play activity that they were going to perform for the class, and one of the outgoing female students wanted to play the lead part of the father. When she expressed her desire to play the lead part, the male students in the group unanimously rejected her request and told her that she could only play the smaller parts of the mother or the sister because “she is a girl and should also act as one”. The female student was visibly hurt by her peers’ comments, but she remained silent.

Along similar lines, students in a sixth-grade class that I observed planning for an upcoming after school dance told their classmate who is in a wheelchair that he should be on the refreshments committee, rather than the one that he had chosen that was selecting the music that would be played by the deejay, as he “can’t even dance”. The student shared with me privately that he was upset by this comment and wanted me to know that he *can dance*, even if he cannot move his legs. This brief yet painful exchange constitutes a microaggressive act against a person with a disability.

These examples demonstrate the subtlety and implicit nature of biased incidences that can be considered microaggressions. These brief interactions could likely all be explained away as unbiased by the perpetrators, but the student victims were emotionally impacted by them nonetheless. It is important to note here that by definition, *microaggressions are determined by the people experiencing them*. The literature on microaggressions emphasizes that they are detrimental to their targets because over time, “they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities” (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 273).

According to the literature on microaggression, the least effective and most unhelpful strategies for teachers confronted with microaggressions include:

Taking a passive approach (i.e., let the class take over the discussion), disengaging (i.e., not initiating, going with superficial responses, and dismissing the importance of the topic), becoming emotional (i.e., get mad at what was being said), or simply ignoring the dialogue (i.e., switching topics) (Sue *et al.*, 2009, p. 188).

Teachers should try and consciously avoid these unhelpful responses to microaggressions whenever possible.

### Identifying and reducing microaggressions by teachers

One of the most useful self-reflective tools for teachers wishing to better identify and reduce microaggressions in their classrooms is videotaping. Videotaping one’s own teaching provides countless opportunities to analyze brief interactions that might otherwise be missed. Teachers can videotape their own classes and look specifically for microaggressive acts. According to Sue *et al.* (2007, p. 273), microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures and tones. In analyzing video of their own teaching, teachers can more readily identify both verbal and nonverbal microaggressive acts on the part of both teachers and students. Along similar lines, teachers can also keep anecdotal journals of instances that they believe may constitute microaggressions and discuss them with

a small group of colleagues, preferably a diverse group, to see if they agree or disagree with their initial identifications.

To become better at identifying microaggressions, teachers should expand their professional knowledge in this area by reading scholarly articles, such as “Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom” by Sue *et al.* (2009) and recent books about microaggression, such as *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* (Sue, 2015) and discussing them with a colleague or group of interested colleagues as part of a professional development or teacher self-study group. Additionally, school counselors or psychologists can be asked to make presentations about microaggression for faculty and staff to help heighten their awareness and sensitivity. Teachers and school counselors can also dialogue with school administrators about microaggression and create greater awareness among faculty and their supervisors about what they are and how they make their targets and perpetrators feel and react.

It is important to recognize that microaggressions can be considered violations of civil rights laws and possibly even criminal acts. The concept of “hostile environment” comes into play when microaggressive acts occur continuously at a school or place of work over a period of time. Employee and student handbooks should contain information for students, teachers, parents and administrators about when microaggressions and other forms of bias become illegal and provide information on how to file legal complaints. The school attorney should have input on this documentation and should be involved in creating a formal process for any and all complaints involving bias at the school to be investigated and addressed legally.

### **Identifying and reducing microaggressions by students**

There are also several ways for teachers to help their students learn to recognize and reduce student-to-student microaggressions. Many of the recommended classroom strategies for increasing awareness of microaggressions by students are those of critical literacy that consciously and intentionally promote thoughtful dialogue, discussion and analysis of complex, controversial social issues from multiple perspectives, including race, gender, sexual orientation and disability. As the classroom is a place that consistently promotes reading, writing, speaking and listening, it affords excellent opportunities for students to identify and analyze microaggressive acts, both in texts and in real life.

For example, teachers can ask their students to respond to journal or writing prompts that naturally segue into larger class discussions on microaggression, racism, sexism, homophobia and understanding of differences. One such prompt could be:

Have you ever experienced a time when you believed a classmate or teacher at our school made an inappropriate comment to you regarding your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, etc.? How did it make you feel? Why? How did you respond? Why? How did the teacher and/or other students respond?

This writing prompt can later be further developed by asking students to form text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections to their responses. I have termed critical literacy writing prompts such as these “cultural and political vignettes” (CPVs) (Darvin, 2015, 2011a, 2011b). In addition to responding in writing, teachers can also ask their students to role-play brief scenarios in response to the previous CPV writing

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prompt and then ask the students to analyze their own situated performances through a lens of microaggression (Darvin, 2015, 2009).

Teachers can also address microaggression with students through text and film and use literature and literary characters' actions to create a safe third space (Gutierrez, 1995; Gutierrez and Larson, 2007) for discussing things that are very sensitive to discuss in classrooms, such as race and disability. Teachers can define and point out various microaggressions in texts, and students can then be asked to debate how and why they believe or do not believe the characters' actions are microaggressive. It is far easier and more comfortable for teachers and students to begin by confronting the microaggressive acts of literary characters before moving on to those of real people and themselves. Once students and teachers become more adept at having complicated conversations about microaggressions in texts, they can begin addressing those that occur in their midst more maturely and skillfully.

To provide a specific example, I recently observed a seventh-grade teacher giving an excellent language arts lesson on microaggressions using *The House on Mango Street* by Cisneros (1984). In one class period, the students were able to identify many examples of microaggressive acts that were perpetrated against the Latina/o characters in the text. After identifying the various microaggressions, the students had an extensive class discussion on why they believed the acts were microaggressive, using specific textual evidence to support their claims. For homework, the students were asked to write about a microaggressive act that they had witnessed in their real lives or in a television show or movie and explain how it might have been prevented or handled more effectively by either the victim(s) or bystanders once it had occurred. Activities such as these can also be extended to include classroom simulations illustrating microaggressions, so that students can live the experience. Students can be asked to role-play various microaggressive situations and then discuss and act out more culturally sensitive and appropriate responses. As with any curriculum that touches on sensitive issues, a school psychologist, counselor and/or social worker should work in consultation with the classroom teachers to make sure that the simulations are handled carefully and that psychological and emotional support is provided to the targeted individuals.

### **Involving parents in identifying and reducing microaggressions**

Parents should also be invited into a school-wide campaign to identify and reduce microaggressions in the community. Similar to the students, parents can be asked questions such as:

Have you ever experienced a time when you believed a student, teacher, or another parent at our school made an inappropriate comment to you regarding your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, etc.? How did it make you feel? Why? How did you respond? Why? How did the teacher and/or other parents respond?

Teachers or school administrators can ask parents to respond in writing to the previous questions at a parent-teacher meeting, on a school web site, or through some other parent forum. Student and parent responses can also be submitted anonymously to the teachers and administration in case they fear repercussions from the school for voicing their opinions regarding acts of explicit or implicit bias, including microaggressions.

### **Conclusion**

In the literature on microaggression, the reportedly most effective strategies for teachers to use include:

[...] legitimizing the discussion on race, validating feelings of the participants in class, willingness to accept a different racial reality from students of color, comfort in addressing race and racism, and using a direct approach in managing the discussion (Sue *et al.*, 2009, p. 188).

Teachers should try and use these strategies in their classrooms and school communities whenever possible. One of the defining characteristics of microaggressions is their invisibility to the perpetrator and often the recipient. If teachers are unsure whether a microaggression has occurred, they should ask probing follow-up questions so that the seemingly microaggressive act can be further explored. Teachers should also encourage students who belong to groups that are frequently targeted by microaggressions (African Americans, Latinos, GLBT students, students with disabilities, etc.) to create their own academic and social “counter spaces” (student organizations, clubs, peer groups, etc.) on and off school grounds that can “serve as sites where deficit notions of people [...] can be challenged” (Solorzano *et al.*, 2000, p. 70).

Daily interactions between teachers and students in the classroom afford powerful occasions to analyze classroom communication and provide many tiny windows into the nature of student–student and student–teacher relationships at multiple levels of interaction. Regardless of where, when, why or how they occur, these seemingly simple interactions provide brief yet compelling opportunities for culturally responsive teachers to demonstrate that they respect their students’ home and community cultures, accept who their students are, and honor the education that they receive both inside and outside of school. Becoming more adept at recognizing and addressing microaggressions is one sure way that teachers can become more culturally responsive. For students, being able to identify and respond more effectively to microaggressions creates greater opportunities to think critically, tell their stories, speak their truths and engage in social action.

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