



## ***Interrupting Microaggressions:*** Important Lessons in the Early Years

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**A**s an early childhood educator, I have always valued the importance of creating safe spaces for my students, spaces in which young children feel invited to bring their full selves each morning. Social-emotional growth and academic success are interdependent. The process of learning, as many educators have often understood it, is the series of cycles that bring human beings into disequilibrium as the world they have come to understand is shifted, either in small ways or in greater more profound ways. This disequilibrium creates unease within the learner, who then seeks to make sense of the information they have absorbed in order to return to equilibrium. This is true when children are learning to regroup multi-digit equations, or when they are learning a new spelling pattern, or even when they are learning a new conflict resolution strategy. Unease and disequilibrium are a critical part of the learning process, and require learners to take risks.

During a recent Curriculum Night I hosted with lower school parents, I asked them to think back to a formative learning experience and then asked them to describe what they remembered. Unsurprisingly, many recounted supportive teachers and peers, encouragement from the group surrounding them, and deep connection to their community. As was true for those adults reflecting on important learning moments, students will take the greatest risks when they feel supported and when they experience a sense of belonging in their community. This sense of belonging, however, is undermined when a community does not think critically about the ways in which each member's identity is either embraced or marginalized.

Children notice differences. They are hardwired to observe patterns in their world, and as they develop, they begin to ascribe meaning to those differences. In a study done by Katz and Kafkin (1997), they found that infants as young as six months of age were able to nonverbally categorize individuals they observed by racial and gendered categories. In her article, *Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race* (2009), Dr. Erin Win-



kler describes how this natural inclination to categorize continues into the preschool years and can be observed as young children begin to navigate their social environments. The differences that they notice at six months begin to take on social meaning. Young children are natural researchers. Winkler, supported by the research of others, argues that children seek to make sense of those differences, gathering information from the world around them, from sources which include, but are not limited to: their family, their peer group, the media, and their general environment.

They do so by tapping into the messages that are communicated about the ways in which our society values or devalues different identities across race, gender, sexual identity, class, ability, and other social identifiers. These messages, unless interrupted, become part of the lens they use to understand and interpret their world. As a result, the interactions that the students have with each other and with the adults in their schools and learning communities are infused with those messages. A kindergarten child being told that their skin looks dirty because it is brown, a first grader telling her classmate that it is impossible for her to have two moms, or a teacher consistently confusing the two Asian students in her class are examples of moments in which a piece of a person's identity is marginalized. These acts of marginalization based on a person's identity have come to be known as microaggressions (Wing Sue, D. et. al., 2009).

Microaggressions are often described as "small paper cuts" that represent all of the times that someone says or does some-

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thing that further marginalizes you because of your identity. As a queer, Christian, able-bodied, traditionally educated, English-speaking, cisgender woman of color in the United States, I will experience privileges that come with being a member of some of those groups which wield power (political, social, economic, etc.), and I will also experience the marginalization that comes from being a member of other groups that do not wield power in my American context.

If, as early childhood educators, we believe in the importance of creating safe learning spaces, where children can take risks, and if this necessitates that each child feels that they belong, then we have a responsibility to interrupt microaggressions that we witness and perpetuate in our learning environments as we navigate the differences that will inevitably exist in any classroom made up of individuals who occupy multiple identities. When we name those experiences for young children, we are helping them develop a lens with which they begin to identify those moments of marginalization, and in turn, interrupt them. An important piece of this work belongs to the adults who must model what it means to bring their full selves into the classroom. When we do this, we are explicitly sending the

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message to students that each piece of who they are is valuable and belongs, and that the classroom would not be complete without every last piece. But what does this process look like in a classroom of young children?

### Let me tell you a story...

Before becoming an administrator, I had taught in early childhood and elementary classrooms for 14 years. Six of those years were spent teaching third grade.

One afternoon, my third grade students were enjoying a few minutes of quiet time in order to reflect and decompress. I needed to step out for a moment so I asked another teacher to stay with the students while I was away. She was new to the school, and so I asked her if she would introduce herself. What is important to know in this story is that this teacher identified as Asian American. She also taught Mandarin in the lower school, but not to my students. As she introduced herself, one of my students said, "Wow, you sound American."

Words are powerful, and they can hang in the air, sucking the oxygen out of the space. The teacher was stunned, and I quickly said, "Ouch." "Ouch" is the word that we used in our classroom when someone's words or actions made an impact. The ouch may not be immediately defined, but it lets the class know that we must stop to address an important matter. I followed the ouch by saying that I needed a few moments to gather my thoughts, take a break, and that

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we would address what I was feeling when I returned.

I took a few minutes to gather some resources that would support a third grade conversation regarding microaggressions, and in particular, the impact of this child's comment. In the case of my student, his statement reflected his understanding of this teacher's Asian American identity as perpetually foreign. She could not be from here because her Asian identity contradicts his understanding of what it means to be American.

I invited the students to the meeting area. I introduced the students to the concept of microaggressions, sharing the definition and some examples. I then shared stories regarding moments during which I experienced these "paper cuts." Some of the students made connection signs with their hands as I shared my stories, and then began to recount their own stories of marginalization. One student who also identified as Asian American named how frustrating it was for him to be confused with another Asian American child by the adults who taught him in the building. "I don't even look like him," he noted. One of my white



students responded that she understood why her friend would be upset because the comment implied that these two students were interchangeable and could easily be replaced. As we shared these incidents, my students began to reflect on the moment in the classroom, and on other moments in their lives, moments during which they had both experienced a microaggression or delivered one impacting another person. They made connections, and in doing so, developed a deeper understanding of the world and a more meaningful connection to each other.

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A few days later, in response to the note I wrote to the parents about our conversations regarding microaggressions, the mom of the Asian American student who initially shared his feelings about being misnamed wrote about her concerns regarding our conversations about race, worrying that in naming racism, we would negatively impact the classroom community. Her note highlighted a concern that many adults

have about having conversations with children about race (and about any social identifiers): *if you name it, it will exist*. And, her note, as a person of color, had added dimension to this concern due to the real impact these conversations would have on her child of color and her discomfort with the labels placed on people of color in general. It was not simply about her child being uncomfortable, but about her child being safe. I was grateful for the note and the trust she had in me to communicate her concerns, and responded by offering more details about the context of the conversation and why, in naming this moment, my goal was to support all of the students, and in particular, the students of color. I shared a number of thoughts, including the following:

*Throughout the year we have explored what it means to be from a particular racial group. The United States chooses to add racial labels to talk about people who have a shared history. It is not that I agree or disagree about whether it is right, but that I acknowledge it exists. If students are not taught about this history, then they will not be prepared to deal with its implications. For white children, it is important to learn this history, not because they should feel shame, but because it can empower them to be advocates against prejudice just as \_\_\_ was for \_\_\_ and \_\_\_. I love this community, not because hurtful things don’t happen, but because the teachers create intentional spaces to talk about the way the world is and what it can be when we work to fix it.*

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Children notice differences instinctually, the way that they notice they are hungry or tired. It is a gift to those of us who teach young children that their noticing of these differences are often not yet bound by the constraints of a society who seeks to ignore conversations about inequity and justice. As teachers of young children, when our students notice differences, it presents us with an opportunity to name the impact of those differences on our ability to navigate our world. A kindergartener who names that the skin of a brown child is “dirty” is also ready to have a conversation about the impact of lack of representation of brown-skinned characters in books, or brown-skinned princesses in animated films and how that might lead us to believe that brown skin is not beautiful. A four-year-old who comments that boys don’t wear dresses is a child who is ready to be part of a conversation about gender stereotypes and the idea that gender is not something you can assess by looking at a person, but rather something they communicate about their own identity. These are the conversa-

tions, lessons, and experiences that build the capacity for children to speak across difference, in accountability to each other, and with the hope of building a more just and equitable world. ●

## References

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