Racial Microaggressions and African American and Hispanic Students in Urban Schools: A Call for Culturally Affirming Education

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This conceptual paper explores racial microaggressions and their effects on African American and Hispanic students in urban schools. Microaggressions are pervasive in our society (Sue et al., 2007), and although often manifested in subtle ways, can be detrimental for their long-term effects on students' psychological, social-emotional, and intellectual development. Our analysis utilizes extant literature to explore racial *micro*aggressions on a *macro* level in terms of district/school level microaggressions and teacher level microaggressions. A discussion ensues concerning the effects of racial microaggressions on African American and Hispanic students. Furthermore, we advocate for a culturally affirming education to empower and engage educational stakeholders in the processes of developing cultural competency within our urban schools and communities.

Keywords: racial microaggressions, African American students, Hispanic students, urban schools.

Racial microaggressions, the brief verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, denigrating, and hurtful messages to people of color (Allen, 2012; Nadal, 2010; Sue et al., 2007), have been a recent interest amongst various fields and disciplines. The majority of the contextual literature concerning microaggressions has been found in the realms of social and counseling psychology (Sue et al., 2007). However, several traditional and recent works on racial microaggressions in education have focused on the post-secondary level (Donovan, David, Grace, Bennett, & Felicie, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010), while a new body of work is emerging that focuses on K-12 environments (Allen, 2012; Henfield, 2011). This article seeks to explore the complexities of racial microaggressions in the context of education, particularly in K-12 urban schools. It is our hope that this discussion of racial microaggressions will highlight the marginality of African American and Hispanic students in urban schools and engender valuable perspective building for educational stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

Our conceptualization of microaggressions extends beyond the scope of simple verbal or behavioral interactions; rather we seek to explore *micro*aggressions on a *macro* level. We examine institutionalized systems and structures within K-12 district and school contexts, coupled with teacher positionalities that perpetuate racial micoaggressions. We contend that microaggressions are in fact detrimental for students, not for their seemingly short-term and innocuous impact (Sue et al., 2007; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011), but rather for the "deleterious

and long term consequences" (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010, p. 1095). Further, we theorize that a comprehensive culturally affirming education has the ability to positively shape the psychological, social/emotional, and intellectual development of African American and Hispanic students in urban schools.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is the theoretical lens upon which our discussion is founded. Since its inception from legal studies known as Critical Legal Studies (CLS), CRT continues to interrogate norms and assumptions to challenge the ways in which racial power and privilege are constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This CRT framework uncovers how and why race mediates people of colors' experiences of subordination through social and institutional racism (Allen, 2012). CRT also offers a platform for analysis within educational contexts. Solorzano et al. (2000) asserted that CRT offers methods and pedagogies that lead to the transformation of the structural and cultural components of education, which "maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (p. 63). Bell's (1995) discussion of the intentions of critical race theorists such as himself, falls in line with our intentions in this article: "We emphasize our marginality and try to turn it toward advantageous perspective building and concrete advocacy on behalf of those oppressed by race and other interlocking factors" (p. 79). We utilize CRT as a springboard to launch our discussion on racial microaggressions and a thread to weave through our examination of its effects on African American and Hispanic students.

What are Microaggressions?

For the purpose of this discussion, Allen's (2012) definition of microaggressions is most pertinent. According to Allen, "microaggressions affect all marginalized groups and are felt through environmental cues as well as verbal and nonverbal hidden messages that serve to invalidate one's experiential reality and perpetuate feelings of inferiority" (p. 175). The entity of school serves as an environment that often communicates cues to students about their capabilities, the importance of their contributions, and their expected life outcomes based on who they are. According to Sue et al. (2007) microaggressions are transmitted through subtle "snubs, dismissive looks, gestures, and tones" (p. 273), and materialize in the form of (a) microassaults (explicit racial derogation), (b) microinsults (actions that convey insensitivity and are belittling to a person's racial identity), and (c) microinvalidations (actions that negate or nullify a person of color's experiences or realities) (Nadal, 2010). These categories help to frame the "various textures of microaggressions and the ways in which race is embedded in the fabric of one's life" (Allen, 2012, p. 176). As this discussion positions racial microaggressions within the domain of educational spaces, it is imperative to examine environmental microaggressions (racial assaults, insults, and invalidations which are manifested on systematic levels) (Sue et al., 2007) at the district and school level.

District and School Level Microaggressions

Microaggressions are eminent at the district- and school-level of urban education. The existence of such indignities continues to denigrate the experiences of African American and Hispanic

students. Historically, the aims of education were to create and reproduce a working class society in order to move from the agrarian lifestyle to industrial living (Wiggan, 2013). Universal education provided a way for the state to superimpose structural, ideological, and bureaucratic practices without further consideration for the population that would attend schools. Many of these practices are perpetuated today through school policies and operational structures such as overcrowding of urban schools (Sue et al., 2007), the placement of less qualified teachers in urban schools, and bias in standardized testing, amongst others.

In the section that follows is a synthesis of recent literature that encapsulates the racial disparities that exist in schools as they pertain to disciplinary policies, academic tracking, and the curriculum. Districts and schools serve as conduits of racial microaggressions for they often transmit socio-cultural messages which can perpetuate students' feelings of inferiority, and when internalized at the level of the unconscious, can greatly effect students' well being (Cokley, 2006).

Discipline (Zero-Tolerance) Policies

Research over the last four decades reveal racial disparities for African American and Hispanic students with regards to discipline ratings through zero tolerance mandates. These mandates have increased dropout numbers, school suspensions, and expulsions among this student population (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Zero-tolerance policies for public schools were enacted as a response to the *Gun Free School Zone Act of 1990* (18 USCA § 921), a means to safeguard against school violence. Within this federal mandate, states were required to expel students who brought firearms to school. As a result, the development of zero-tolerance mandates throughout the state and its district counterparts enabled administrations to establish consequences – mainly school suspensions and/or expulsions – as a behavior modification model and intervention.

As time progressed, more menial infractions involving weapons (i.e., what is considered a weapon), drug abuse (i.e., non-authorized prescription and over-the-counter medications), behavior (i.e., classroom disruptions and/or insubordination involving teachers and administrators), and other forms of school violence (e.g., bullying, cyber-bullying, instigating student violence) became inclusive of zero tolerance policies which provided grounds to discipline student violators more frequently and incisively. The harsh reality in regards to universal discipline policies is that traditionally marginalized populations often receive harsher/more punitive consequences than their racial counterparts (Lewis et al., 2010). Increases in school suspensions and the racial discipline gap further perpetuate racial disparities that ultimately disadvantage African American and Hispanic students. And it is with much criticism that zero-tolerance policies continue to serve as microaggressions in educational settings.

Academic Tracking Policies

Academic tracking (also referred to as *curriculum tracking*) policies also serve as a district-and-school-level microaggression that denigrates the educational experiences of Black and Hispanic students. Curriculum tracks were developed and exist to accommodate ability-stratified student

groups, which are typically divided by high, average, and low academic performance. In this model, students with higher academic performance are placed on higher tracks that usually lead to advanced courses and four-year colleges (Allen, Farinde, & Lewis, 2013), whereas students on lower tracks are placed in courses that often prepare them for vocational occupations. The mere practice of tracking affects student achievement because this variability in educational access and resources perpetuates large-scale educational inequities.

Traditional models of school tracking were associated with factors of race and social class rather than students' academic ability. This system of segregation between advantaged and lesser-advantaged students propel psychological factors that include a re-evaluation of self-concept, self-efficacy, and overall academic motivation (Ansalone & Ming, 2006). Ansalone and Ming (2006) proposed the incorporation of learning styles (the ways in which students process information) as a salient approach to guide which classes and/or tracks students should pursue. Werblow, Urick, and Duesbery (2013) investigated the relationship between academic tracking and school dropout populations. Their findings revealed that students who were enrolled in lower academic tracks were 60% more likely to drop out of high school and students who comprised these lower tracks were mostly Latino, received special educational accommodations, or were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. They further contended that tracking is still associated heavily with racial and social class lines, where students most underrepresented in higher tracked courses were minorities and/or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Moreover, the disparities between the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic students in special education as well as their under representation in gifted and talented programs serves as another systematic microaggression. Ford (2013) proposed effective ways to recruit and retain Black and Hispanic students in gifted education courses to counteract the vast underrepresentation of this demographic in public schools. With solutions surrounding culturally relevant practices that address academic, social, and cultural barriers that exist in the classroom, Ford provided staunch recommendations to posit student academic outcomes.

Hegemonic Curriculum

The term *hegemonic curriculum* has been used to define the ways in which curriculum in schools have been shaped to reflect the interests of the dominant social class. More modernly used, Ighodaro and Wiggan (2011) reference *curriculum violence* as "the deliberate manipulation of academic programming in a manner that ignores or compromises the intellectual and psychological well-being of learners" (p. 2) as an intentional term to illustrate the way hegemony still pervades school curriculums. More specifically, curriculum violence occurs when pertinent cultural values, messages, and historical truths are suppressed or omitted in aims to continue oppression amongst minority groups. Through empirical data findings of school district practices, Ighodaro and Wiggan explored systematic ways in which curriculum has reinforced miseducation for historically marginalized student populations. Watson (2013) credits the text as a point of praxis for social change and social empowerment through the authors' recommendations for African-centered pedagogy and curriculum re-design that reflects an uplifting and transforming educational experience for students. In the same vein, an inclusive curriculum is not enough: "No curriculum can teach itself. It does not matter if teachers have access to exceptional curriculum if they do not have the instructional skills to teach all students"

(Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 37). Therefore, this discussion of microaggressions must extend to teacher level influences.

Teacher Level Microaggressions

Teachers play a critical role in the development of their students on all fronts pertaining to their psychological, social/emotional, and intellectual development. Due to the often cultural incongruence between the majority White teaching force (Landsman & Lewis, 2011) and their pupils, greatly composed of African American and Hispanic students, this racial demographic imbalance (Delano-Oriaran, 2012) warrants a discussion concerning the impact of teacher level microaggressions on students in classroom contexts. Overall, classroom and school climate is defined by the interactions between students and staff and the ways in which these interactions can influence school outcomes for African American and Hispanic students (Vega et al., 2012). In this section, we examine the ways in which teacher perceptions, deficit vs. asset based perspectives, and the lack of culturally relevant practices serve as teacher level microaggressions that ultimately marginalize African American and Hispanic students.

Teacher Perceptions and Dispositions

Teacher perception- that which a teacher believes about his/her students in regards to their abilities, capabilities, expectations, and likely outcomes can lead to a manifestation of microaggressions against their students. As such, teachers' perceptions set the overall tone for the classroom climate and this climate can greatly affect students' experiences. Because racial bias can unconsciously exist in teachers' perceptions, it is imperative that teachers possess tools to deconstruct their life experiences, historical contexts, and socio-racial-economic realities. In Rivera, Forquer, and Rangel's (2010) findings of microaggressions and the life experiences of Latino Americans, their college-educated participants noted that primary and secondary educational contexts had the most immediate and long lasting negative effects of microaggressions. Dually noted, microaggressions committed between teachers and students heightened the intensity of the impact in terms of teacher perceptions and expectations. Allen (2012) examined microaggressions and teacher perceptions as they related to the educational experiences of Black middle-class males in school. He found that the negative and stereotypical views held by teachers and administrators impacted the learning environment for the students. His findings indicated that teachers' perspectives resulted in racialized assumptions of intelligence, deviance, and differential treatment in discipline. These harmful racial microaggressions undermined the identity of the students as Black males and even stunted their ability to use their education for social mobility.

Along the same lines, teacher dispositions, comprising of beliefs, attitudes and perceptions come into play in a diverse learning environment (Talbert-Johnson, 2006). White (2012) highlighted that teachers resist disposition exploration, often denying widespread educational inequalities. This denial manifests when teachers need to "defend dominant social values from which they have personally benefitted" (p. 12) and when they have a "defensive reaction to challenges posed to their core beliefs and sense of self or individual identity" (p. 13). Oftentimes, teacher dispositions have a direct impact on the development of transformative relationships with students, making it even more detrimental when teachers are not aware of their own dispositions

(Vega et al., 2012). Positive relationships are paramount in urban school settings (Hancock, 2011) and when negative perceptions of students abound, authentic relationship building is stifled. Teachers should develop and possess an empathetic disposition through building nurturing and caring relationships with students (Talbert-Johnson, 2006). Additionally, teachers must commit to dig deeper to a level of critical consciousness (Nieto & McDonough, 2011) in order to recognize and unpack their own racial microaggression offenses.

Deficit vs. Asset Based Perspectives

When teachers attempt to leverage student differences as deficits rather than assets, another teacher level microaggression is ignited. Teachers often interpret differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages in students and their cultures (Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006). Deficit thinking as defined by Ford et al. (2006) is the negative, stereotypical, and prejudicial beliefs one holds about diverse groups. Deficit thinking has profound implications for teachers and their students for deficit thinking prevents educational stakeholders from recognizing and acknowledging their students' strengths, and this mindset can influence the development of large-scale policies and practices (Ford et al., 2006). On the contrary, asset-based approaches consider racially diverse communities as having strengths and encourage empowerment (Delano-Oriaran, 2012). Delano-Oriaran's research directly addressed teacher deficit models through an authentic and culturally engaging (ACE) service-learning framework, which yielded positive results in terms of preparing, empowering, and engaging White middle class teachers in their development of cultural competency skills. Culturally responsive pedagogy is an asset-based approach to teaching and learning which acknowledges and utilizes student differences as strengths in the learning process. Cokley (2006) noted that culturally irrelevant curricula and culturally insensitive teachers combine to negatively impact the intrinsic motivation and academic identity of African American students. In contrast, culturally responsive teachers are "student-centered, eliminate barriers to learning and achievement and open doors for culturally different students to reach their potential" (Ford, 2010, p. 50). Teacher perceptions and actions can also transcend to student-to-student interactions in schools. If teachers transmit microaggresive behaviors towards marginalized students, this can have grave implications for the student-to-student level microaggressions that could potentially take place. In turn, there are several effects of both teacher level and district and school level microaggressions on students.

The Effects of Microaggressions on Students

African American and Hispanic students occasionally have unique encounters with racial microaggressions. This can be attributed to the stereotypes and prejudices typically associated to their group of membership (Sue et al., 2007; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011) such as questions of immigrant status for Hispanics (Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010) and fear of violent behaviors for African American males (Allen, 2012; Henfield, 2011; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). We discuss three shared experiences/effects of racial microaggressions that may be experienced by this population—mental health and well-being, ascribed intelligence and perceived deviance, and self-concept and racial identity development.

Mental Health and Well-being

One of the major effects of microaggressions pertains to the health and well-being of students (Donovan et al., 2013; Henfield, 2011; Nadal, 2010)). Racial microaggressions assault students' psychological functioning through everyday behavioral and environmental encounters with inferiority (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). When one considers that people of color are exposed continually to microaggressions and that their effects are cumulative, it becomes easier to understand the psychological toil they may take on recipients' well-being (Sue et al., 2007). Nadal's (2010) work demonstrated that although microaggressions are often unconscious, they may lead to mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, trauma, or issues with self-esteem. Constantine (2006) asserted that racism-related life events and daily microstressors are exacerbated when in tandem with transgenerationally transmitted racism-related stress. Smith, Hung, and Franklin's (2011) study quantitatively examined the role that racial microaggressions has on Black males' mundane, extreme environmental stress (MEES) particularly as they moved up the educational pipeline. Interestingly, higher levels of educational attainment resulted in greater levels of MEES, which impacted the overall health and well being of the participants. Such experiences with microaggressions and the impact on the psychological and social emotional well-beings of students have great implications for students on a long-term scale.

Ascribed Intelligence and Perceived Deviance

Subtle attacks on students' intellectual abilities and teachers' negative interpretations of students' behaviors and intentions have strong influences on students. Such feelings of inferiority are triggered from performance anxiety in school or pressures to prove their competence in the face of such negative expectations. For example, high academic achievement amongst African American and Hispanic students can be viewed as the exception rather than the rule (Sue et al., 2007). Solorzano et al. (2000) stated:

> Racial microaggressions within academic spaces are filtered through layers of racial stereotypes. That is, any negative actions by or deficiencies noted among one or more African American students are used to justify pejorative perceptions about all African American students, while the positive actions or attributes of one or a few African American students are viewed as rare cases of success amidst their racial group's overall failures (p. 68).

Stereotype threat has also been noted as one of the most detrimental effects of student internalized intellectual inferiority. Students who belong to groups that are stereotyped are likely to perform less well in situations such as standardized tests in which they feel they are being evaluated through the lens of race and performance (Cokley, 2006).

Assumptions of deviance and wrongdoing amongst African American and Hispanic students have emerged as a major theme within the literature (Allen, 2012; Henfield, 2011; Sue et al., 2007). Henfield's (2011) study of Black males in a predominately White middle school supported this finding. The participants of his study often felt that they were viewed as criminals or stereotypical caricatures of Black males such as rappers, gangbangers, and athletes. These findings were consistent with Allen's (2012) findings of Black middle-class male students who

likewise reported that teacher and school interpretations of Black male behaviors were often disrespectful, aggressive, and intimidating. Such microaggressions towards students' intellectual capabilities and behavioral expectations have grave effects on their sense of self.

Self-Concept and Racial Identity Development

Another impact of racial microaggressions is that they chip away at students' self- concept and positive racial identity development. One's self-concept involves the way in which an individual develops a sense of oneself and his or her racial group. One's concept of self is an ongoing product of social interactions with others, particularly in the context of schooling environments. Likewise, racial identity development can be viewed as an individual's beliefs about the relevance of race in his or her life (Moore & Owen, 2009) and serves as a way of understanding how youth view themselves in relation to their ethnic group. The 'otherization' of youth as they navigate their sense of belonging has a strong bearing on their identity development (Bejarano, 2006). Historical and current structures in American life generate beliefs, attitudes, values, and ways that make it difficult for students to establish positive personal identity (Moore & Owen, 2009). According to Moore and Owen, self-concept and racial identity development are linked to academic achievement. They asserted that particularly during adolescence, students are aware of societal implications and stereotypes associated with their racial or ethnic group, which may lead to their disassociation with their racial group of membership to avoid stereotypes. Murrell (2009) contended that "agency is a critical capacity in the development of academically successful African American youth" (p. 97). Students who have strong self-concept and racial identity development can in fact advocate for themselves in ways that can positively impact their educational experiences. The myriad of effects of microaggressions on students such as the ones discussed here can be combated with culturally affirming educational experiences.

Culturally Affirming Education

Culturally affirming education can effectively and strategically combat racial microaggressions as they relate to the educational experiences of African American and Hispanic students in urban schools. Culturally affirming education extends the discussion of cultural relevancy because it does not simply implicate accommodation, rather affirmation. Affirming education means that one's background, culture and experiences are viewed with high regard and esteem. Moreover, the educational process is committed to the positive self-concept and racial identity development of students by honoring the legacy, and historical and contemporary contributions of their racial groups. Districts, schools, and teachers can utilize culturally affirming education to remedy the effects of microaggressions on African American and Hispanic students.

Culturally-Specific Curriculum that Empowers

A culturally-specific curriculum can serve as a change agent to combat microaggressions in urban education. The first culturally-specific curriculum which centered on teaching students of color is that of Afrocentricity. Wiggan (2012) discusses three lesser-known African American historical figures and their connections to Afrocentricity by providing scholarship on the experiences of African people and those of African descent. He provides the reader with a deeper understanding of how education has been historically and contemporarily used as a vehicle for

liberation and personal emancipation. The foundations and core tenets of Afrocentric curriculums and practices in the classroom have the potential to provide both the student and teacher with a cultural centering that reflects appreciation, homage, and cultural affirmation. Continued, curriculum in the classroom should be a process that brings about global awareness and ongoing knowledge development about the self and others. Kumaradivelu (2012) propounds the KARDS model, which stands for Knowing, Analyzing, Reflecting, Doing, and Seeing. He posits that this process is cyclical for teachers to best impart knowledge on their students. This is particularly important when considering the implications of using ethnic studies and/or culturally-specific curriculum approaches to learning with diverse student populations. In this model, students and teachers can become more reflective and critical through self-introspection about educational empowerment.

Teachers and Culturally Affirming Education

Perhaps the most integral theme in culturally affirming education is that of centrality, which centers on racial consciousness in the classroom. Friere (1970) proposed critical consciousness within his discussion of the banking model of education. The premise behind the banking model is that students are empty vessels in which teachers deposit and then withdraw information, which further alienates students from their learning. Friere also asserted that only through dialogic interaction between the teacher and the student would reflection and examination of social/political/economic forms of control push for liberation of the oppressed. Further, he contended that liberation and social agency from the oppressor should not be based on charity, but through an effort of solidarity for social change. Other authors such as Ford (2010), Kumardivelu (2012), Kunjufu (2002), Ladson-Billings (2011) and Sleeter (2012) push for culturally relevant and responsive teaching and pedagogy. Loosely defined, this involves learning that is centered on providing meaningful curriculum and instruction for students. In this model, students reactivate their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections in learning; and multiple perspectives are encouraged to foster learning. Culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching also involves allowing students to examine the social, political, economic, and cultural implications of society. Teachers can create socially supportive classrooms that foster emotionally warm and caring relationships among teachers and peers (Wentzel, Russell, Garza, & Merchant, 2011). Furthermore, teachers must identify and monitor their own biases and microaggressions towards students (Sue et al., 2009) to serve as culturally competent instructional and cultural leaders in their classrooms

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Conclusion

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Racial microaggressions, as examined through the lens of district/school and teacher levels, persistently affect African American and Hispanic students' experiences in urban schools. With the incorporation of a culturally affirming education, districts, schools, and teachers can move towards cultural competency (Ladson-Billings, 2011) by assessing the overall cultural climate of schools and classrooms (Henfield, 2011), supporting positive relationship building with students, families (Hancock, 2011), and communities (Delano-Oriaran, 2012), and striving to eradicate deficit positionalites (Ford et al., 2006). On a systematic level, districts and schools must transparently evaluate their disciplinary policies, remove the hegemonic curriculum and replace it with a culturally-specific and empowering curriculum, and dismantle tracking policies that

assault and denigrate students' educational opportunities. Lastly, educational stakeholders can support students' own personal resistance against microaggressions through the development of counter spaces (Solorzano et al., 2000; Torres & Driscoll, 2010), the creation of diverse opportunities that build cultural wealth through social and navigational capital (Allen, 2012), and positive self-concept and racial identity development (Moore & Owen, 2009). The awareness, acknowledgement, and removal of microaggressions from educational spaces will support the healthy psychological, social-emotional, and intellectual development of all students in urban schools.

AUTHOR NOTES

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