

# **Part I**

## **Getting Started**



# Welcome to Readers

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# 1

The purpose of this book is to engage teachers in thinking about how their everyday practice influences students from diverse backgrounds from a new perspective. Though teachers think about teaching and learning continually, their voices are rarely heard. Instead, the relentless debate in the news media about how to improve American schools and reduce the achievement gap focuses on a blame game that points to teachers or parents or students as the cause of what is too often described as the “failure” of American schools. Teachers are vilified as lazy, incompetent, and ruled by union decisions. Parents are blamed for raising unruly, disrespectful children. And students’ capabilities and motivations are questioned. Recommendations for improving schools include ridding districts of teachers unions, replacing regular public schools with charter schools, and using punitive discipline methods such as zero tolerance policies as punishment for unwanted student behavior. Much of the discourse is about student performance rather than student learning. As a nation, we have nearly lost the plot of the purpose of education. The idea that a good education could teach students to become productive contributors to our democratic society is rarely mentioned.

Few of the discussions about school improvement focus on what is going on in the classroom and how that affects the students’ daily experience. And, not many of the media reports and talk show discussions on “the gap” describe how students are treated or how to build their skills, challenge their curiosity, or help them learn to work together and independently on meaningful, useful learning activities. This is particularly true when the focus is on schools that students of color and poor students attend. For these students, the recommendations focus on strict discipline, remedial curriculum aimed at teaching basic skills, and almost military-like requirements for compliant behavior. These remedies are celebrated as successful models for other schools to follow. The media discourse is focused on solutions such

#### 4 • Part I. Getting Started

as these for low-performing schools attended by other people's children. Few promote the idea that we should treat all students as we would want our own children treated. And, it is rarely recommended that we treat teachers with the respect and authority needed for them to build intellectually and socially dynamic, caring classrooms focused on learning. Yet, mutual respect among all members of the classroom community provides the foundation for creating what we call an *identity safe classroom*.

Our premise is that efforts to create identity safe classrooms are essential to protect the lives of all students, especially those who suffer from two conditions: (1) a sense of alienation from school after repeated failure and (2) the epidemic of punitive punishments including suspensions and expulsions. These punitive discipline practices are *not* colorblind. A national study of nearly 7,000 districts in 2009–2010 found that 17.7% of African American students and 7.5% of Latino students were suspended from school during the school year. These high numbers are in contrast to those for Asian students (2.1%) and white students (5.6%). This disparity in suspension rates is called *disproportionality* and leads to the “school-to-prison pipeline” that describes the troubling trajectory of young students of color when their abilities at school are negatively stereotyped (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). It is important to make clear that the majority of these decisions to exclude students from school are based on discretionary disciplinary actions in response to behaviors such as acting disrespectful or defiant; they are not based on more serious offenses such as fighting or possessing drugs (Drakeford, 2006).

In response to the unintended consequences of these disciplinary practices, some schools have to begun to examine them and seek solutions other than exclusion from school, which has been found to have a negative affect on students instead of helping them improve their behavior. As teachers look at data on achievement and behavior, they see the links between academic failure, alienation from school, and disruptive behavior and can seek solutions that address all aspects of a child's school experience. Our work on identity safety focuses on all aspects of life in the classroom and helps teachers examine their practice from the point of view of each of their students. This process helps them respond more successfully to the needs of each member of their class.

### **INTRODUCTION OF IDENTITY SAFE TEACHING PRACTICES**

Our work is based on the premise that classrooms are socially dynamic places where, for each student, who you are and what matters to you is inextricably linked to your sense of belonging and ability to fully engage in learning and participating.

Our research identified an array of effective practices that are linked to improved student outcomes on standardized tests and on students' attitudes about school, including their overall liking for school, educational aspirations, and sense of belonging in school.

In our yearlong research on 84 diverse elementary classrooms, we have documented ways that teachers can create inclusive, intellectually exciting, and socially supportive classrooms that promote learning and social development among all students. This research, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation and called the Stanford Integrated Schools Project (SISP), identified certain characteristics of the classroom that had a positive effect on student learning and attachment to schooling, in spite of real and powerful social inequalities in these schools. These identified classroom practices and relationships foster a sense of *identity safety* in students. Students have a sense of identity safety when they believe 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.

Identity safe practices provide a potential antidote to a sense of *stereotype threat* that has been shown to lower academic achievement. Stereotype threat theory suggests that people from groups whose abilities in school are negatively stereotyped may worry that they could “be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype or that [they] might do something that would inadvertently confirm it” (Steele, C. M., Spencer, & Aronson, 2002, p. 389). The research on stereotype threat and its link to depressed performance in important domains of human learning and performance provides the theoretical foundation of the present work on identity safety for students.

To answer our question, “What can teachers do in diverse classrooms to promote more successful learning and attachment to school,” SISP researchers observed 84 classrooms three times during this yearlong study to identify classroom practices that teachers can incorporate to promote learning among those students whose ability and behavior at school is commonly questioned. The researchers observed everything in the classrooms to see what teachers can do to create a classroom environment that serves as an antidote to the threat of being stereotyped as a poor student. As we will show, this antidote, *identity safe teaching practices*, benefits everyone in the classroom. All students make progress when teachers focus on positive classroom relationships, challenging learning opportunities, and cooperation instead of competition, to build on all students' knowledge, curiosity, and energy.

Identity safe teaching is not colorblind. Instead, it uses student diversity as a resource for learning. Identity safe classrooms are free from

## 6 • Part I. Getting Started

the negative relationships, cues, and teaching practices (e.g., tracking, punitive discipline, remedial curriculum) that implicitly or explicitly link students' identities (e.g., race, gender, class) to academic performance. Identity safe teaching practices begin with the consideration of how every aspect of classroom life is being experienced by each of the students in the class. We discovered that with careful attention to providing challenging instruction and by facilitating positive social dynamics in the classroom, students of all backgrounds come to feel accepted, included, and expected to be successful. They can begin to feel identity safe!

### RESEARCH BASIS OF IDENTITY SAFETY

The goal of racially integrating schools, the aim of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, was expected to fix the problem of unequal schooling for minority students. But now, as our schools become ever more segregated once again, we realize that access to equal schooling is just the start of the endeavor to provide America's students of color with adequate schooling that promotes success in school and later adult life. Once students have access to the same classrooms, the complicated work begins—how to make classrooms a place of inclusion and high-level learning for all students.

As mentioned earlier, the work on identity safety emerged out of the research on stereotype threat. Our question was, if stereotype threat depresses performance, is there anything that teachers can do to create a less threatening environment to free students to learn? Based on earlier research and theorizing (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, C. M., 2005; Markus, Steele, C. M., & Steele, D. M., 2000; Steele, C. M., & Aronson, 1995; Steele, C. M., Spencer, & Aronson, 2002), we began with the assumption that particular practices (e.g., ability tracking, colorblind approaches to curriculum materials and tasks, rigid teaching strategies) in integrated classrooms may, inadvertently, reinforce widely held negative stereotypes linking ethnicity to academic achievement and leading to reduced achievement for students of color. Our SISP study was designed to test whether other practices (e.g., a focus on cooperative, helpful student relationships, expressed and scaffolded high expectations for all students, challenging curriculum) would cultivate a sense of identity safety in students (a sense of freedom from stereotypes linking social identity to academic performance) and would improve the academic achievement of many minority students.

We know from the experimental work on stereotype threat among college students that performance can be improved by explicitly removing stereotype threat from the situation (Cohen, Steele, C. M., & Ross, 1999;

Davies, Spencer, & Steele, C. M., 2005; Steele, C. M., & Aronson, 1995). This work shows that there are various ways of reducing these forms of identity threat: promoting cross-group friendships, fostering high expectations for success, providing success-affirming role models, eliciting and valuing diverse perspectives and ideas, and providing an array of diverse representations linking people from diverse groups with valued classroom membership and academic achievement. While some teachers are using several of these practices, we recognized that sustaining them in the classroom day in and day out over the school year would be crucial to diminish the effects of stereotype threat. We hypothesized that when some constellation of these practices is intentionally incorporated in a classroom setting, all students, and particularly students of color, will be more successful than they would be in less identity safe classrooms.

Our work on identity safe teaching practices was an effort to translate the findings of the research on college students into elementary classrooms. There is ethnographic data indicating that young students are aware when some students but not others are disproportionately being sent to the principal's office, when some students but not others are in the high reading group, when some parents but not others are invited to help with a field trip, and so forth (Ambady, Shih, Kim, & Pitinsky, 2001; Lewis, 2004). We believe that it is practices such as these that contribute to students' learning about negative stereotypes.

By contrast, we found in our SISP research that a set of factors, taken together, can mitigate the identity threat that prevails in many integrated classrooms. These practices we call identity safe teaching practices can create a social and intellectual environment of inclusion and validation that can be experienced even by young children.

These four domains that constitute identity safe teaching practices are the following:

1. *Child-Centered Teaching* characterized by Classroom Autonomy, Listening for Students' Voices, Teaching for Understanding, and a Focus on Cooperation
2. *Cultivating Diversity as a Resource*, characterized by Diversity as a Resource for Teaching, Challenging Curriculum, and High Expectations and Academic Rigor
3. *Classroom Relationships* characterized by Teacher Warmth, Teacher Availability to Support Learning, and Positive Student Relationships
4. *Caring Environments* characterized by Emotional and Physical Comfort, which is promoted by Teacher Skill and Attention to Prosocial Development

## 8 • Part I. Getting Started

These four domains reflect the foundational assumption of identity safety that learning is a social process. Learning occurs in every social, intellectual, and procedural transaction between the teacher and students and among the students. Therefore, it is important to foster positive, caring relationships with the other students and the teacher in the classroom. Because relationships matter, who you are and what you know and can do matters. While a teacher may have the idea that being colorblind and ignoring differences shows equal acceptance of all, even young students are very aware of their differences. Instead, in identity safe environments, student differences are recognized and validated. Consideration is given to every aspect of the classroom, to all the subtle and overt messages that recognize that diverse ideas, perspectives, and materials can actually enhance learning.

### WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING COLORBLIND?

Part of what makes it difficult for teachers to fully appreciate group differences in lived experience and their role in academic achievement is the well-intended cultural injunction *not to see* group differences. Since the civil rights era, the social norm has been to remedy the negative effects of historic group prejudice by not seeing group differences. The goal, then, has been to be colorblind. It is linked to our idea of fairness and the strongly held belief that, in America, if you work hard you can achieve anything. This belief is based on the notion that people are equal, so that race and ethnicity should not affect opportunities in life such as education, housing, and employment. Yet, in reality, people are not colorblind and, from a young age, children in this country are exposed to the powerful influence of race. And such efforts not to see differences can often magnify the impact of differences (Markus, Steele, C. M., & Steele, D. M., 2000).

It is important to note here that the theory of stereotype threat is not based on the assumption that teachers are personally or explicitly prejudiced. Quite the contrary, we believe that the goal of most teachers is to be fair by being colorblind. However, this well-meaning goal to ignore differences inadvertently creates an environment that can lead to stereotype threat among students. By not paying *particular* attention to who each student is and by failing to address each student's *particular* experiences and interests, teachers unintentionally convey that what these students know and can do, and how they feel, does not matter. Without cues in the environment that reflect the lives, interests, and value of these students, they become, in the term of Ralph Ellison (1952), invisible.



## FROM THEORY, TO RESEARCH, TO TRANSFORMING PRACTICE

Many of the numerous explanations for the persistent gap in achievement between white children and children of color focus on attributes of the children and their families as the source of the problem. This perspective about the source of the gap has been dominant since our earliest attempts at school integration. There have been alternative perspectives, though, that shift the focus from the troubled characteristics of the students to the experience they have in schools. As long ago as 1933, historian Carter G. Woodson wrote in his book *The Mis-Education of the Negro*,

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker people. . . . No systemic effort towards change has been possible for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. (1933, pp. xii–xiii)

If the problem of the achievement gap rests in students' fixed ability and motivation, there is no reason for schools to change their approach to teaching—the problem *is* with the children. Inherent in school improvement efforts is the assumption that schools *can* do something to improve student learning, in spite of the structural and familial situations from which students come. The comprehensive, national school improvement efforts of James Comer (1988), Henry Levin (1988), and the Child Development Project (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996) all point to the power that teachers and schools have to improve student learning, thereby changing students' schooling outcomes. In addition to demonstrating the effect that teaching practices can have on improving student learning, these three research programs informed the process of building our hypotheses about what might constitute identity safe teaching practices and might be linked to improvement in students' sense of being identity safe. Our hypothesis was that freeing students from distracting threats to their identity in these ways should foster their higher academic achievement, sense of belonging, and social understanding.

Following our year-long observation of 84 elementary classrooms, the SISP team met for over two years with teachers and administrators from the research district to take the findings of the study back to them and to form a community of inquiry about how to implement the identity safe practices identified in the study. Much was learned from the teachers in this monthly study group as they grappled together with how to incorporate these practices in the daily life of the classroom. For example, teachers considered how to move from competition to cooperation, how to truly offer all students appropriately challenging curriculum, and how to find time to focus on prosocial development.

A few years later, a second research initiative brought together a small group of teachers who held a monthly study group for a year that focused on exploring each of the identity safe factors. These teachers' efforts to understand and to begin to incorporate identity safe practices were documented in Becki's dissertation (2007). Some real-life examples from her dissertation, drawn from the inquiry and practice of teachers in the two study groups, are included in this book, and we hope that they will inspire and inform readers.

## **IDENTITY SAFETY BRINGS TOGETHER BEST PRACTICES**

As we shared what we learned from the SISP study with teachers in many different settings, we found that the theory and practices of identity safety resonate with educators as they face the complexity of creating environments that promote teaching and learning of students from a range of backgrounds.

Teachers who are educating students to navigate the complexities of the 21st century are seeking to make their classrooms places that foster creativity, critical thinking, a sense of responsibility toward others, and a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. They are aware that their students need social-emotional learning, prosocial skills, and tools for cooperating, communicating, and fostering empathy. As classrooms are increasingly diverse, many schools are seeking culturally responsive ways to help students learn to appreciate their identities and strengths, bridge differences, and understand multiple perspectives. Identity safe teaching incorporates each of these critical areas of the process of teaching and learning.

Identity safe teaching practices fit well with the Common Core State Standards. These standards encourage teaching for understanding and promote performance-based assessments rather than just rote learning measured on multiple-choice tests. Identity safety is amenable to project-based

learning that seeks to get children thinking autonomously and using their learning in new and innovative situations. Teachers are also seeking to meaningfully differentiate their instruction and to provide explicit teaching and behavioral support for each of their students.

Many identity safe practices will be familiar to veteran teachers. For example, cooperative learning is a practice that has been around for many years and lends itself to a more equitable classroom where students feel more identity safe. Some experienced teachers might even say, “Isn’t this just good teaching?” However, we contend that identity safety, while encompassing the practices that are good for all children, has been demonstrated to improve learning for students of color. We ask readers to take a deeper look at how these practices that focus on each student’s social identity will transform student learning outcomes.

It is our hope that this book will help teachers do two things. First, we hope they will look at life in the classroom every day from the perspective of each of the students and make modifications that support students’ sense of identity safety. Second, we hope teachers will build on what they know and do and become intentional in using the time-tested, equitable practices and new ideas described in this book to create classrooms that are more identity safe. When teachers do this, their students will become more successful, both academically and socially.