



Creating Identity-Safe Schools and Classrooms

Laura E. Hernández and Linda Darling-Hammond

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Neuroscience and research on learning make it clear that social, emotional, and cognitive experiences are intertwined and influence how we learn. Having trusting relationships and experiencing positive emotions, such as interest and excitement, open the mind to learning. Negative emotions, such as anxiety or self-doubt, reduce the brain's capacity to learn when left unmitigated. A young person's performance under conditions of high support and low threat differs substantially from how they perform without such support or when feeling threatened.

Unfortunately, schools are not emotionally or psychologically safe for many students. For example, one in five students between the ages of 12 and 18 report having been bullied, often as a function of their background characteristics, ranging from racial or ethnic group membership to gender identity, appearance, or disability status. Researchers have also long found that some teachers hold inaccurate characterizations of students based on race and ethnicity, have lower expectations of Black and Latinx students, and interact with them less positively.

The negative societal or school-delivered messages that students can receive in relation to their race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, language, immigration status, disability, age, or any other feature that is associated with social stigma can trigger social identity or stereotype threat. Such threat occurs when people feel they are at risk of being negatively judged in a situation because others associate their identity with undesirable characteristics. When social identity or stereotype threat has been triggered, it induces stress and impedes working memory and focus, leading to impaired performance on tests and other school tasks. In addition, students experiencing these threats often have a heightened assumption that they are uncared for or unwelcomed, causing many to disengage or disidentify with school settings.

This research report addresses the ways in which practitioners can build inclusive and affirming school environments with keen attention to identity safety that can support all students in feeling safe, protected, and valued in school environments. A growing body of research points to effective school-based practices and structures, described below, that educators can use to foster the identity safety that nurtures student achievement, positive attachments to school, and a genuine sense of belonging and membership for each student.

Promoting Trust and Interpersonal Connection

Practices that create trusting relationships and interpersonal connection between educators and students are central to cultivating identity safety. Finding ways to build empathy is foundational in this work, as it can transform educators' relationships with students and generate tangible outcomes. Connection-building tools, or those that allow educators and students to identify what they have in common, are also powerful for the similarities they surface and for their role in mitigating bias that can affect relationships. Finally, values affirmation interventions, which ask students to reflect on things important to them, are also effective relationship-building strategies, as they tell students that teachers want to learn about them and provide educators with important information about students that enriches their teaching ability.

Creating Purposeful Communities of Care and Consistency

Identity-safe classrooms cultivate a community of care, enabling educators and youth to build productive attachments that allow young people to be seen, valued, and known. Schools can foster communities of care with structures that create the conditions for positive connections to flourish, including advisory systems, looping, and block scheduling. Implementing consistent routines, such as regular community meetings and norms for positive greetings and dialogue, can support students in managing stress while empowering them to have a greater sense of inclusion. Finally, identity-affirming forums, like affinity clubs, can build a sense of belonging for students, particularly those who identify with minoritized groups.

Creating Trusting Relationships Using Restorative Practices

Using restorative approaches is also critical to building trusting relationships and identity safety. Restorative practices “proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing.” Relationships and trust are supported through universal interventions, such as community-building activities and classroom meetings. These strategies are supplemented with restorative conferences, often mediated by trained staff or peers, when a difficult event occurs. Central to a restorative approach is the belief that all people have worth and that it is important to build and maintain relationships within a community, thus contributing to the goal of creating an inclusive, identity-safe school environment.

Promoting Understanding, Voice, and Responsibility

Engaging students in intellectually demanding inquiries in which students have choice, voice, and growing responsibility for their own learning can also foster identity safety. Students feel connected to and confident in learning when teachers organize challenging tasks that are relevant to students’ lives and support them in learning through those opportunities. This includes teaching students strategies they can use to manage their own learning and building on their individual and cultural resources through engaging and relevant experiences, such as community-based projects. As students tackle challenging work, educators can support their efforts with affirming attitudes that acknowledge student competence and reflect the teacher’s high standards and a conviction that the student can reach them. Approaches like these can minimize stereotype threat and create an identity-safe and engaging atmosphere for learning to take place.

Elevating Diversity as a Resource for Learning

Educators seeking to cultivate identity-safe classrooms celebrate the unique identities of students while building on them to support rich and inclusive learning. Practices such as conversations with parents and students, community walks, and consistent classroom meetings are critical in surfacing what students already know, in what areas they already demonstrate competence, and how they can bring that knowledge into the classroom. Learning experiences that enable young people to explore their own identities or engage with culturally responsive content and materials can also help build bridges between students’ experiences and disciplinary learning. In designing learning opportunities like these, educators are responsive to students—both by validating and reflecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences young people bring and by building upon their unique knowledge to propel learning and critical thinking.

Introduction

We have learned a great deal in recent years about how biology and environment interact to affect learning and development. Neuroscience and research on learning make it clear that social, emotional, and cognitive experiences are intertwined and influence how we learn. Having trusting relationships and experiencing positive emotions, such as interest and excitement, open the mind to learning. Negative emotions, such as anxiety or self-doubt, reduce the brain's capacity to learn when left unmitigated. A young person's performance under conditions of high support and low threat differs substantially from how they perform without such support or when feeling threatened.¹

Unfortunately, schools are not emotionally or psychologically safe for many students. For example, one in five students between the ages of 12 and 18 report having been bullied,² often as a function of their background characteristics, ranging from racial or ethnic group membership to gender identity, appearance, or disability status.³ In addition, just one in three California middle and high school students identify a caring adult in school, and the proportion is still smaller for students from minoritized racial groups.⁴ Researchers have also long found that some teachers hold inaccurate characterizations of academic ability and behavior of students based on race and ethnicity,⁵ have lower expectations of Black and Latinx students, and interact with them less positively than with white students.⁶ These implicit biases are associated with significant disparities in disciplinary actions, as well as lower levels of support for academic performance.⁷

This report describes how practitioners can build inclusive and affirming school environments with keen attention to identity safety. Identity-safe learning settings aim to mitigate psychological threats to students and their multifaceted identities that could be triggered by negative messages, bullying, or marginalization while helping to nurture a positive sense of efficacy and engagement in learning.⁸ In using identity-safe teaching and learning practices, educators promote student achievement and attachments to school by creating a genuine sense of belonging and membership for each student.

Social Identity Threat and Its Impact

The way students are treated in school and society can trigger or ameliorate **social identity threat**, which can affect youth from stigmatized groups, including racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQ youth, people with disabilities, recent immigrants, and others.⁹ Social identity threat occurs when people feel they are at risk of being negatively evaluated in a situation because others associate their identity with undesirable characteristics. Such threats create a toxic condition that leads to significant stress, release of cortisol and adrenaline, and symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Sometimes social identity threat can trigger the fight-or-flight response that occurs when a sense of threat is activated, leading to challenging behavior. That activation results in a state of hypervigilance and defensiveness that can cause a young person to respond to a seemingly innocuous correction or interaction with a disproportionately negative response in an attempt to protect themselves from a perceived threat.¹⁰ Because all people have myriad identities—race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, job role, and more—there are many different identities that can be a source of threat at any given time and in any context.¹¹

Research over the past 20 years shows that identity threats can be triggered by a range of situational cues, including:

- under- or over-representation of a given group in a particular context (e.g., courses, extracurricular activities) and physical environment (e.g., photos, posters on the walls);
- interpersonal exchanges that connote explicit or implicit disrespect or criticism;
- subtle or overt discriminatory treatment (e.g., in disciplinary practices);
- organizational policies and practices that signal the lack of value placed on diversity (e.g., lack of multicultural representation in instructional materials, as well as staffing and engagement with others from the community); and
- individual and organizational views of ability (e.g., tracking, “ability grouping,” and systems of recognition within the school).¹²

The negative societal or school-delivered messages that students receive not only compromise relationships and their sense of belonging in a school environment but can also translate into negative self-perceptions.¹³ **Stereotype threat**, the “social identity threat that occurs when one fears being judged in terms of a group-based stereotype,”¹⁴ induces stress and impedes working memory and focus, leading to impaired performance on tests and other school tasks.¹⁵

Schools can foster stereotype threats in many ways. They may group or track students in ways that convey messages about ability and deliver stereotypical messages associated with group status. They can also emphasize ability rather than effort (e.g., “smartness” vs. “hard work”) in their judgments about students and the reasons for their success.¹⁶ They may also treat student behaviors differently.

For example, concerns over the effects of school policing—which began with zero-tolerance discipline policies that were supported with federal funds—surfaced alarming statistics about how many students of color and students with disabilities have been routinely mistreated, handcuffed or

arrested for minor offenses, and even tased or body-slammed in schools.¹⁷ Less physically damaging but equally harmful to students are the rates at which students—especially Black students and students with disabilities—are suspended and expelled. For example, in the 2017–18 school year, Black students were suspended at about 4 times the rate of white students, students with disabilities were suspended at 3 times the rate, and Native American students were suspended at about twice the rate.¹⁸ This is not necessarily a function of greater misbehavior. Studies show that these students are punished more harshly for the same offense, and most of these exclusions are associated with minor transgressions.¹⁹ Even in schools that work to ensure equal and caring treatment of students, it is important to recognize that many students of color, LGBTQ youth, students with disabilities, and others who experience discrimination remain keenly aware of the ways they are marginalized by society, with schools often being ground zero for legal battles about their status, such as disputes around segregation and bathroom access.

When social identity or stereotype threat has been triggered, students often have a heightened assumption that they are uncared for or unwelcomed, causing many to “disengage or disidentify with the setting.”²⁰ In essence, many young people may come to view schools as unsafe spaces—a feeling that can be exacerbated if they do not see themselves or their multifaceted identities represented in the curriculum, faculty, policies, or broader school climate. Because society creates conditions that make some groups feel unsafe,²¹ schools have an obligation to act affirmatively to make it clear that all students will be safe, protected, and valued in this environment.

What Does Identity Safety Look Like in Practice?

When adults appreciate and understand students' experiences, assets, and backgrounds, they can foster identity-safe environments that support students in ways that counteract societal stereotypes that may undermine their confidence and performance. Fortunately, a growing body of research points to effective school-based practices and structures that practitioners can use to do just that, including:

- trusting classroom relationships based on encouraging interactions between the teacher and each student, and the creation of positive relationships among the students;
- caring, consistent, and purposeful classroom environments in which social skills are proactively taught and practiced to help students respect and care for one another in an emotionally and physically safe classroom so each student feels attached to the others;
- teaching that promotes understanding, student voice, student responsibility for and belonging to the classroom community, and cooperation in learning and classroom tasks; and
- cultivating diversity as a resource for teaching through regular use of diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities, along with high expectations for all students.²²

Promoting Trust and Interpersonal Connection

Practices that create trusting relationships and interpersonal connection between educators and students are central to cultivating identity safety. Finding ways to **build empathy** is foundational in this work, as it can transform educators' relationships with students and generate tangible outcomes. For example, in one experiment, middle school math teachers who worked in schools with zero-tolerance discipline policies were given an empathy-enhancing experience. Teachers in the empathic mindset condition read articles about the benefits of good teacher–student relationships that explained how students' feelings and experiences can cause them to act out and how they often respond well to expressions of concern rather than punishment. Teachers were asked to reflect on and write about how they seek to understand students' experiences and sustain positive relationships even when challenges arise. Two months later, these teachers read another article about a teacher who respected her students and then wrote about how they show respect to students in their classrooms. In the control condition, teachers read articles about the benefits of technology-based learning and wrote about how they could bring a technology-based curriculum into their classrooms. In the classrooms of teachers who were randomly assigned to the empathic mindset condition, suspension rates were significantly lower than those in the control group classrooms, especially for students of color, disrupting patterns of exclusion that reinforce academic, social, and emotional difficulties.²³

Practices that allow educators and students to identify what they have in common also help to build empathy in their relationships and, in turn, affect student achievement. In one study, teachers and students completed a “Getting to Know You” survey and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) no feedback about commonalities, (2) students learned five things they had in common with their teacher, (3) teachers learned five things they had in common with specific students, or (4) both students and teachers learned about five commonalities. Both students and

teachers who learned that they shared commonalities with each other perceived more positive relationships, and students earned higher grades when teachers learned about their similarities to those students. This was a particularly strong effect for teachers' relationships with Black and Latinx students, closing the achievement gap for these student groups by over 60%.²⁴

Connection-building tools are powerful not only for the similarities between students and practitioners they surface, but also for “sidelining” bias and building transformative relationships.²⁵ For example, in another study of efforts to proactively create a safe space for stigmatized students, children returning to school from juvenile detention wrote to an educator of their choosing about their prosocial hopes for school as well as challenges they faced. The letter was delivered via a third party requesting the educator's help. The result was both a significant decrease in recidivism to juvenile detention through the next semester (from 69% to 29%) and feelings of greater respect for and commitment to students beginning their school reentry from educators who received such letters, potentially initiating more support and a better trajectory for the students going forward.

Researchers have also found that students respond positively to values affirmation interventions²⁶ that guide students to reflect on things most important to them—such as their relationships with friends or family, their personal interests, their goals for learning—during critical times during the year (e.g., beginning of the year, prior to tests, before seasonal breaks). These interventions tell students that teachers want to learn about them.²⁷ They also provide teachers with important information about students that enriches teachers' ability to draw on student experiences and goals as they make connections in the classroom. Multiple studies have found that such strategies reduce the effect of stereotype threat among middle school students, resulting in higher academic performance for Black students for as long as 7–9 years after the interventions.²⁸

As educators seek to see students for who they are, and as students feel seen, they cultivate greater identity safety. With a stronger appreciation of their students, educators develop greater empathy and understanding, which can transform relationships and outcomes.

Creating Purposeful Communities of Care and Consistency

In nurturing identity-safe classrooms, practitioners can ensure their settings cultivate a community of care. To do this, practitioners can implement everyday practices that enable educators and youth to build positive relationships and productive attachments that allow young people to be seen, valued, and known.²⁹ Schools can facilitate these relationships through structures that create the conditions for positive connections to flourish, including **advisory systems** in middle and high schools that provide students with a family group in which they are well known and receive consistent support. **Looping** teachers with their students for more than 1 year can also create longer-term relationships between educators and students, and **block scheduling** allows for more time and extended relationship building in content courses.

Implementing **consistent routines** across learning settings, including norms for relationships and dialogue, can support students in managing or reducing stress and empowers them to have a greater sense of inclusion. These routines can also include **regular community meetings**. In elementary schools, these may take the form of meetings that start the day or reunite students after lunch or recess. In secondary schools, these meetings may take place as community circles in advisory classes or in content classes. Community meetings can build a caring and collaborative environment in which students have a sense of belonging, voice, and agency over their own

learning and behavior. When implemented with intentionality and consistency, such meetings offer a respectful setting for students to share their experiences, to problem-solve issues that make them feel vulnerable, and to build empathy among peers. Because these settings can foster a sense of acceptance, they can contribute to greater student engagement in learning and the growth of interpersonal skills. (See “Community Meetings at Glenview Elementary” for a look at this practice in action.)

Community Meetings at Glenview Elementary

In Oakland, CA, Glenview Elementary embraces the use of community meetings, which take the form of dialogue circles that are part of the school’s larger restorative justice approach. Every teacher uses daily dialogue circles to check in with students, settle disputes, involve students in activities, support classroom management, and build community. This designated time provides space to bring students together to engage with each other and their teacher.

Teacher Edwina Smith uses dialogue circles in her classroom to prepare students to engage in academic instruction. As Smith describes, circles provide important opportunities “to have each student share and be heard in the classroom.” Every day, Smith begins her classroom circle with a mindfulness activity so that students have an opportunity to get centered and ready for learning. After this activity, they participate in a check-in activity during which students rank on a scale of 1 to 5 how ready they are to learn and discuss the reasons for their rankings. She begins by sharing her number and then asks students to share how they are feeling. One student shared, “I’m a 5 because I can’t wait for spirit week.” Another said, “I’m a 1 because my head hurts from Sunday.”

During these activities, Smith uses strategies to manage the discussion. For example, students take turns addressing their classmates by using a talking piece that indicates who has the floor. At the beginning of the year, students also get to contribute to the discussion by coming up with topics that they think should be taken up by the class. Dialogue circles are also used to resolve conflicts that arise throughout the day. In one instance, children came together to discuss an issue that occurred during recess. This took place in a smaller circle of students who were trying to resolve the conflict. The teacher listened to a student as she explained the issue and then engaged the other students to respond and discuss a way forward.

Source: Adapted from Plasencia, S., & Schachner, A. (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action*. Learning Policy Institute; Turnaround for Children. <https://k12.designprinciples.org>

Practices and structures that seek to create a sense of community and consistency help all students, who inevitably seek acceptance and belonging, to feel psychologically safe in schools and classrooms. Helping students appraise and (re)interpret their experiences and feelings in ways that are less likely to trigger stereotype threat is also helpful. For example, studies have investigated the effects of communications from older students to new students at transition points into middle and high schools. They have found that when older students communicate to younger students that social challenges and feelings of not belonging are normal and improve with time, this can reduce gaps in achievement and discipline along racial, ethnic, gender, and class lines, particularly among adolescents, thus helping students who often experience social identity threat to grow and excel.³⁰

In addition to these broader community-building opportunities, some research has shown the positive impact of **identity-affirming forums** on building a sense of belonging for students who identify with particular minoritized groups. For example, studies have shown that schools with a Genders & Sexualities Alliance (GSA) create a safer environment both for students who identify as or are perceived to be LGBTQ and for the broader student population.³¹

Creating Trusting Relationships Using Restorative Practices

Using restorative approaches is also critical to building trusting relationships and identity safety. Restorative practices “proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing.”³² (See Figure 1.) Relationships and trust are supported through universal interventions, such as community-building activities and classroom meetings. These strategies are supplemented with restorative conferences, often mediated by trained staff or peers, when a difficult event occurs. In these instances, conflict resolution allows students to reflect on mistakes, repair damage to the community, and get counseling when needed. Central to a restorative approach is the belief that all people have worth and that it is important to build and maintain relationships within a community,³³ thus contributing to the goal of creating an inclusive, identity-safe school environment.

Figure 1
What Are Restorative Practices?



Source: Schott Foundation, Advancement Project, American Federation of Teachers, & National Education Association. (2014). *Restorative practices: Fostering healthy relationships & promoting positive discipline in schools*.

Creating an environment in which students learn to be responsible and are given the opportunity for agency and contribution can transform social, emotional, and academic behavior and outcomes. Accumulating evidence suggests that shifting to restorative practices, with robust supports to enable the adults to do so, reduces the use of exclusionary discipline, resulting in fewer and less racially disparate suspensions and expulsions, while making schools identity-safe and improving school climate, relationships, and academic achievement.³⁴ The more comprehensive and well infused the restorative approach is within the school, the stronger the outcomes.³⁵ For example, a continuum model including proactive restorative exchanges, affirmative statements, informal conferences, large group circles, and restorative conferences substantially changed school culture and outcomes rapidly in one major district, as disparities in school discipline were reduced every year for each racial group and gains were made in academic achievement across all subjects in nearly every grade level.³⁶

Promoting Understanding, Voice, and Responsibility

Practitioners can cultivate a sense of identity safety and belonging by engaging students in intellectually demanding inquiries focused on deeper learning in which students have choice and voice and through which they take growing responsibility for their own learning. Students feel connected to and confident in learning when teachers organize challenging tasks that are connected to students' lives and support them in learning through those opportunities, conveying their confidence that students can learn and excel. This includes teaching students strategies they can use to monitor and manage their own learning³⁷ and building on the individual and cultural resources they bring to the school. When teachers view students' experiences as assets and bring student voice into the classroom, they minimize stereotype threat and create an identity-safe and engaging atmosphere for learning to take place.

For example, a study of inquiry-based instructional practices in mathematics classes serving students from low-income backgrounds found that linguistic, ethnic, and class outcome disparities were reduced when teachers used deeper-learning strategies. These strategies included making math problems relevant to students' lives and having students discuss their thinking as they collaboratively explored challenging problems.³⁸ These teachers achieved stronger outcomes by supporting student inquiry in the context of rich learning experiences and affirming their identities as mathematical thinkers, rather than narrowing the curriculum and reducing it to rote learning experiences, as often happens for students who have had less experience with the content and with inquiry approaches.

Community-based projects that ask students to analyze issues within their communities and take action to make change can also support deep understanding, voice, and responsibility.³⁹ These projects often begin by posing an essential question or equity-focused problem or by asking students to identify issues impacting them and their communities. For example, students at the UCLA Community School engaged in an interdisciplinary, community-based project as they transitioned to virtual schooling in response to pandemic-induced school closures. This 10-week unit asked students to investigate the disparate impact of the pandemic on communities of color and the responses of local students, teachers, and parents who have organized to work for justice in and beyond schools.⁴⁰ After reading articles and reviewing the latest research on the virus, students

reported on how these issues were affecting them, their families, and their communities. During this inquiry, students eagerly participated because they were learning something they cared about and could use to improve their lives and those of their loved ones.

As students tackle challenging work, educators can support their efforts with **affirming and identity-safe attitudes**. For example, teachers can communicate that the purpose of assignments and assessments is to develop and understand current skills that can be improved rather than measuring ability.⁴¹ Educators can also send affirming messages in the constructive feedback and revision opportunities they provide to students, noting that these opportunities reflect the teacher’s high standards and a conviction that the student can reach them.⁴²

Educators can also use **authentic affirmations** that acknowledge student learning and contributions to the classroom. This can be done through consistent communication, which can even become an explicit part of classroom interactions, as in the use of an “Affirmation Station” at Bronxdale High School in New York City (see Figure 2), where staff developed a regular practice to ensure that they communicate the many ways they value each of their students.⁴³ Teachers and other school staff can also complement these affirmative practices with spaces that allow youth to discuss their challenges, doubts, and worries as a way to normalize these feelings and experiences as part of everyone’s individual path and growth.

Figure 2
Affirmation Station at Bronxdale High School



Source: Aness, J., Rogers, B., Duncan Grand, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *Teaching the way students learn best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School*. Learning Policy Institute.

Affirming and academically rich practices like these can mitigate stereotype threat and support student achievement.⁴⁴ Dozens of studies have shown that when students receive such affirmations, performance on tests, grades, and other academic measures improve significantly in ways that are frequently maintained over time.⁴⁵ Teachers who respect cultural differences are more apt to believe that students from nondominant groups are capable learners and to offset stereotype threat by conveying their faith in students' abilities.

Elevating Diversity as a Resource for Learning

Practitioners seeking to cultivate identity-safe classrooms can also implement curriculum and instructional strategies often referred to as culturally responsive pedagogy—approaches that celebrate the unique identities of students while building on them to support rich and inclusive learning.⁴⁶ This asset-based orientation rejects the idea that practitioners should ignore cultural differences. Instead, culturally responsive educators invite students' multifaceted identities and backgrounds into the classroom to inform curriculum, instruction, and learning processes.⁴⁷

Cultural responsiveness can be fostered through practices that both surface and build on knowledge about students and their communities. To become a culturally responsive educator, a practitioner must find ways to know students well, maintaining a learning mindset that opens up opportunities for educators to learn with and from students. This includes learning what students already know, in what areas they already demonstrate competence, and how they can bring that knowledge into the classroom. The many strategies educators can use to learn about students include **home visits, conversations with parents and students, community walks, journaling, and community meetings.**⁴⁸

To enact culturally responsive pedagogy, educators can also create learning experiences that enable young people to **explore their own identities.** Some schools do this in part through identity exploration and pursuit of community issues from a social justice perspective. These strategies teach educators about their students while allowing students to take ownership of the learning process and develop the critical thinking that enables them to challenge the status quo.

For example, in a 9th-grade ethnic studies course at Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas) near Los Angeles, students engage in projects that help them learn concepts and skills through an analysis of their multifaceted identities. One SJ Humanitas teacher explained that the project allows students to move into later grades having “already looked at their history and their past, and the way that they see the world, and how [they can] become better for it.”⁴⁹ Not incidentally, this project teaches writing, reflection, and revision skills while teaching educators about their students in profound ways that can be built on throughout high school. In a related SJ Humanitas assignment, students read the memoir *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez, in which the author recounts his experience as a young Chicano gang member surviving the dangerous streets of East Los Angeles. Students are asked to reflect on and write an essay about how the author overcame adversity and setbacks.⁵⁰

Another culturally responsive teaching practice includes **opportunities for student voice and agency.** One example of this can be seen in the practices associated with reality pedagogy, which invite students to take ownership of their learning by co-teaching each other and building from their cultural and homelife contexts by sharing relevant artifacts. Teachers learn alongside students and engage them in co-designing the learning experience. This approach creates community, shared

experience, and common knowledge among members of the classroom. It also enables students to become responsible for their own learning, as well as one another, valuing and leveraging their different identities.⁵¹

Ensuring that young people have rich learning experiences also requires **culturally responsive content and materials** that:

- reflect and respect the legitimacy and accomplishments of different cultures;
- empower students to value all cultures, not just their own;
- incorporate cultural information into the heart of the curriculum, instead of simply adding on at the margins; and
- relate new information to students' life experiences.

Culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning also deliberately **build bridges between students' experiences and school content** that draw on the familiar to scaffold learning. Students often perform complex tasks outside of school that are not always displayed in school-type tasks. Additionally, their displays might not be recognized as demonstrating competence according to normative standards that dominate many classrooms.⁵² For example, calculations used on the basketball court may not initially carry into the mathematics class unless teachers support that transfer by building on this kind of real-world knowledge. Similarly, the use of rap songs to illustrate symbolic meanings in literature can help a culturally responsive teacher carry student insights into the study of more formal canonic texts.⁵³

Overall, culturally responsive pedagogies recognize the importance of infusing students' experiences into all aspects of learning.⁵⁴ Doing so enables educators to be responsive to learners—both by validating and reflecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences young people bring and by building upon their unique knowledge and schema to propel learning and critical thinking. By working to nurture equity and cultural pluralism, teachers can create a context of belonging for students that can counteract the deficit approaches to teaching and learning that have sought to minimize, penalize, or eradicate cultural ways of being that do not adhere to white, middle-class norms.

As culturally responsive, sustaining, and affirming pedagogical approaches center and celebrate diversity, they further belonging and inclusion⁵⁵ and positively affect educational outcomes, including engagement in learning, identity development, and academic achievement.⁵⁶ Furthermore, students from all backgrounds benefit from inclusive learning environments that honor and celebrate diversity. These settings can not only help all young people learn and embrace the diverse cultures that make up the fabric of U.S. democracy, but also cultivate their awareness and orientations toward issues of injustice.

Conclusion

Findings from the science of learning and development make it clear that for students to learn and thrive, they need intellectually dynamic, caring school environments. Relationships and experiences profoundly affect academic outcomes. Stress, including that induced by stereotype threat, exacts a psychic price that lowers academic performance, a reality that is acutely felt by Black, Native American, and Latinx students, as well as LGBTQ students and students with disabilities.

The antidote to stereotype threat is identity safety. Identity-safe classrooms promote student understanding, voice, responsibility, and cooperation; cultivate diversity as a resource for learning; and build trusting, encouraging relationships and a caring, purposeful environment to support a sense of belonging and safety. A growing body of research shows that these elements are effective in eliminating stereotype threat and increasing student motivation and achievement.

Intentionally bringing students' voices and experiences into the classroom also helps create an identity-safe and engaging atmosphere for learning to take place and enables all students to have a sense of safety and belonging. In identity-safe and affirming classrooms, teachers avoid labeling students in ways that implicitly categorize some as worthy and others as unseen or problematic. They instead find many ways to provide positive affirmations about individual and group competence and growth. Moreover, identity-safe schools eschew a reliance on exclusionary discipline that does not work and that is both discriminatory and harmful, as it leads to higher rates of dropping out and, later, incarceration. Instead, these schools teach problem-solving and conflict resolution strategies and address challenges with restorative practices. The result is fewer and less disproportionate suspensions and expulsions; fewer disciplinary referrals; and improved school climate, teacher–student relationships, and academic achievement.

In identity-safe classrooms, strategies that convey respect, care, and concern for students become the basis for meaningful relationships and favorable academic results.⁵⁷ These include recognizing students' culturally grounded experiences as a foundation on which to build knowledge and exhibiting cultural responsiveness in interacting with students and families. In addition, educators demonstrate an ethic of deep care and possess a sense of efficacy about learning and about the pursuit of more equitable education that is consciously transmitted to students.⁵⁸ When students know that educators care about and believe in them and their futures, they respond with motivation, effort, and accomplishment.

Endnotes

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