The Impact of Microaggressions and Stereotype Threat in Schools
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Introduction

Although the overt demonstration of racist behaviors and remarks are viewed as socially unacceptable, people of color report that they often experience acts of subtle racism by White individuals (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Today, school-based professionals in the U.S. are disproportionately White, whereas most of the children they serve are students of color. Specifically, the most recent U.S. Census data (2012) indicate that 49.7% of those under five years of age are minority children. These children will soon be entering school and will have daily contact with teachers and other professionals, most of whom represent the majority of U.S. culture. It is important to acknowledge that the National Center for Education Information (2011) reported that, 84% of teachers in the U.S. in 2011 were White, and Curtis and colleagues (2006) reported that 92.6% of NASP members were White in 2005. These discrepancies are particularly concerning, as school professionals may inadvertently communicate hostile and racially charged slurs that can have negative effects on children’s academic performance and how they feel about themselves.

Relevance for School Psychology: The field of school psychology has moved away from the traditional approach to service delivery, in which school psychologists simply processed referrals, tested, and recommended needed services. With the move toward a multi-tiered system of services, the role of the school psychologist has changed, such that school psychologists are more involved with consultation and intervention. This multi-tiered system of service delivery is not only relevant for students’ academic functioning, but an increasing number of states are integrating the use of social-emotional learning curricula. As such, school psychologists who are aware and sensitive to concerns regarding subtle racism can consult with teachers and other school professionals regarding school climate and social-emotional learning initiatives.

Racial Microaggressions

Definition: Verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights directed at another person that are often automatic, unintentional, and often occur on a daily basis (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

Examples of occurrences in schools:
• An Asian girl who is new at a predominantly White elementary school brings a sandwich and chips for lunch. A classmate looks at her food and says, “Wow! We bought the same thing for lunch. My other friend like you used to always bring fried rice.”
• During parent-teacher conferences, Mrs. Thomas suggests involvement in extra curricular activities to the parents of one of her Latino students. Specifically, she suggests that he might try soccer next season.
• As a school psychologist walks a Black female student to her office to be tested, she attempts to engage in small talk by asking the student if she has heard the latest Beyoncé CD. On a separate occasion the same school psychologist asks a Latino student how long his family has been in the U.S.

Stereotype Threat

Definition: The risk or fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s own group, must involve an identification with a relevant domain (e.g., viewing school as important), and deals directly with performance deficits (Steele, 1997).

Examples of occurrences in schools:
• A Black female, notices that her math teacher only calls on her to answer questions that are easy in class and that he always ask the White boys to answer the difficult questions. Although math is her favorite subject, she performs poorly on the exams.
• When his family moves, a Black male is enrolled in a predominantly White high school after being in a predominantly Black elementary school up until then. Jonathon is aware of the stereotypes associated with Black people’s deficits in academic performance. As such, stereotype threat is activated when he takes a placement exam before classes start.
• A school psychologists has his test kits organized and labeled according to test type. When taking the WISC off the shelf, the racially diverse student he’s testing notices that it was on the intelligence test shelf. In turn stereotype threat is activated.

Recommendations

What can school psychologists do?
• Discuss with school personnel the effects of racial microaggressions and stereotype threat.
• Help school personnel realize that things meant to be benign of flattering could be interpreted by others as race-focused hostility.
• Change students’ perceptions about the rigidity of intelligence.
• Include information regarding the effects of the administration of racial microaggressions when addressing school and classroom climate issues (e.g., as part of PBIS).
• Foster a safe school environment such that students feel comfortable discussing upsetting issues with school personnel.
• Challenge one’s own beliefs about racial microaggressions and stereotype threat before encouraging other school personnel to do the same.
• Continue to encourage minority identification with academics.

Suggested Resources: