



Examples of Racial Microaggressions in Schools

Racial microaggressions break down into three categories: **microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults.**

Microinvalidations In Schools

Microinvalidations exclude, negate, or invalidate thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. In your work life, this may be a statement that says “the best person will get the job” when the employment protocol is biased, or a failure to acknowledge a religious holiday that a co-worker celebrates. This communication in schools can look a variety of ways. **Here are some examples:**

“Be Respectful. Work Hard.”

Telling students that “working hard” and “being respectful or kind” equals success can be a natural instinct in an educational environment where students are to be taught and inspired. But, schools leaders and teachers must be conscious of systematic structures that are in place in America that impact the progress of students of color. Even when some of them work the hardest and bring the best attitude, they will be denied equitable opportunities.

“Reach for the Top”

Some schools operate with the belief that all of their students will reach the top. Schools should promote working tirelessly to reach goals, but it is dangerous to fail to acknowledge the hurdles that exist on the path to and through expanded opportunities, especially for students of color. Students of color have been denied access to opportunities due to their race, where they live, their economic status and simply who they don’t know. Schools must operate from a place of awareness and build this consciousness in students, using cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Ignoring Racial Trauma and Pain

Failing to acknowledge a racial trauma is another way to invalidate students of color. When a person of color, like Philando Castile, is murdered and broadcasted in the media, schools can't expect students of color to operate without impact at school. These situations may cause fear and anxiety in students and must be addressed in a thorough and intentional matter. It's not easy to simply "work through" triggered emotions. Just because we tell students that their effort will pay off doesn't mean it will keep them motivated in a world that tells them they don't matter.

The Misuse of "We"

The misuse of "we" is also a microinvalidation. When school leaders try to influence and support students, it is important that they do not equate their experience to a student of color's reality if it is not the same. The unspoken "pull yourself up by the bootstraps, like me" dismisses the burdens students of color bear while working to find success. It is especially important that white school staff be careful not to compare their experiences with students of color without factoring in the impact that white privilege had on their success.

Microinsults In Schools

Microinsults are often unconscious behavioral or verbal comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial identity. Here are some ways microinsults can play out in schools.

- A student's academic capacity is assumed based on their race
- A parent's level of investment in their student's success is inferred based on the way they look, how they speak or where they live
- A student of color is not given the same opportunities as white peers
- A black or brown student is assumed to be dangerous or violent

Additionally, some school phrases may resemble microinsults. Ask yourself, what are the underlying beliefs that we have when we say the following things:

“We have zero tolerance for behavior issues.”

Schools should prioritize student safety, but they must be conscious of the way in which this priority lives. Emphasizing “zero tolerance” verbally and visually throughout the school can feel similar to rhetoric used nationally to encourage **mass incarceration** in communities of color. It can reveal a belief that students of color need to be controlled and reminded of who is in power in order to function appropriately. Additionally, the statement shows a lack of sensitivity to any root issue that may impact student behavior. Schools should focus on building positive school culture as a means to increase motivation and decrease behavioral infractions as opposed to instilling fear in students.

“High Expectations”

This is a tricky one. On one hand, it is honorable for a school to ensure that students of color are presumed capable of as high achievement and success as any other student. However, this idea must be rooted on a foundation where students of color are given the same opportunities as their white peers. It is not enough to expect students of color to be the best without giving them the best instruction, best instructors and best environment. Schools must hold themselves to the same standard they hold students to.

Additionally, verbally and visually presenting the statement “high expectations” as a motto can imply that students and their families don’t already operate with the highest of expectation and intention for themselves. Schools must be conscious of the reason they are using statements and ensure that there isn’t unconscious bias that is feeding the intention.

When high expectations are present, it looks like ensuring that students are held accountable to do their best, but it also shows what staff believe is the “best” for students of color. Without equitable resources, culturally responsive school practices and instruction and great relationships, it will be challenging for students to meet these expectations.

Microassaults In Schools

Microassaults are more explicit verbal and nonverbal attacks meant to hurt people of color. This can occur through labeling/name-calling, avoidant behavior and being discriminatory. Here are a few ways schools microassault students of color.

Labeling/Name-Calling

- Calling students “lazy”- This is a stereotype that has been perpetuated about people of color and can be emphasized in school when a student is lacking investment or not meeting teacher expectations.
- Calling students “boy” or “girl”- Again, these statements have been historically used to degrade people of color and insinuates inferiority.
- Stating that a student “doesn’t want to learn”- There may be something impacting how a student behaves at school, but it shouldn’t be inferred that students don’t enjoy or desire to learn. It’s never true. When working with students of color, this statement can stem from the stereotype that people of color are ignorant and have no desire for education.

Avoidant Behavior

- Failing to communicate vital information with parents of color. This can look like developing specialized interventions or change of class placement without parental consent.
- Failure to communicate mistakes staff has made when working with a student of color to avoid a parent’s disapproval of the school’s approach.

Being Discriminatory

- Denying parents of color adequate opportunity to be involved in school initiatives and decisions. This shows that a school’s assumption is that they know what’s best for the students, instead of parents.