

Gifted Education and Culturally Different Students: Examining Prejudice and Discrimination via Microaggressions

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Introduction

This paper is really exceptional! Who helped you with it? Did you use Cliffs Notes?

Teacher to Donna Y. Ford as a 10th grader

In the previous issue of *Gifted Child Today* (GCT; Ford, 2013) focused on prejudice (beliefs and attitudes) and discrimination (actions and behaviors) using the theoretical frameworks of Gordon Allport and Robert Merton to inform, in part, why Black students were underrepresented in gifted education. She argued that deficit thinking (low and negative expectations) and prejudicial thinking about the capabilities of Black students keep them from being referred by teachers for gifted education screening, identification, and services. It was noted that the models by Allport and Merton were only two of many other models that inform not just underrepresentation, but also recruiting and retaining culturally different students in gifted education. A fuller treatment of recruitment and retention barriers for culturally different students appears in Ford (in press).

In this article, the coauthors continue this line of scholarship to concentrate on an equally relevant and timely theory of prejudice and discrimination—microaggressions—in the context of gifted education. As with the previous article, the dual purpose of the current article is (a) to (further) expose professionals in gifted education to attitudinal barriers that hinder, at best, and deny, at worst, access to gifted education for Black and Hispanic students and (b) to effect significant

changes to advocate for and be professionally accountable for all the culturally different gifted students we must teach. Ultimately, we hope that sharing this third model will further help educators to decrease/eliminate underrepresentation and improve recruitment and retention among these culturally different groups.

It is not our intent to reiterate the need and rationale for addressing prejudice, and possible and real discrimination,

in gifted education. To the point, readers can and must refer to the previous GCT article (Ford, 2013), Ford (in press), and our individual and collective works with schools, communities, families, and culturally different students.

The data speak volumes—at no time in the history of gifted education have Black students been equitably represented (e.g., Ford, 2010, 2011, in press; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). The same holds true for Hispanic students (Castellano & Frazier, 2010; Ford, in press). In the majority of our publications and work with schools and organizations,

we present gifted education trends for Black and/or Hispanic students, with attention to gender disparities. The experiences of Black males, Hispanic males, Black females, and Hispanic females are similar and different. Black males and Hispanic males, respectively, are the most underrepresented students in gifted education (Ford, 2011). Gender differences cannot be ignored or trivialized in the gifted education recruitment and retention process (see Ford, in press; Moore & Flowers, 2012).

As we write this article, the most recent data reveal that Black and Hispanic students are *again* extensively underrepresented

“ TO ELIMINATE ALL TYPES OF MICROAGGRESSIONS IN GIFTED EDUCATION, TEACHERS REQUIRE SYSTEMATIC AND COMPREHENSIVE MULTICULTURAL COURSEWORK AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. ”

in gifted education as of 2012. Black students represent 19% of public schools that offer gifted services, but only 10% of gifted education enrollment in such districts. Hispanic students represent 25% of public schools offering gifted services, but only 16% of gifted education enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-2012-data-summary.pdf>). As we describe next, microaggressions play a significant role in contributing to the problems associated with recruiting and retaining Black and Hispanic students in gifted programs.

Microaggression is the notion that specific interactions between those of different races and cultures are often problematic, and result in demeaning and insulting non-Whites (Pierce, 1970). Sue and colleagues (2007) described microaggressions as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and/or environmental indignities, intentional and unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward racially different individuals and groups.

Microaggressions are demeaning subtle insults against non-Whites. According to Pierce (1970), the chief vehicle for pro-racist behaviors is microaggressions. They are subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges that are put-downs of Blacks by offenders.

From the overview thus far, readers may be confused regarding the need to study microaggressions in the context of gifted education. In the following sections, we attempt to put this confusion to rest.

Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions pertain to understanding variables that influence intergroup relations. Teachers may ask students who have the highest grade(s) if they received assistance. The question may be innocent and not ill intended (recall Merton). However, when this and other situations are perceived as being tied to or a function of cultural differences, they become distinct and take on a different meaning. Subsequently, Black and Hispanic students subjected to microaggressions may experience or respond with anger, hurt, self-guessing, and

other negative feelings and thoughts. Having their abilities second-guessed and interrogated can (and does) contribute to underachievement among culturally different students, which ultimately contributes to underrepresentation.

Derald Sue and colleagues (Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009) proposed a classification of racial microaggressions where they described three types of racial transgressions:

1. *Microassaults*. Conscious and intentional actions or antilocution (Allport, 1954), such as using racial epithets, racist jokes, displaying nooses, and/or deliberately complimenting a gifted White student but not a gifted Hispanic student who earned the same grade or test score.
2. *Microinsults*. Verbal and nonverbal communication that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity, as well as demean culturally different students' heritage and/or racial identity. One example is querying a gifted Black student how she or he got admitted in the gifted program, implying that she or he was admitted to fulfill some type of racial quota.
3. *Microinvalidations*. Communications that subtly exclude, negate, and/or nullify the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Black and Hispanic students. For instance, teachers who ask a Hispanic student where she or he was born convey the message that the student could not possibly be born in the United States. This suggests that the non-White student is a foreigner in his or her own land (see Ford, 2013).

Table 1 presents the three types of microaggressions accompanied by examples specific to gifted Black and Hispanic students. These examples are not contrived; in our collective experiences, we have been witness to such statements, questions, and behaviors. And we have witnessed the psychological and social toll they placed on gifted students who are Black and Hispanic. The table has three columns that describe the specific theme, microaggression, and conveyed message(s) to gifted Black and Hispanic students.

Table 1.
Microaggressions and Gifted Education: Black and Hispanic Students Examples.

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Alien in One's Own Land Statements that convey the message that Hispanic students are assumed to be foreign born.	"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" "You speak good English." "Can you teach me Spanish?"	You are not American. Hispanics are foreigners. All are immigrants.
Ascription of Intelligence Statements that interpret intelligence on the basis of students' race.	"You are a credit to your race." "You are so articulate."	Black and/or Hispanics gifted students are not as intelligent as White gifted students. It is rare for gifted Black and/or Hispanic students to be so well spoken, meaning who speak mainstream English. ^a

Table 1. (continued)

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Colorblindness Statements that indicate that a White educator does not want to acknowledge race.	"When I look at you, I don't see color." "America is a melting pot." "There is only one race, the human race."	Denying a Black and/or Hispanic students' racial experiences. Assimilate/acclurate to the dominant culture. Denying the gifted Black and/or Hispanic student(s) is a racial/cultural being that has needs unlike White students.
Denial of Individual Racism A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases.	"I'm not racist. I have several Black and/or Hispanic friends." "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority."	I am immune to racism because I have Black and/or Hispanic friends. Racial oppression is no different than gender oppression. I cannot be a racist. I am like you.
Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status A culturally different student is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of his or her race.	A White teacher clutches purse/wallet as a Black or Hispanic approaches or passes. A White teacher only feels safe working with gifted White students.	Gifted Black and/or Hispanic students are criminals. Black and/or Hispanic students are dangerous, regardless of intelligence and academic performance.
Myth of Meritocracy Statements that assert that race does not play a role in life successes.	The most qualified student should be admitted to gifted education. "Everyone can succeed in the gifted program if they work hard enough."	Black and/or Hispanic students are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. Gifted Black and/or Hispanic students are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.
Pathologizing Cultural Values/ Communication Styles The notion that the communication styles and values of the dominant/White culture are ideal.	Asking a Black student "Why do you have to be so loud and animated? Just calm down." "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think." Dismissing culturally different students' comments and queries when they bring up race/culture in school settings.	Gifted and/or Hispanic students must assimilate to dominant culture communication styles to succeed. Be more verbal. Speak up more like gifted White students. Leave your cultural baggage as a Black and/or Hispanic student outside of school classrooms.
Second-Class Citizen A White student is given preferential treatment over a culturally different student.	Black and Hispanic students not viewed as gifted. Gifted teacher questions why she or he must make changes to be culturally responsive. "You people . . ."	Black and/or Hispanic are general education students; they cannot possibly benefit from and survive in gifted education. Whites and their culture are more valued students than Black and/or Hispanic students. Black and/or Hispanic students do not belong in gifted education. They are lesser academic beings than White classmates.
Environmental microaggressions Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels.	A gifted school that is named after White heterosexual upper-income males or females. Books and curricular materials feature predominantly White people.	Gifted Black and/or Hispanic students do not belong in our schools and programs. They will not succeed in gifted education. There is only so far they can go. Gifted Black and/or Hispanic students are outsiders. Their history; culture, significant to U.S. society; ways of being; and so on are unimportant.

*See Alim and Smitherman (2012).

Summary and Recommendations

The three microaggressions are powerful reminders that Blacks and Hispanics seldom have the privilege of being comfortably different. Their cultural differences from White students become the target of both overt (microassaults) and covert (microinsults and microinvalidations) racial prejudice. Microinsults and microinvalidations, often dubbed new or aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), are the most difficult to prove because of their subtle nature. While the Black or Hispanic student(s) may feel insulted, she or he has trouble pinpointing why, and the perpetrator does not acknowledge that anything has happened because she or she professes to be unaware of having been offensive or insulting.

I didn't mean to imply that he [Black or Hispanic student] did not do the work independently. It was just so well done that I, initially, had a hard time believing he did not get help. I was trying to be complimentary. (Teacher)

To eliminate all types of microaggressions in gifted education, teachers require systematic and comprehensive multicultural coursework and professional development.

Conflict of Interest

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