Discrimination’s Impact on Children

Discrimination includes beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that denigrate individuals or groups based on physical characteristics (genetic and environmental influences) or group affiliation, most commonly within an ethnic or racial context (Soto et al. 2011). Although everyone acknowledges it’s an unwanted behavior, recent research has established that discrimination’s effects on the individual can be classified as trauma, resulting in anxiety, depression, an impaired sense of well-being, and psychological distress, as well as negatively affecting physical health (Pascoe and Richman 2009; Paradies 2006; Soto et al. 2011; Williams et al. 2003).

Outside and inside the classroom, ethnic and racial minority students are often the victims of discrimination that negatively affects their mental health, self-esteem, engagement, and academic performance (Huynh 2012). Throughout childhood and adolescence, our students’ awareness of race and ethnicity becomes more complex (Ruble et al. 2004). Exploring one’s ethnic culture may involve talking to people from the shared ethnic background (older friends, parents, relatives) about shared experiences, learning cultural practices, attending cultural events, and/or reading about the particular culture. This information encourages a stable view of the self, cultivates the sense of belonging to a group, and influences ethnic commitment—a strong attachment and personal investment in one’s ethnic group.

Cross-race friendships, same-race friendships, classroom racial composition, and ethnic identity all influence race-related social understanding in children (Rowley et al. 2008). In their study, Rowley et al. found that African American children with more African American friends expected more discrimination in cross-race interactions. Further, African American students for whom race was an integral part of their self-definition (race centrality, as described in Okeke, Howard, and Kurtz-Costes 2009) were more likely to expect discrimination. This conceptual framework around discrimination can help children depersonalize discrimination, whereas children who are less aware of discrimination in the larger culture can personalize it to a larger degree. However, knowing that discrimination exists does not sufficiently buffer anyone from feeling its effects.

Traditional, overt discrimination (calling someone the n-word, making other racial slurs, openly attributing mistreatment to one’s race, etc.) is no longer socially acceptable in the United States. Today, racial discrimination is more likely to be covert, to take place in the form of ambiguous racial microaggression (Sue et al. 2007): the “subtle daily racial slights and insults” that racial/ethnic minorities often experience (Torres et al. 2010). Microaggression is typically brief nonverbal or verbal behavior that subtly demeans and condescends to the victim; it can include statements that invalidate the importance of one’s ethnic or racial heritage or question one’s ability to succeed (job attainment and promotion, for
example) based on racial stereotypes about ability (Sue et al. 2007).

The harm in microaggression lies in its ambiguity (Helms 2012); victims aren’t sure whether or not the perpetrator is being racist. Perpetrators with good intentions may become microaggressive toward people they consider friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. For example, a teacher who expresses surprise when a black student gets a math problem right and then praises him excessively may intend to be encouraging but instead communicate that the student was not expected to know the answer because black students are not regarded as smart. Did the teacher intend this? Perhaps not. But the student, who is keenly aware of racism through experience, does not know the teacher’s intention and can become distracted by the ambiguity. This distraction can be self-destructive, creating self-doubt and pulling a child’s attention away from necessary school-related tasks.

Teachers who are aware of their own biases are less likely to demonstrate microaggression toward their minority students or treat them according to stereotypes. Individuals who are unaware of the harm they have caused may become defensive if questioned about their motivation (Sue et al. 2007). It may be difficult to accept and acknowledge that we as instructors have biases, but everyone has unconscious biases, not only related to race. By being aware of these biases, we greatly reduce the likelihood that we will be microaggressive toward our students. It helps to think more broadly, beyond the binary relationship between the teacher and student, and consider how individuals might perceive our behavior based on past experience regardless of our intention. We have an obligation to avoid doing harm. The impact of microaggression lies in its pervasive, invisible, and frequently covert nature. The individual who experiences microaggression see it as uncontrollable, sudden, and negative, which can induce posttraumatic symptoms such as paranoia and hypervigilance (Carter 2007). Being aware of our own potentially discriminatory behavior and consciously choosing words and actions that do not reinforce stereotypes can only help our students.

Many of the interactions students have during the course of the day do not occur in school. However, the effects of perceived discrimination both in and out of school may be evident in student attitudes and performance. One such observable change is psychological disengagement in the classroom. In a sample of white and ethnic minority adolescents, Verkuyten and Brug (2003) found that perceived discrimination was related to psychological disengagement from course material so that self-worth is no longer synonymous with failing or succeeding (Major et al. 1998).

Children can learn negative messages about their cultural groups from the internet, family members, television programs, news outlets, and their communities. Even when controlling for socioeconomic status and parental levels of education, African Americans still underperform in academic settings when compared with non-Hispanic whites (Steele 1997). One negative outcome of discrimination is self-sabotage—intentionally not studying for tests or preparing for and paying attention in class. A study conducted with Australian high school students concluded that indigenous Australians (a stigmatized minority compared with non-Aboriginal Australians) were more likely to engage in self-sabotaging behavior when they perceived high levels of perceived discrimination (Bodkin-Andrews, Denson, and Bansel 2013). Even positive stereotypes may result in negative student outcomes if not carefully monitored. For example, stereotypes of Asian Americans include the expectation of exceptional academic prowess, especially in STEM-related subjects; as a result, many of these students experience increased anxiety and depression, especially when they struggle with the course material (Lee et al. 2009).

Combating Microaggression
There is no definitive way to reverse the negative impact of microaggression in the classroom, but as educators we should be aware of its negative effects and actively prevent it from occurring. Doing so requires not only avoiding a deficit perspective on unfamiliar cultures but also being aware of how we might be stereotyping minorities, positively and negatively, in ways that limit our students’ agency. We must not only be aware of this negative impact but actively offset it by teaching that honors diversity and cultivates awareness of the societal role of race and culture in nonminority students.

We want to give all students a positive environment and tools to cultivate an awareness of discrimination. What follows are some shifts in perspective and actions teachers can take to buffer minority children from the trauma of discrimination.

“Colorblind” Teaching Versus Honoring Diversity

“Colorblind” teachers say they treat everyone the same regardless of race (Terwilliger et al. 2013). This is seemingly helpful, but it can invalidate the unique experiences of minorities. Sue et al. (2007) posit that statements such as “I don’t see color” suggest that the experiences of minorities are unimportant or that their identity is irrelevant. Minorities may be very proud of their cultural background, and minimizing a minority individual’s experiential reality can be damaging. In addition, being “colorblind” allows non-Hispanic whites not to worry or think about the relevance of race and culture in American society, unknowingly turn a blind eye to the obstacles minority groups regularly face.

Both minority and nonminority students may be negatively impacted by a colorblind approach. Nonminority students may never be fully aware of the unique issues that minorities face and never understand how their own racial privilege influences the advantages they receive. Minority students may be taught that everyone is equal regardless of race and then have confusing experiences in the real world when they are indeed mistreated because of their racial background.

To avoid the negative consequences of “colorblind” teaching, we can instead take an approach that honors diversity, emphasizing differences among cultural groups and celebrating these differences rather than ignoring them (Terwilliger et al. 2013). This not only validates minority students’ ethnic identities but also helps nonminority students understand the role of culture in society and the advantages and disadvantages afforded various cultural groups. Helping all students adopt a diversity approach validates the unique experiences of minority students and greatly reduces the likelihood that nonminority students may demonstrate microaggression.

Stereotypical ideas about various groups prevail when there is not sufficient evidence to the contrary, which is why it is imperative for curriculum to include the positive contributions of minorities throughout history. Outlining the achievements of minority group members as well as traditionally recognized notables offsets the negative effects of stereotyping. Specifically, it may instill confidence and hope in minority students that they can accomplish many things despite coming from backgrounds that have produced fewer well-known success stories.

As important, including curriculum that highlights the contributions of minorities may counteract stereotypes, based on media portrayals, held by nonminority students who have not previously had contact with these minority groups. Lessons throughout the school year devoted to the success of prominent minority figures directly contradict negative stereotypes by providing an alternate perspective.

Diversity in classrooms is also strengthened by teaching social justice activism throughout history. This is
not only valuable for minority students but also informs students from all backgrounds about social movements that fought, and continue to fight, the oppression inbred in the United States.

**Uncovering Our Own Biases**

Although it is important to create a safe place for ethnoracial minorities in the classroom and teach from a multicultural perspective, it is even more important to assess our own racial biases. Dovidio and Gaertner (1998) describe *aversive racism* as negative feelings toward ethnoracial minorities that include uneasiness, disgust, or fear but do not cross over into open hostility. In fact, aversive racists usually claim to have progressive and egalitarian views.

Researchers have traditionally measured teachers’ explicit attitudes; however, this may not capture the unconscious nature of aversive feelings. Glock and Kovacs (2013), assessing teachers’ attitudes toward students who traditionally demonstrate low educational achievement, found that teachers overtly endorsed positive attitudes toward these groups, while their implicit attitudes when interacting with students of color were more likely to be negative and to rely on stereotypes. We may hold positive conscious attitudes toward particular minority groups but not be aware of our unconscious biases, which may be more automatic and more likely to drive our interactions with these groups.

We need to educate ourselves regarding racial awareness and the experience of discrimination so that we can better understand the difficulties of our minority students. We also need to be aware of our own biases and how they relate to our classroom behavior. A “colorblind” approach makes it difficult to recognize and acknowledge differences.

**References**


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