Recognizing and Addressing Microaggressions in Teacher-Family Relationships

by Maryam Daha

Teachers, in their interactions with families, can unintentionally use words and behaviors that deliver negative and denigrating messages. These *microaggressions* can be subtle, at times unconscious and without intended harm, but may cause a rift in family-teacher relationships. Communicating with a learning disposition leads to a willingness to learn about the worldview of the family, and focuses on practical strategies that strengthen cross-cultural communication.

A five-year-old girl draws a picture for a class project. Her teacher says, "Good job. You can share this with your mom tonight." The girl pauses and responds, "I don't have a mom."

A teacher asks a father, who is from Kenya, if he can come to school and speak about his village. "The kids will love to hear about the lions and elephants." The father came from a large city in Kenya and had only seen these types of animals in the zoo.

Well-intentioned educators who have a sincere desire to have a positive relationship with students and their families made each of these remarks. I know because the first example was something I said when I was once volunteering in a classroom. These are incidents of microaggressions, which are brief, subtle, intentional or unintentional verbal and behavioral encounters that can communicate put-down messages and insults to individuals because of their group membership (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions, which can be carried out unconsciously, are prevalent in groups from all

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walks of life. However, marginalized groups including people of color, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBTs), religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and people from lower socioeconomic classes disproportionately experience microaggressions in their everyday lives (Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, & Lyons, 2010; Sue, 2010). Studies show that cumulative effects of microaggressions can produce

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An Example of Microaggression

Sheena[1] is a five-year-old American girl whose family emigrated from India when she was two. Sheena has a three-year-old sister named Hema. Toward the end of their first parent-teacher conference, Mrs. Roberts talks about Sheena's new friend and casually asks Mrs. Mehta, "Does Sheena go on play dates?" Mrs. Mehta replies, "I do not want Sheena to go on play dates that often. After all, she has time to play with her friends at school." Mrs. Roberts raises her eyebrows, and responds, "Friendship is an important part of children's lives, and they have to have opportunities to go to each others' homes. It is very good for them." Mrs. Mehta explains, "Sheena sometimes has a play date, and occasionally goes to birthday parties, but more than that is too much. I want her to spend time with her sister. You know, after all, I had Hema so that Sheena would not be alone." Mrs. Roberts smiles and says, "Sisters are different from friends." Mrs. Mehta feels uncomfortable with Mrs. Roberts' smile and asks, "Does Sheena have problems with friends at school?" Mrs. Roberts answers, "I don't think so, but you know play dates are an important part of the culture."

Mrs. Roberts shares information with Mrs. Mehta about a science activity planned for the coming week and asks if she would be willing to help out. Mrs. Mehta agrees, saying "Sure, I will come and help. We do similar types of activities at home. My girls like to do activities together. But lately I notice that Sheena sometimes does not like to share her toys or snacks with Hema and at times goes to the room and closes the door so that Hema cannot go in." Mrs. Roberts responds impatiently, "Sheena does not have to share everything with her sister. She can choose what to share." Mrs. Mehta explains, "I don't like to see this attitude in Sheena." Mrs. Roberts, noticing the discontent in Mrs. Mehta's face, advises, "I think you are making a big deal about this. Just let her be. She is a great girl."

Leaving the classroom, Mrs. Mehta had feelings of uneasiness and frustration about her conversation with Sheena's teacher. Her mind drifted to a class newsletter that had come home earlier in the week. She remembered language that said, "Each family is unique and we believe in embracing diversity. In the midst of differences, we should also emphasize our commonalities. After all, we are all the same on the inside." Mrs. Roberts' written words endorsed a colorblind ideology (Bell, 2008), efforts not to see or respond to differences, and rested on the meaning that she was fair and treated everyone on an equal basis. However, her written words were different from what Mrs. Mehta experienced in person. Mrs. Mehta's experience with Mrs. Roberts highlights the subtle nature of microaggressions and their contradictory double messages that cause ambiguous thoughts for the recipients, and result in them questioning whether they are interpreting the situation correctly and should confront the person about what was said.

1 For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms are used.

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psychological distress, impact self-esteem, and influence academic performance (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Sue & Sue, 2012).

Even though microaggressions might seem harmless and the person who enacts them might be unaware, they have a way of devaluing people and their hidden messages are degrading. One example is when a director praises a Vietnamese American mother, born in the United States: "You speak perfect English." Her intention was to compliment the mother, but the underlying message was that she was seen as a foreigner, not as an American.

Self-awareness, including recognizing our own biases that influence our worldview, is important in our interactions with children and families (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Not all biases are blatant. Indeed, many are subtle, less obvious, unconscious, and implicit. Studies show that through social conditioning, we harbor unconscious negative feelings and beliefs towards people based on their identities and backgrounds (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, Penner, Pearson, & Norton, 2009).

In the following vignette I explore a real-life incident, which illustrates the dynamics of microagression in more detail (see adjacent box).

This anecdote demonstrates a dissonance resulting from Mrs. Roberts' perception and attitude towards

someone from another culture that surfaced through micro-aggressions.

Communication: Rigid Disposition vs. Learning Disposition

Mrs. Roberts, who was well-meaning, viewed the interaction with Mrs. Mehta from her own cultural perspective and adopted a rigid disposition. Her aim was to teach Mrs. Mehta about common cultural practices and beliefs in the host culture. This type of communication emphasizes the notion that one person has to be right, and it brings an atmosphere of divisiveness and judgment into the relationship. Mrs. Roberts' verbal comments, facial expressions, and tone of voice conveyed hidden messages that Mrs. Mehta interpreted as criticism of her parenting.

A learning disposition, on the other hand, communicates a willingness to learn about the worldview of the parent. While it does not mean that Mrs. Roberts will agree with everything that Mrs. Mehta says, in taking this approach she is open to discovering differing perspectives.

Communication that is culturally responsive is the key to building a partnership with families (Gonzalez-Mena, 2013; Keyser, 2006). Listed are suggestions for Mrs. Roberts to use while having a dialogue with Mrs. Mehta using a learning disposition:

Listen to Mrs. Mehta attentively. Body language including posture, gestures, voice intonation, facial expressions are as important as what you say.

Ask open-ended questions, and extend yourself to see the situation from the parent's point of view. Phrases and questions like these, used in active listening, can help Mrs. Roberts to understand the situation from Mrs. Mehta's perspective:

- Tell me more.
- If I hear you correctly, you are saying that….
- I wonder if that is what you mean?
- What are your thoughts about…?
- It seems that….

By rephrasing Mrs. Mehta's ideas and reflecting back her feelings and thoughts, Mrs. Roberts checks for understanding and communicates to the parent that she is being heard. This, in turn, will open the door for a deeper dialogue.

View Mrs. Mehta's cultural perspective as a strength and not a deficit. Mrs. Mehta's views and concerns about Sheena and her sister stem from her collectivist values. While Sheena's individuality is important, interdependency within her family is equally important. Mrs. Roberts, who looked at the situation through her own cultural lens, stressed the value of play dates as important for socialization, as well as Sheena's individual right to privacy and freedom to make choices. It is important to remember that we may sometimes unconsciously judge someone's childrearing practices through our cultural lens. Although Mrs. Mehta did not acknowledge individualism in the same way as Mrs. Roberts, it would be wrong to assume she did not value it in other situations. It would also be an assumption to think that since Mrs. Mehta encouraged interdependence that Sheena would grow too dependent.

With a learning disposition, Mrs. Roberts can try to understand Mrs. Mehta's cultural practices and the meaning behind them. Embedded in this approach is the recognition that cultural behaviors can benefit an individual's development. For example, when Mrs. Roberts looks at the situation through Mrs. Mehta's eyes she might recognize that Mrs. Mehta's effort to transmit the importance of the familial bond to her daughters is admirable and deserving of her respect and support.

Acknowledge Mrs. Mehta's cultural cues and avoid dismissing her worries. Childrearing practices are largely based on our cultural beliefs. For example, Mrs. Roberts, who validated individual ownership, dismissed Mrs. Mehta's concerns about Sheena not sharing with Hema through microagression ("You are making a big deal…"). It would have been beneficial to hear the reason behind Mrs. Mehta's worries. In some cultures, not sharing with a younger sibling is a sign of self-centeredness.

Express your opinions and thoughts by exchanging information with a respectful attitude. Mrs. Roberts would do well to speak with Mrs. Mehta in a way that does not make her feel that she is being lectured to or put down. The focus of the conversation is on building a relationship: including the parent in the life of the classroom with the intention that the child and family will both feel welcome there and have a sense of belonging to the school. Microaggressions not only exclude, but also wound the relationship.

Be sensitive to the family's experiences. Socialization in two cultures can bring difficult experiences to families and their children (Daha, 2011). By actively listening, Mrs. Roberts could connect more effectively with Mrs. Mehta and learn more about Sheena's experiences. Building a positive work-

ing alliance between them would also help Sheena to feel more secure in communicating her needs to Mrs. Roberts at school.

In culturally responsive communication, both sides do not need to agree with each other on every point, but they are both committed to engaging in a dialogue that values different perspectives and builds a positive interpersonal relationship.

Conclusion

We are not born with biases and stereotypes; we learn them through our interactions with our social environment. It is critical to our ongoing professional development that we regularly examine our assumptions, beliefs, and biases and the effects of these on the people in our lives. Changing our attitudes and beliefs is difficult, but it is important and valuable work. Moving away from a rigid disposition to a learning disposition, engaging in open dialogues to identify and address microaggressions, and reflecting critically on the system of social inequities are all important steps along a path to truly celebrating diversity in all its forms.

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