

## Reducing Stereotype Threat in the Classroom

Stereotype threat refers to *being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group* (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This threat can cause poor academic performance among stereotyped groups (females, ethnic minorities). Educators can help eliminate stereotype threat by altering the academic environment to be safe for all students.

- Reframe the task
  - Task descriptions that highlight race, gender, or expectations of group differences in performance can cause stereotype threat.
  - When possible, describe tasks as non-stereotyped activities, such as a problem solving task, and emphasize that all students can perform well on the task.
    - ❖ Test diagnosticity: When possible, describe tests as non-diagnostic of math ability. If unrealistic, emphasize that the test assesses content learned over a term, not inherent intelligence, or natural math ability.
    - ❖ Ensure gender and race fairness: Explicitly state that the test does not show gender or race differences. State that although the test is diagnostic of ability, it is unbiased.
- Deemphasize threatened social identities
  - Make sure that race and gender are not salient before test taking. This can be done by:
    - ❖ Moving demographic questions to the end of standardized tests
    - ❖ Encouraging students to have complex self-views. Having multiple identities unrelated to the stereotyped domain can protect students' self-esteem if one identity becomes threatened.
    - ❖ Encouraging focus on the students' positive, unique characteristics
    - ❖ Focusing on a common group identity, such as "student" or "7<sup>th</sup> grader" rather than "female" or "black"
- Encourage self-affirmation
  - Students who affirm their self-worth in a domain unrelated to the stereotype can eliminate the threat. Emphasize positive personal characteristics, skills, or values that are important, e.g., "I'm a great athlete."
  - Research with 7<sup>th</sup> grade African-American students showed that those who self-affirmed had a .3 higher GPA than African-American students who didn't self-affirm.
- Emphasize high standards with assurances of capability
  - Teachers' expectations can greatly affect students' performance. Communicate to all students high expectations and convey confidence that students can achieve them.
  - Make the assumption that your students belong in the domain (e.g., STEM), rather than questioning their fit.
  - Constructive feedback reduces students' perceived teacher bias, increases their motivation, and keeps them identified with the domain.
- Provide positive role models
  - Provide students with positive exemplars of an ingroup member who has succeeded in the domain. This can replace stereotypical images of people who succeed in STEM, as the role models challenge stereotypes and assumptions.
  - For example, having a highly competent female math teacher gives females an ingroup image to refer to during math tests. Similarly, same-race experimenters elicit less stereotype threat. Having students read an essay about an intelligent female or ethnic minority scientist before a test can improve test scores.
- Provide external attributions for difficulty
  - The anxiety and distracting thoughts caused by stereotype threat lead to lower performance. Providing an external reason for this anxiety that doesn't harm self-esteem can alleviate stereotype threat.
  - For example, telling students that the transition to high school is challenging for everyone and will pass with time (external and temporary cause), can alleviate anxiety aroused by a new math curriculum.
- Emphasize an incremental view of ability
  - Encourage the belief that intelligence is malleable. Students can develop skills and become more knowledgeable over time.
  - If students think intelligence is fixed and that they are not smart, they won't have hope and may not work hard to improve their performance.
  - Emphasize the importance of *effort* and *motivation* (malleable) rather than *talent* or *inherent intelligence* (perceived as fixed).
- Tell people about its effect and it loses power
  - Telling students, "it's important to keep in mind that if you are feeling anxious while taking this test, this anxiety could be the result of negative stereotypes that are widely known in society and have nothing to do with your actual ability to do well on the test."
  - This information provides an external attribution for any anxiety aroused by the test.