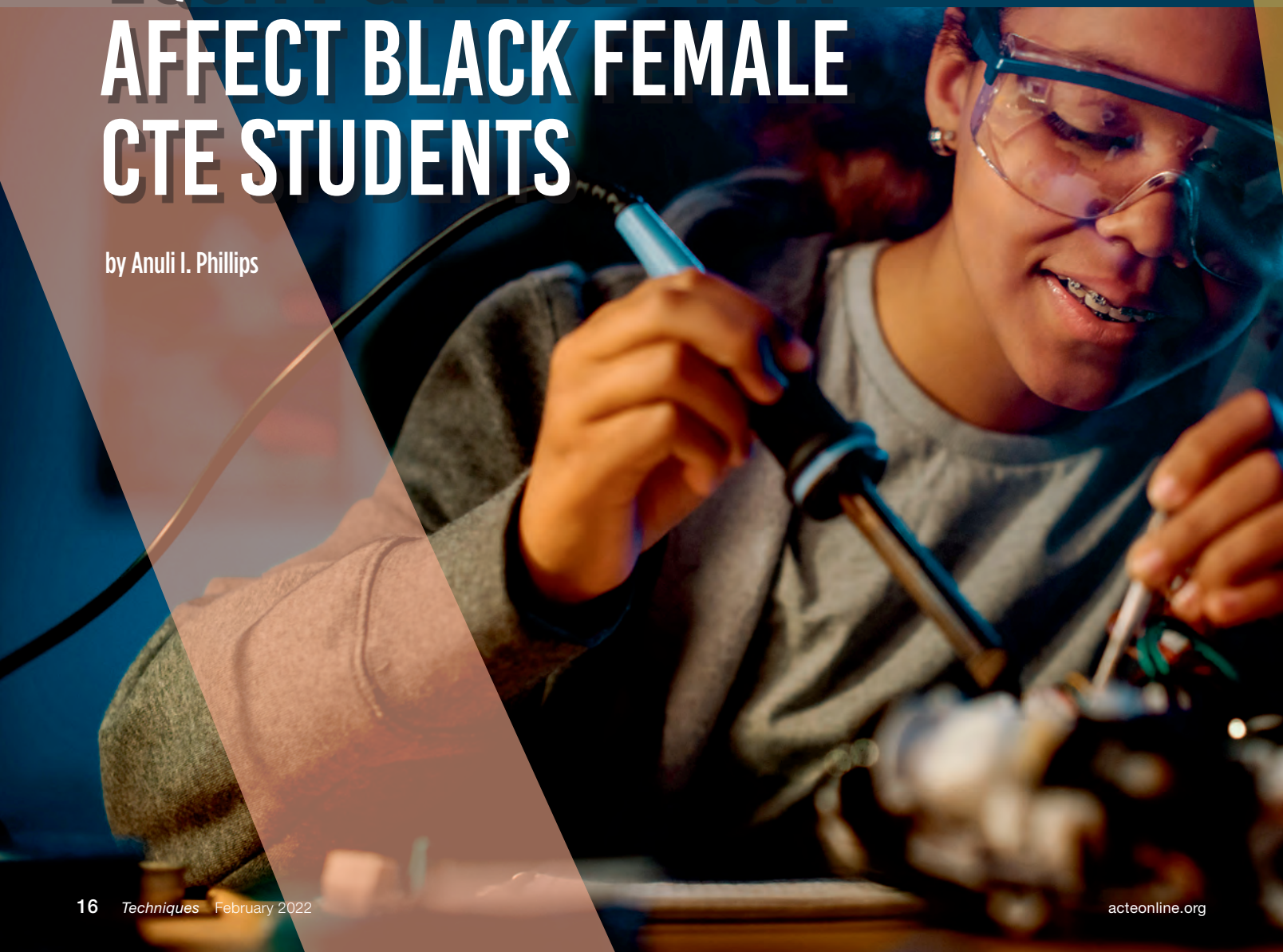
Understanding the Barriers:

How Microaggressions, Equity & Perception Affect Black Female CTE Students

by Anuli I. Phillips



This article offers a scholarly inquiry into Black female students' participation in career and technical education (CTE) and their underrepresentation in such high-paying career fields as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Microaggressions, equity and perception are analyzed for their effect on the population in question. This study will seek to explain how these variables affect the course-taking habits of Black female students in CTE. The literature that concerns Black CTE students and the literature that concerns female CTE students are explored individually; this discussion will further develop readers' understanding of how multifaceted Black female CTE students are. I separate race and gender in hopes of highlighting the lived experiences of this group and how their identities — and unique challenges — within these two groups intersect, compounding barriers to success in CTE (Crenshaw, 1998).

I set out to understand why Black female CTE students are less likely to enroll in high-paying technical fields and programs of study, as compared to their white male counterparts. My novice knowledge of the issue at hand suggested that Black female CTE students are more likely to be clustered in fields like hospitality and hygiene. Then, the focus became identifying the challenges that exist.

What can CTE educators do to increase the rate of enrollment of Black female students in high-wage, high-demand career pathways?

By exploring the literature surrounding this problem, I identified three key issues worthy of investigation:

- Microaggressions
- Equity
- Perception

(Fluhr et al., 2017; Johnson, 1996; King, 1977; Lester et al., 2017; Toglia, 2013)

These issues are revealed to lie at the heart of the problem. Hill-Collins (1990) used the term "matrix of domination" to illustrate how race, class and gender operate together, instead of as separate categories. Thus, they are cumulative in effect and will simultaneously structure one's opportunity.

Understanding the specific phenomena at hand requires an understanding of what it is like to be a Black CTE student, and what it is like to be a female CTE student. Only then can we fully illustrate the incredibly unique barriers affecting Black female students in CTE. Let's review the literature.

Gender-based obstacles

During the push to pass the Smith-Hughes Act (SHA) of 1917, men's interests dominated the workforce. Women and women's groups, however, were also invested in its passing. The General Federation of Women's Clubs led the call to use the term home economics in the bill. And the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) raised the issue of differing — lower — pay schedules for the teachers of home economics courses (Hillison, 1995).

Yet, the larger issue at hand was how CTE could enrich the lives of their female students. The Women's Trade Union League supported the SHA bill in hopes that it would diversify the career outlook

for women across the nation. The body of research provides evidence of a very checkered history in this area. Much like the larger society, CTE has struggled to recruit and retain women in high-paying fields.

Today, more than 100 years since the passing of the Smith-Hughes Act, we can seek to understand how the field has dealt with its gender biases and to discover what additional work must be done to improve equity in education for Black female CTE students.

Barriers

In 1972, Title IX was passed to ensure that everyone had equal access to education regardless of sex. This has, of course, benefitted women in CTE by providing women legal protections in all classrooms — compelling female students to seek more equal representation in traditionally male dominated CTE programs. Yet, women have still reported feeling as though they don't fit in to these spaces when they occupy them.

National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (2012) studied the current effects of Title IX, decades later, and found that, despite the legislation, enrollment patterns persisted. Specifically, barriers include unequal treatment and gender stereotypes. These barriers can be reduced through the continuation and improvement of tracking and data reporting. What sanctions should be used when discrimination is uncovered remains debatable, as studies show that discrimination happens implicitly, in the words that are never spoken.

Microaggressions

Lester et al. (2017) explained that microaggressions may not fall in line with what we would traditionally or legally consider discrimination. Microagressions can be verbal or nonverbal, conscious or unconscious on the part of the aggressor, and they make the other person or group feel neglected or negated. In CTE classrooms, female students have reported not feeling welcome to ask questions in male-dominated fields. Something as simple as the use of exclusively male pronouns can be defined as a microagression in the classroom.

Equity

Historically, women have clustered in service, hygiene and hospitality industries. On the other hand, men focused on agriculture, construction and mechanics (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). To close the persistent gender equity issue in STEM, female students must be counseled into exploring pathways that have been regarded as nontraditional. Because, when women opt out of high-wage, high-demand CTE pathways, the gender inequality translates into the industries and larger economy. And these trends can have a real impact on the lifetime earning potential of women versus men.

Career and technical education has long provided pathways into high-wage, high-demand STEM careers. The future of women in STEM is intimately connected to the future of women in CTE. The future of women in STEM education correlates directly with women being represented in high-paying fields.

The current course-taking trends in CTE reveal challenges and promises of the future STEM fields for women. Women currently make up 20% of STEM jobs (Toglia, 2013). Yet, at the time of Toglia's

study, women still only made up 6% of CTE electrician students.

The questions remain: What can be done to usher in a surge of future female students in high-quality STEM programs of study? And how does CTE fit into that narrative? Toglia (2013) examined strategies to improve gender equity in STEM fields, looking specifically at the prospect of mentoring programs for girls. Tate (2017) discussed the benefits of increased outreach from women in information technology careers to school-aged students. Invite women professionals in IT to attend CTE workshops and recruitment events; he argued that they are a key asset in the current fight toward gender equity in CTE. Not only do they serve as a visual representation of students' future selves, but they also may act as a unique resource to calm fears and address questions.

Race-based obstacles

Perception

There still exists a negative perception of career and technical education among some Black families, who only want their students to pursue four-year degrees. Often, individuals will dissuade or be dissuaded from participating in CTE. How do these and other factors affect Black students' participation in CTE during high school?

Current perceptions can be traced back to CTE's inception and its introduction to the Black community. Johnson (1996) recalled the negative stigma of career and technical education associated with the polarizing arguments between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. He stated that, according to administrators, one of the challenges in recruiting students in CTE is the way that Black Americans view technical education. Washington advocated for industrial schooling rather than academic, which many believed he preached as a tool to remove Black Americans from politics and higher academia. DuBois valued skills and vocational education, but he equated higher education with civil rights and political power. In contrast to Washington, DuBois did not think it wise to focus on specific trades as a strategy to uplift the race. These arguments would help to dichotomize the choice of college versus trade deep inside the Black community.

King (1977) echoed this finding, oxymoronically, almost 20 years prior. He explained the prevailing ideology of the time was that Black people were incapable of learning academic subjects and they should thus be outfitted with practical skills. As such, there still exists a perception about what role career and technical education plays — or has the potential to play — in the success of Black students. This, King attributed to much of the disinterest in CTE students among the Black community.

Gordon and Schultz (2020) also referred to the structural challenges of Black Americans' full and profitable participation in CTE by acknowledging that certain high-wage, high-demand career pathways were not at all available in certain schools. And the high-paying fields of study that were available to Black students were often underfunded. Thus, the investment in career and technical education did not reflect the same benefits or actualize the same reward as their white counterparts. This situation contributed to a longstanding, albeit false, perception that CTE would not deliver profitable returns on education. And it served to maintain the DuBois argument for a focus on academics. Yet, as of 2016, only 21% of Black Americans, aged 25 or older, held a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

With equity in mind, CTE has the power to improve the educational outcomes of Black students.

Conclusion

Byars-Winston (2010) discussed thoroughly the unique needs of the Black community, which career counselors must be equipped to wrestle with and meet. Because race and gender overshadow a student's broader experience in society, educators must prioritize equity and innovation in recruiting Black female students in high-wage, high-demand CTE programs of study. Remember, career choices do not exist in a vacuum.

The need to navigate through the racial consequences of career status, exploration, development and satisfaction requires that CTE educators be versed in and knowledgeable of the cultural context. The special experiences — consequential of their racial construct assignment — cannot be minimized or ignored. Rather than seek to not discuss race, culture, and ethnicity, Byars-Winston (2010) argued, educators should assist in providing their students and students' families with tools to explore what meaning can be made from their previous racialized experiences and notions.

Merely recognizing race can cause feelings of discomfort in some professional settings; there is, therefore, this need for career and technical educators to possess a minimum level of comfort with the construct. Better still: an enhanced level of knowledge of the unique struggles, privileges and history of the students' ethnic background(s).

For young Black girls entering CTE, traditional career exploration models may not produce the intended explorative and open-minded effect. Students' interests most often reflect the culture, understanding, and the limitations placed on future selves and dreams based on discourse. Black female students often lack the exposure to discover and express ideals about careers in STEM. And this is, perhaps, where the biggest need can be met by educators seeking to serve Black female CTE students. ■

Anuli I. Phillips, M.A., is a native of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, and a former AmeriCorps member. She previously taught World History and student success at a Title I high school and is currently a stay-at-home mom. Phillips graduated with her master's degree in CTE from the University of Central Florida (UCF) in 2021, received her graduate certificate in college teaching and leadership from UCF in 2019, and attained her bachelor's in sociology from Spelman College in 2010. She is a proud member of the Association for Career and Technical Education, Kappa Delta Pi, and Golden Key. Phillips has a three-year-old daughter and a 16-year-old son enrolled in an entrepreneurship/business CTE program.

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