

Introduction to Identity Safe Teaching Practices

Categories: Classroom Community

The goal of most American teachers is to successfully educate all students, but too many black and Latino students underperform academically and fail to meet their potential. Educating all students well is not only important for the students themselves, but for our nation as a whole. We cannot have a just and democratic society without fully educated citizens.

Among the many remedies for student underperformance, we find didactic teaching aimed at skill remediation and zero-tolerance policies. These remedies have not worked. Disproportionate numbers of low-income students and students of color are pushed out of school and fail to graduate. Our work on identity safe teaching shifts our focus from the deficits of students to an examination of what we do in classrooms that helps them succeed socially and academically.

Identity safe classrooms are those in which teachers strive to ensure that students feel that their social identity is an asset rather than a barrier to success in the classroom, and that they are welcomed, supported, and valued whatever their background.

Our work evolved from the body of research on “stereotype threat” done by Claude Steele and colleagues. They wanted to understand why black college students had lower grade point averages than white students with the same ACT scores-at every level. Stereotype threat theory states that people from negatively stereotyped groups may fear, in situations that are relevant to them, that they might “be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype or that [they] might do something that would inadvertently confirm it” (Steele, Spencer & Aronson 2002, p. 389).

Literally hundreds of studies have demonstrated the power of stereotypes to depress human performance. For example, black students performed less well than white students on an intelligence test when it was described as a test of ability. But when the same test was called a game, they did as well as the white students. Studies of women taking math tests had similar results.

In another set of studies, white athletes did better than their black teammates when the task was described as one based on “sports intelligence.” By contrast, the black students performed better than the white athletes when it was described as a “test of natural athletic ability.” (See reducingstereotypethreat.org.)

Our research, the “Stanford Integrated Schools Project” on identity safe teaching practices, explores how to lift the threat to improve success in elementary classrooms. How can teachers reduce the sense of stereotype threat for students whose social identities (race, gender, ethnicity) link them to low school outcomes? Our question: Are there ways to incorporate social and academic practices so students from all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and purpose in the classroom, so they can fully engage in learning?

Our researchers observed in 84 classrooms to document the arrangement of students and materials, the nature of their relationships, the types of questions directed toward students, the presence or absence of cooperative learning activities, the level of student autonomy, and the teachers’ approaches to dealing with misbehavior. We looked for evidence of the use of diverse materials and activities as a resource for teaching, rather than a more color-blind approach that ignores student differences. We discovered a link between identity safe teaching and enhanced student performance. We found:

- Students in higher identity safe classrooms had higher scores on standardized tests than students in lower identity safe classrooms.
- The Student Questionnaire revealed that students from higher identity safe classrooms had an increased liking for school and motivation to learn, liked challenging work, and felt a sense of belonging compared to students from less identity safe classrooms.

This approach is based on the assumption that teaching and learning are social processes that depend on building trusting, positive relationships between teachers and students and among the students-no matter what their social identities.

Social identities are attributes in each of us-whether we are white or black, young or old, rich or poor, gay or straight, Methodist or Muslim, etc. Everyone has multiple social identities. Sometimes, because of our racialized American history, some social identities are linked to school success and others are not. In identity safe classrooms, student diversity becomes a resource for learning.

Identity safe teaching is in stark contrast to schools whose curriculum is high on remediation and low on inspiration, and whose discipline is punitive and based on heavy-handed control that does not promote compassion, responsibility, and problem-solving.

By contrast, identity safe teaching focuses on how what we do affects students' experience in the classroom. From our research, we learned there is a constellation of things teachers can do that change life in the classroom so that students achieve at higher levels and improve their liking for school, their willingness to work hard, and their feeling of belonging in school. The components of identity safety fall into four major categories: child-centered teaching, cultivating diversity as a resource, classroom relationships, and caring environments. How to put the components into practice is the topic of the next four blog posts in our series.

The components of identity safety are:

1. **Child-centered teaching:** promotes autonomy, cooperation, and student voice.
2. **Cultivating diversity as a resource:** teachers provide challenging curriculum and high expectations for all students in the context of the regular and authentic use of diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities.
3. **Classroom relationships:** relationships are based on trusting, positive interactions with the teacher and among the students.
4. **Caring classroom environments:** social skills are taught and practiced to help students care for one another in an emotionally and physically safe classroom.

This blog is the first in a series of blogs on Identity Safe Classrooms. You can read the second blog in the series [here](#).

This blog was co-authored by Dorothy M. Steele, ED.D. Dorothy is co-author of the new book, *Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn*, and former Executive Director of the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University. She is an early childhood educator who is interested in public schools including teaching practices that are effective for diverse classrooms, alternative assessment processes that inform teaching and learning, and strategies that build inclusive communities of learners in schools. Her work with the Stanford Integrated Schools Project was an attempt to look at these various aspects of schooling in a large urban school district.

This blog was a collaboration with Not In Our Town (NIOT), a movement to stop hate, address bullying, and build safe communities. Not In Our School, a part of NIOT creates films, lesson plans, and tools to help educators create accepting, inclusive, and identity safe schools.