Protocols in Practice:
Racial Microaggressions Text-Based Discussion

Wendy Brannen, New York, and Kim Feicke, Oregon

We are a group of African-American and white NSRF facilitators actively striving to build alliances across race in our work. As a part of learning how to work together in new and different ways, we structured a dialogue around this focus question: What do we need from each other across difference in order to sustain and deepen our alliances and work in the face of aversive racism and racial microaggressions?

"Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities." [1]

We used the article "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life, Implications for Clinical Practice" by Wing Sue, Derald et al and the Save the Last Word for Me Protocol. Since members of our group live in different locations, our discussion occurred over the phone. We asked folks to post their selected quote from the article online before the discussion to make it easier to follow along and respond. The following are edited excerpts from our discussion.

Participants: Camilla Greene, Wendy Brannen, Debbie Bambino, Mary Hastings, Kim Feicke, RoLesia Holman

Quote: *The fact that people of color have had to face daily microaggressions and have continued to maintain their dignity in the face of such hostility is a testament to their resiliency. What coping strategies have been found to serve them well? A greater understanding of responses to microaggressions, both in the long term and the short term, and of the coping strategies employed would be beneficial in arming children of color for the life they will face.* (D. W. Sue, 2003)

Discussion

Kim: This is not only detrimental for kids of color but for white kids as well. What are the microaggressions that are reinforced for them and taught right now and they don't even know they're being taught? When do we get to a place when the work isn't about teaching coping strategies to kids of colors, but about educating and preventing racial microaggressions from taking place?

RoLesia: Fortunately, some Blacks have been taught and know the counter-narratives explained by Lisa Delpit in "Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting high achievement Among African-American Students." When taught by knowledgeable/culturally aware Blacks, we know the truth in addition to what's been told/said/shown about us by Whites. We have a foundational knowledge that counters the negative images and inferiority perpetuated upon us by Whites. It's imperative that we teach our children how to navigate these two worlds.

Camilla: This passage pointed to the fact that kids and people of color have these coping strategies that in the face of racial microaggressions help them maintain their dignity and help them persevere. I'm wondering what it is that we need to know about this and study it and figure out how people of color (cope). A lot of people in the dominant culture say they're fearful and I think partly our coping strategies make us courageous. They make us face fear many, many, many, many times and push through it. So that becomes a strength for African-Americans and people of color.

Quote: *Minorities, on the other hand, perceive Whites as (a) racially insensitive, (b) unwilling to share their position and wealth, (c) believing they are superior, (d) needing to control everything, and (e) treating them poorly because of their race. People of color believe these attributes are reenacted everyday in their interpersonal interactions with Whites, oftentimes in the form of microaggressions.*

Discussion

Mary: My reaction to that was, yeah, the sense of the superiority and the need to control and that being in and of itself, a microaggressive attitude toward people of color and even people of the same culture in some cases. And I guess when I read that too I think about, wow, that's how I am perceived by people of color in general. I'm part of that culture that has those qualities or appears to have those qualities.

Wendy: It's sad in terms of the oppression and unfortunately the anger and stress that the kids have reacting to this and possibly not knowing and also knowing why. And I think because of the privilege of my white colleagues here it's just been so ingrained. It's a work in progress but it's still basically within our group. It's going to be an ongoing process to work towards it and I respect that fact that there's growing awareness amongst *(continued on page 13)*

you to look at how you are perceived by people of color.

RoLesia: Yeah! To some extent I believe these to be true for all/most whites. I believe they would agree for the most part. I also think some people of color feel likewise after assimilating to a certain level of status. Internalized oppression is what comes to mind.

Debbie: Getting it in one instance doesn't necessarily mean getting it in the next instance. There's always that tension of trying to understand but trying to be vigilant and not feeling like my progress is the responsibility of my colleagues of color but wanting to make sure that we have the kind of honesty where people don't feel that they have to continually make the choice of whether we are worth telling the truth to, because we may come back with "oh no it was something else" or "oh no you misunderstood."

Quote: *Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Yet, as indicated previously, microaggressions are detrimental to persons of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities.*

Discussion

Camilla: I think about sitting in meetings, often when you're the only person of color and someone from the dominant culture will roll their eyes at you and say something. That is an image I have in my mind of when I've touched the nerve of someone in the dominant culture. People may not even be aware that they have that kind of reaction. I think an ally is someone who has stopped not knowing and someone who is on guard and is trying to reverse a lot of this.

RoLesia: Attending to our intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional selves. This education is necessary to consciously, deliberately, intentionally interrupt derogatory comments and behaviors. We must interrupt them whenever we can. Important that we do it in tandem with others. If not, it is overwhelming to have to carry this burden alone. This is some of the reason our students check out and behave in non-productive ways in our schools and communities.

Debbie: I think all of us have been in situations where people of color get quiet and we know people have something to say. Or where one of you said something and it doesn't get followed up on and then becomes our idea or some other white person's idea a few moments later, as if you didn't say something in the first place. I think it's our responsibility not to let that go and not to always make it the responsibility of the person who's being given the look or being passed over.

Mary: I just saw myself in this quote. I saw it loud and clear and it's not that I'm that much better at it but it is something I feel I'm getting more conscious of; and I agree with Kim, it is something we have to be in together and be conscious of it all the time.

Quote: *In essence, the catch-22 means you are 'damned if you do, and damned if you don't.'*

Discussion

Wendy: This takes me back to how much power silence has. We give the power to the person who has launched the microaggression and for me it becomes more difficult if I choose to ignore it.

Camilla: I also see from this point in my life and throw caution to the wind more often than not and just do…for all the people who cannot find their voices, for all the people who are not at the table, and so I think I can take whatever's going to be handed or dished out in certain environments. However, I think in our allyship it's not an either or. That it's an understanding, I don't know how to explain it, so that I can actually say I don't choose to address this right now and that would be okay.

Kim: How are we pushing that for ourselves, how can we at least, for ourselves, create the space where we're not damned if we do and damned if we don't? Some way that we can begin to unpack this for ourselves in a way that provides a different way to work together and a different level of honesty about the work that we're doing? ∎

[1] *Wing Sue, Derald et al. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life, Implications for Clinical Practice." American Psychologist. May–June 2007.*

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around the iceberg of racial and socioeconomic inequity, there has to be some diversity and dissonance present among the adults. It's hard to take the risks needed to reframe and relearn in an atmosphere of sameness. Where's the provocation, the influx of multiple perspectives and divergent experiences, the disturbance? Where's the willingness to engage in the inside-outside work called for by our colleague, Victor Cary of the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (BayCES)? Cary (2005) states that, "The work of creating equitable and excellent schools is fundamentally about changing ourselves, and thereby our relationships with others." He goes on to say that doing this work means being able to reflect on our inner lives while also focusing on our assumptions about oppression, power and hegemony. I'm not saying white teachers can't do this transformational work, but as a white teacher myself, I am saying we cannot do it in isolation. Our learning must be informed by alliances with colleagues and stakeholders across difference, and it requires a conscious decision to change the way we frame the discourse.

Changing the Discourse

Working in alliance and changing our discourse opens up possibilities for the transformation of our practice and our vision, with and for our students. Eubanks, Parish and Smith (1997) define Discourse I as the way we think, talk and plan in order to maintain or reproduce the status quo in schools. They call for a new discourse, what they call Discourse II, as the basis for real change in our schools. BayCES (2003) offers the following excerpt from the full text to distinguish between the two types of discourse:

Discourse I	Discourse II
• Singular Truths	• Multiple Stories
• The work of adults	• The learning & experience of students
• Discipline & control	• Alienation & resistance
• Dropouts	• Pushouts

There was some limited diversity in my first CFG. We represented differences of race, gender, religious upbringing and sexual orientation. And yet, in our fledgling efforts at collaboration, we were engaged in a relatively comfortable Discourse I exchange of feedback, in which the presenting teacher framed the examination of student work with a question, and no one ever questioned or pushed back on the "frame" or focus. We did not discuss the foundations of our individual or collective dilemmas. We were dedicated to finding simple solutions to complex problems that were often systemic in nature. The opportunity to discuss issues of oppression, power and hegemony was present, but the opportunity was not addressed. Instead, our CFG was energizing and as Ellen said, "we felt affirmed…" after each meeting, but as Camilla indicated, it was unclear what, if anything, was changing for the bulk of our students.

At one CFG meeting, I presented a videotape of my science class and shared a dilemma about my students' lack of reflection. I wondered aloud what I could do differently to support greater student reflection and the transfer of knowledge from a lab activity to a pencil and paper test and on to their future studies. However, I never acknowledged the skin I was in and the ways it shaped my perspective. I was concerned that my kids completed lab experiments, enjoyed the hands-on activities, and then moved on to the next lab without grasping the real science content involved. I got some good, concrete ideas from my colleagues, ideas about slowing down and using our science journals more. I put my CFG's feedback to use the very next day and the lab was much more successful, at least on the surface.

However, I didn't seek or receive feedback about the lack of student-centered conversation in my class, where all discussion and all power flowed through me. As the presenter, I did not address my role as a white teacher working with students of color, and no one else identified these differences as a fundamental feature of my classroom instruction. My limited frame set the boundaries, and no one mentioned my failure to differentiate supports for my students with limited literacy skill or English language fluency. Instead there was an unspoken acceptance that I was doing the best I could as a teacher who only spoke English in a linguistically diverse class of 33 adolescents. We stayed focused primarily on my work, the work of adults, and we missed the chance to really explore what it would take to reframe my/our focus on the learning and experience of my/our students.

After about a year of working as a CFG member, it finally dawned on me that I needed to directly engage my students in these teaching and

learning conversations. Like the V-8 commercials in which people slap themselves in the heads, I realized that my diverse group of students had critical information to share with me, their white teacher, about what they didn't understand about my content, and whether my directions, which were clear to me and to my similarly educated colleagues, were in fact clear as mud to them. Looking back this seems like an obvious step, but in my experience, sharing power with students was relatively unusual, especially between white teachers and their students of color, who were generally treated as disinterested parties in their own education.

Along similar lines, I have been involved with teams of urban educators in CFGs across the country, teams in which predominantly white teachers describe their problems with "hard to reach parents." Recently, a CFG in Oregon recognized this framing of parents as the problem as Discourse I and flipped the script to Discourse II, reframing the problem as one of "hard to access schools." Changing the discourse led to a host of new possibilities and responsibilities for welcoming parents into the schools. Discourse II challenges mostly white, middle-class participants to surface and examine both their assumptions and the power dynamics parents and families face in meetings and spaces that we organize and control. Reframing the problem challenges us to ensure that invitations to parents and other family members are more than one-sided requests for homework support, or disciplinary backup. Discourse II calls for "The Essential Conversation(s)" (2003) that Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot describes where both parents' ghosts of former experiences with schooling and the inherent power of home and school partnerships are acknowledged, allowing alliances based on mutual respect to be forged on behalf of students. Conversely, staying stuck in Discourse I means more of the status quo, an ongoing search for the right prize or bribe to get bodies into the seats at the next parent or family night, without launching or sustaining a partnership in any true sense of the word.

As our experiences with CFGs evolve, many of us, both white teachers and teachers of color, are struggling to reframe the process and our conversations into Discourse II. Working together as a Consortium for Educational Equity (CFEE), some of us are embracing the fact that we, either as educators in isolation, or as CFG members stuck in Discourse I, especially in schools where we teach across differences of race and class, don't have all the answers, and that we often aren't asking the right questions. We are working in alliances across difference to extend the collaborative process to include the voices of students and their families. In our individual practice and in our schools and systems, we are moving beyond the shallow Discourse I, the familiar, surface level of school reform into the deeper Discourse II, the uncomfortable, waters of transformation. While we are still committed to educating other people's children, we recognize the importance of naming and reframing the culture of power (Delpit 1995) in order to support the access of each student, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, national origin or special needs, to academic and social success in our schools and communities. We are no longer content to simply revise our practice, or restructure our schools, the critical outside work of school reform: instead we are committed to doing the inside work as well, in order to transform our relationships and our teaching to meet the needs of each student in our care. ∎

References:

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Coaching Whole School Change...
(continued from page 3)

Center of Activity Report...
(continued from page 7)

into a professional learning community. Allen ends this study with the statement that, "Extraordinary coaches come in all kinds of 'personality packages' but will be unified by their tenacious commitment to the individual growth of the individual teachers and administrators with whom they work, as well as the development of the professional community and school community that those people create and re-create every day."

The Appendix of this text outlines the structure of the ISA, a model that many schools will seek to emulate in their own change processes.

I will recommend this text to my school and district administrators. The study of the complexities of the coaching model will both alleviate tensions and offer a new lens through which to view the many strands of human interactions that contribute to building a positive school climate. ■

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made to offer a new coaches institute this summer and possibly another retreat for the leaders in the area. The local support groups for the CFG's in the region's schools continue, and we hope they will expand to more schools as other institutions observe our successes. ■

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• Palmer, Parker, (1998) *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teachers' Life*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

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Correction

In the Winter 2009 issue of *Connections*, we mistakenly credited the article "Center of Activity Report: San Antonio" to Ileana Liberatore. The author, in fact, was Patricia Norman. We apologize for the error.