

Teaching Channel Perspective

Three Key Questions Educators Need to Ask About Microaggressions

1 What is a microaggression and why are they a problem in schools?

A microaggression is an intentional or unintentional comment or action, usually slight or subtle, that conveys negativity towards a marginalized person, group, or culture.

Examples

- A majority person comments to a minority person, "You're so articulate" or, "You talk so well."
The underlying message is that the majority person had low expectations of the minority person and expected them to be less capable.
- A majority person confuses the names of minority persons. Similarly, expecting a minority person to take a nickname simply because their given name is difficult for a majority person to pronounce.
The underlying message is that minority people are interchangeable or not worth investing in knowing at the individual level.
- A majority person asks, "Where are you from?"
The underlying message is that a minority person cannot be American or is not perceived as truly belonging to their country.
- A majority person asks, "Why do you wear that?"
The underlying message is that a Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, or other religion's clothing is inappropriate, unprofessional, or distracting in the learning environment.
- A majority person asks to touch the hair or a minority person or asks about hair care.
The underlying message is that someone is wrong or lesser about minority hair texture, style, or care.
- A majority person says, "I don't see color. I treat everyone equally."
The underlying message is that difference, personal identities, family upbringing, culture, and lived experience do not matter.
- A majority student is asked, "What's the answer?" and a minority student is asked, "What's your guess?" or, "Do you have an answer?"
The underlying message is that the minority student does not know the answer.

Impact

Most educators are aware that school tracking becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for achievement and growth. If students receive the message that they are in a gifted program or an advanced section of a course, they excel. In the same way, if students receive negative messages about themselves, their performance reflects those lower expectations. Microaggressions are steady, damaging messages to students about their value and potential.

The term 'microaggression' includes 'micro' to make it clear that these instances, as individual events, are not severe but that the repeated impact is exponentially cumulative and deeply damaging.

Microaggressions result in poor academic performance, depression, anxiety, isolation, sleep difficulties, and marginalization.

2 Why does it make majority people defensive when microaggressions are pointed out?

Intentions

- Certainly, some majority persons' comments are intended to be complimentary - for example, suggesting to a person who uses a prosthetic that they are inspirational or commenting to a new teacher that they could pass for a student. The majority person is oblivious to the fact that their comment is offensive.
- In reality, the intentions are insignificant, and the focus should be redirected to the impact of microaggression. There is no excuse.
- When a majority person feels inclined to make a comment about an aspect of a minority person, the majority person should pause and ask themselves, "Why?" If they are curious, they can investigate their own motivation or intention. For example, it's great to compliment someone on an idea, solution, or discussion, but not HOW those things are articulated.

Coping Mechanisms

- Bottom line, if you are curious about a person's personal characteristics, clothing, or behaviors, do your research at the library or online. Individuals are not responsible for enlightening you and certainly can't be expected to use their academic or professional time speaking on behalf of an entire culture, religion, or group.
- Ultimately, even good intentions do not excuse being racist, sexist, offensive, or insensitive. Majority persons are responsible for biting their tongues, learning names, accepting that people share about themselves on their own terms, researching traditions, and exploring explanations independently.

3 How can teachers lead educational conversations around race, stereotypes, and discrimination?

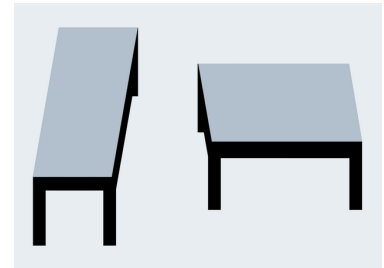
Strategies

My favorite way to open up a conversation about race, stereotypes, and discrimination is to explore the topic of culture through and exercise using the [Shepard Tabletop Illusion](#).

In this activity, students and teachers explore together how surrounding information changes perception and influences meaning.

Here's a start:

1. Invite students (or colleagues!) to share what they notice about the two tables in the image shown on the right.
2. Encourage people to share using descriptive and comparative language.
3. Using a cutout of the top table, demonstrate that the tops of the two tables are actually exactly the same.
4. Explain that the surrounding contextual information changes the perception of the table.
5. Equate 'contextual information' with 'culture and background' to discuss how each of us perceives things based on who we are.



Another great analogy for learning educational conversations is the analogy of [mirrors and windows](#). When we experience life with only mirrors, we see only reflections of ourselves. When we experience life with windows, we see an infinite set of possibilities that is inclusive, and which broadens our horizons.

Teachers have incredible opportunities for professional development and continuing education. Courses like [Creating an Anti-Racist Classroom](#) are a great place to start.

Guidelines

Teachers must meet students where they are and move forward from there. Not every class is positioned with the background knowledge, vocabulary, or experience to engage in a discussion of discrimination. This means, simply, that a transition into the topic is necessary, support and scaffolding must be provided, and all progress should be recognized as a movement towards deeper understanding.

[Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students](#), a comprehensive guide from [Learning for Justice](#) is filled with specific strategies to help you prepare for and facilitate challenging conversations.

Good educators are continuously improving their practice. Building awareness of microaggressions and working to eliminate them will lead to greater equity in the teaching and learning experience.

Additional Resources to Explore

Continuing Education Courses (3 Graduate Credits)

- [5119: An Educators Guide to Global Thinking and Cultural Competence](#)
- [5110: Creating a Vision for Equity in Education](#)
- [5107: Empathy and Social Comprehension for a Compassionate Classroom](#)
- [5111: Mindsets and Skillsets for a Culturally Responsive Classroom](#)

Professional Development Courses (10 hours)

- [PD 143: Ensuring Equity in Online Education](#)
- [PD 124: Culturally Responsive Teaching: Awareness to Action](#)

Teaching Channel Videos

- [Coaching for Equity](#)
- [Building Community Culture Through Community Circles](#)
- [Exploring Immigration Cultural Identity](#)

Suggested Resources for K12 Teachers

- [Begin Your Anti-Racism Journey](#)
- [Teacher Learning Activity: Understanding & Interrupting Implicit Bias](#)
- [Teacher Learning Activity: How Diverse is Your Universe?](#)
- [7 Ways to Be More Culturally Responsive Educator](#)
- [Teaching First-Graders About Microaggressions: The Small Moments Add Up](#)
- [Speaking Up Without Tearing Down](#)

Suggested Resources for Students

- [CNN/Sesame Street Racism Town Hall](#)
- [Books Matter: ADL Children's Literature Library](#)
- [Unit in a Box Lessons \(Secondary\)](#)



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