

## Considerations for Addressing Student-Perpetrated Microaggressions in the Classroom

### 1. Understand the difference between intention and impact.

Microaggressions are often unintentional. Those who commit them may have no idea that their comment was offensive or that they did something that would offend someone else. Microaggressions, however, can create discomfort, anger, and other forms of long-term damage for students who experience them. It is important to focus attention on the way the act made the other person feel and address their needs and pain.

### 2. Don't be afraid to talk about it.

If a student shares an experience about microaggressions or you observe a situation that has made a student uncomfortable, don't avoid it or pretend it didn't happen. Talk to the student in private about their feelings and why the comment or behavior was troubling. If they are comfortable with it, take the time to facilitate a conversation between the student and whomever committed the microaggression, with the goal of coming to a deeper understanding of where these thoughts and behaviors come from and how damaging they can be.

### 3. Be aware of your assumptions.

We are constantly confronted with images in movies, ads, and TV shows that put our students in particular categories. These images often unconsciously guide our expectations and the way we treat our students. While it can be difficult, consider your expectations of your students, and how much they are governed by stereotypes.

At some level, do you expect that your Asian American student will never struggle academically, and will be quiet and shy? If a black student looks bored in class, do you assume it is because she doesn't understand the material, or that she isn't being challenged enough? Assumptions can lead us to miss important signals, and it is important to ask questions and be open to each student's unique needs and experiences.

### 4. Be aware of how color blindness can make students feel.

Some may argue that our nation is post racial, or that we would be in a better place if we didn't recognize differences and just see each other as "people." But when you tell a student "I don't think of you as Latin@," or "I don't see you as American Indian, you're just like all the other students in the class," you are minimizing that student's cultural background, even though it may be very important in her life. It also implies that there may be something wrong with a student's background and heritage; otherwise, why would it be necessary to ignore it?

While this list is certainly not exhaustive, taking more time to be aware of our students' needs and feelings, as well as our own biases and perceptions, can create more healthy learning environments in our classroom so everyone can feel appreciated and included.

- Validate the experience of the target of a microaggression
- Communicate their value as a person
- Affirm their racial or group identity
- Support and encourage their experience on campus



## 5. Provide accurate information to challenge stereotypes and biases in the moment whenever possible.

- Breathe. Pause. Stay as calm as possible.
- Refer to your community agreements, norms, expectations
- Acknowledge the emotions in the room, both visible and invisible. Ask students if they would like to stay in class or take a break/leave.
- While acknowledging the impact, make sure to validate and support those who have been targeted.
- Follow up as needed, e.g. revisit in next class and/or see individuals after class. Identify other people as sources of support.

### How Faculty Can Avoid Committing Microaggressions

- Reflect on your own attitudes, stereotypes, and expectations.
- Confront your own hesitations.
- Do not expect students to be experts on any experiences beyond their own, and do not make them speak for the experience of an entire group of people.
- Assume that the groups that you are talking about always are in some way represented in the classroom.
- In those cases when students do have the courage to contact you and point out that they were offended by a remark that you made or an action that you undertook, listen to them. BELIEVE THEM.

### Some texts that can help teach:

One excellent starting point is children's literature.

- Michael Genhart's *Ouch! Moments: When Words Are Used in Hurtful Ways*, illustrated by Viviana Garofoli, addresses microaggressions explicitly.

Other books tell the story of what it means to be on the receiving end of them:

- Having people treat you as a curiosity—*Don't Touch My Hair*, written and illustrated by Sharee Miller
- Being misgendered—*10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, illustrated by Rex Ray
- Having your name mocked and mangled—*The Name Jar*, written and illustrated by Yangsook Choi

Texts like these help children of all ages confront the reality that what seems like a minor hurt can take on a new level of damage when it reinforces stereotypes.



2300 State Rd 44  
Oshkosh, WI 54904



(920) 233-CESA



cesa6.org



Smart Thinking  
Podcast