

**OVERVIEW:** As Dean of the Stanford University Graduate School of Education, prior to transition to his new role as Provost of the University of California Berkeley, Doctor Claude Steele presented to San Francisco Unified School District's Guiding Coalition for its Vision 2025. Below were some key points from his talk about his and others research on issues of identity, race, gender, and stereotype threat. Dr. Steele also posits policy implications for schools associated with these research findings.

There were two themes that ran through Dr. Steele's talk:

- 1) Identity matters.
- 2) Students' psychological experiences can be used to improve students' learning.

What is stereotype threat?

- **Stereotype threat is a theory that explains the under performance for groups of people whose abilities are negatively stereotyped in society.** Even if these groups of people have the same skills when measured by common techniques, when they perform challenging work, groups experiencing stereotype threat don't perform up to the level of the skills they actually have.
- For example, at the University of Michigan, African American students with the same SAT scores as other students were getting lower grades than those other students.<sup>1</sup>

How is stereotype threat demonstrated?

- **When you are in a situation that is really important to you and the task at hand is difficult, the prospect of being identified with a negative stereotype can be disturbing and interfere with your performance.** For example, people only have so much bandwidth in their brain, and if you fill the brain up with something that worries people at the same time they are performing a difficult task, those people have a lot of distraction and don't have a lot of bandwidth to perform the tough task.
- For example, Steele's research team recruited really strong women and men in the field of math, brought them into the lab, and had them do a very frustrating math problem. In this case, men only deal with the frustration of the math problem where as women also have to deal with the stereotype of women's identity in society about performance in math. These thoughts about the stereotype threat take away from women's cognitive resources on the test, and women performed dramatically lower than men even though the researchers had matched them with the same skill level. In the next phase of the research, the researchers did the same experiment in the lab where they attempted to make the stereotype irrelevant, and told the women that on the test they were taking women do as well as men on the test. This time around women's scores matched men's scores.<sup>2</sup>

What causes stereotype threat?

- **Stereotype threat is not caused by a lack of confidence on the part of the individual. The stereotype effect influences individuals' interpretations of their own experiences.**
- The effects are strongest where people are most confident. If you don't care about math, you won't experience stereotype threat on the math test.
- For example, black immigrants who are from the first generation in their families to arrive in the United States don't show much stereotype threat. While they know about how African Americans are seen in the U.S., they don't think that stereotype applies to them.

<sup>1</sup> Steele, C. and Aronson, J. (Nov. 1995) Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 69 (5). P. 797-811; Steele, C. (June 1997). "A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance." *American Psychologist*, Vol 52(6), p. 613-629; Steele, C. (2011). *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Use and What We Can Do*. W.W. Norton & Company.

<sup>2</sup> Steele and Aronson, 1995; Steele, C., 1997; Steele, 2011.

### What can we do about it?

- ***Schools have control over situational cues that can make stereotype threat strong or weak.*** Stereotype threat is not something a person carries around with him. It is not that a person is a high stereotype threat person, but rather this situation is a high stereotype threat situation for a certain person.
- ***Schools can improve how they are organized such as eliminating tracking.*** If you want to focus on reducing or closing the achievement gap in Vision 2025, you need to look at the seemingly neutral elements of schools as they might play out to imposing identity threat. ***How are our schools organized and how will this influence students' identities?*** For example, when students are put in a lower track, this is a huge cue to people. The people become associated with the identity of that track. People are not "brains on sticks" that we can just sort into skill levels. We need to think about what those tracks mean to students psychologically. This issue of a student's identity and his/her track is a constant issue for the child experiencing that track.<sup>3</sup>
- ***Schools have control over their mission statements.*** Diversity in educational institutions is talked about as a concession that in fact competes with the excellence of the institution. At elite, private schools their mission statements focus on developing students' autonomy and curiosity, whereas in inner city charter schools the mission statements focused on improving test scores. The latter situation gives students the cue that you are the problem -- you don't read well enough. Students are not cognitive machines, but in fact, are shaped by the stereotype perpetuated in these mission statements.
- ***Schools can help students develop a growth mindset.*** Stanford Professor Carol Dweck's emphasis on growth mind set suggests putting at the foundation of education the idea that you can get better at these things. The Dweckian approach is very important because it re-conceptualizes performance and ability, suggesting with interest and effort, all students can move.<sup>4</sup>
- ***School can provide role models, support the development of relationships between teachers and students, and support the development of peer-to-peer relationships with students.***<sup>5</sup>
  - ***1) Students need existence proofs in their adult role models.*** Even the lack of role models can send people signals and evoke anxiety around identity.
  - ***2) Schools need to help their teachers develop the capacity to instruct and build relationships with students that help reduce threats.*** There is a place for training adults in these issues. Adults are affected by the mere knowledge of how society views these groups. This is our history visiting us in our stereotypes. See Stanford Professor Jo Boaler's work with teachers on identity.<sup>6</sup>
  - ***3) Schools can support students through peer-to-peer relationships.*** Students definitely stereotypes in middle school and beyond, but we can help them with this by mellowing the effects.<sup>7</sup> By developing an environment where students develop peer-to-peer relationships, it creates a much safer environment. Students think, "What is happening to me is happening to other kids with other identities." Sometimes sports teams do this.

<sup>3</sup> Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping Track: How school structure inequality*. Yale University.

<sup>4</sup> Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindsets: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Ballantine Books; Dweck, C. (September 2010). "Even Geniuses Work Hard." *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 68 No. 1, p. 16-20.

<sup>5</sup> See pg. 17-18 from Aronson, J. (November 2004). "The Threat of Stereotype." *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 62, N. 3., p. 14-19 to learn more about these ideas.

<sup>6</sup> Boaler, J. (March 2002). The Development of Disciplinary Relationships: Knowledge, Practice, and Identity in Mathematics Classrooms. *For the Learning of Mathematics*. Vol. 22. N. 1. P. 42-47.

<sup>7</sup> Nasir, N.S. and Shah, N. (Feb./March 2011). "On defense: African American Males Making Sense of Racialized Narratives in Mathematics." *Journal of African American Males in Education*. Vol. 2 Issue 1.