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BELONGING and INCLUSION in IDENTITY SAFE SCHOOLS
A Guide for Educational Leaders

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IDENTITY SAFETY: DEFINITIONS AND RESEARCH

Research on stereotype threat offers yet another piece in the puzzle as educators seek to understand the causes of underperformance in their efforts to close achievement and opportunity gaps. Teachers ask for concrete, practical tactics to use in order to reduce and manage these identity pressures in real classrooms.

Claude Steele's wife, Dorothy Steele, also a researcher, understood the need to identify concrete ways stereotype threat could be reduced in practice. Along with her husband, she set out to identify an antidote to stereotype threat and supply teachers with approaches to counter negative and racially based stereotype threat in their classrooms, supplanting curriculum with a blueprint for positive, identity-based strategies. They coined the term "identity safety teaching" in which "teachers strive to assure students that their social identities are an asset rather than a barrier to success in the classroom. And, through strong positive relationships and opportunities to learn, they feel they are welcomed, supported, and valued as members of the learning community." (Identity Safe Classrooms, n.d.)

The Steeles gathered a team of Stanford researchers to observe and analyze the practices of teachers in 84 integrated elementary classrooms in an urban school district in Northern California during the 2001–2002 school year. The Stanford Integrated School Project (SISP) (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) engaged classrooms that had a makeup of at least 15% from each of three ethnic groups, Black, Latinx, and White. The researchers identified 14 behaviors, or "factors," representing a range of teaching strategies and approaches that researchers understood could lead to warm and inclusive classrooms, positive classroom relationships, a challenging and accessible curriculum, and diversity as a classroom resource.

The outcome for applying these conditions would, potentially, result in a classroom where all students could thrive and feel safe, leading to an experience that the Steeles and colleagues termed "identity safety," so named to emphasize the idea that people need to feel safe and free from threats to their identity in order to give their best performance. Trained observers, with negligible knowledge about stereotype threat or identity safety, visited each of the 84 classrooms. Two different observers visited each class three times each equipped with a classroom observation form detailing 200 criteria for their observations. Coupled with a student questionnaire designed to ascertain student comfort in terms of their sense of belonging, motivation to learn, perceived agency and interest in their work, and more, researchers resolved to identify the best paths forward for creating an identity safe classroom (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2016).

Their extensive data revealed in detail how identity safety practices influence student performance and a sense of self in a favorably significant way. They learned that students in classrooms where identity safety was practiced performed higher on standardized tests compared to students in lower identity safe classrooms. The correlation between how the students felt about school and their performance was also established with the student questionnaires. Those from identity safe classrooms enjoyed school more and performed significantly better than their counterparts.

The implications of their findings are promising for educators. Understanding how to address stereotype threat in the classroom in a way that creates happy learning places for students and teachers *and* addresses the negative impacts of systemic racism is a substantial win-win.

This bottom-up research model identified 14 factors that described specific behaviors of the participating teachers that resulted in creating identity safety in their students. The next question involved investigating ways to translate what was revealed in research and further describe the components of identity safety for teachers to apply in their classrooms.

Research on Identity Safety Continues

In 2006, I (Becki), along with Dr. Dorothy Steele's support, began my doctoral studies to describe the SISP identity safety factors in detail and identify effective ideas and approaches for classroom access. I worked for one year with a study group of elementary teachers to identify, organize, and describe what was learned from Steele's research. With Dorothy, we named four domains and condensed the evidence-based factors into 12 supporting components that captured the essence of the attitudes and behaviors observed in successful teachers from the research. We translated the concepts along with examples of concrete strategies to ease practical application in the classroom. Dorothy and I brought their ideas into a book for elementary teachers, *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades K–5: Places to Belong and Learn* (2013). Working in the field with teachers from grades K–12, I heard secondary teachers requesting specific strategies for middle and high schoolers. I partnered with Alexandrea Creer Kahn and Amy Epstein, resulting in a second book, *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6–12: Pathways to Belonging and Learning* (2020).

The four domains and 12 components of identity safety that serve as the framework for application of identity safe teaching in classrooms also serve as useful guidelines to transform all levels of school culture. Drawn straight from the SISP research, they are the bedrock of identity safety practice. We will highlight them throughout the book and apply them to the wider perspective for the whole school.

Domain 1: Student-Centered Teaching

1. Listening for Student Voices: To ensure that students are heard and can contribute to and shape classroom life

2. Teaching for Understanding: To ensure students will learn new knowledge and incorporate it into what they know

3. Focus on Cooperation: Rather than focus on competition, to support students in learning from and helping others

4. Classroom Autonomy: To support students in responsibility and feelings of belonging

Domain 2: Cultivating Diversity

5. Using Diversity as a Resource for Teaching: To include all students' curiosity and knowledge in the classroom

6. High Expectations and Academic Rigor: To support all students in high-level learning

7. Challenging Curriculum: To motivate each student by providing meaningful, purposeful learning

Domain 3: Classroom Relationships

8. Teacher Warmth and Availability to Support Learning: To build a trusting, encouraging relationship with each student

9. Positive Student Relationships: To build interpersonal understanding and caring among students

Domain 4: Caring Classrooms

10. Teacher Skill: To establish an orderly, purposeful classroom that facilitates student learning

11. Emotional and Physical Comfort: To provide a safe environment so that each student connected to school and to other students

12. Attention to Prosocial Development: To teach students how to live with one another, solve problems, and show respect and caring for others

Research on identity safety continues. Stephanie Fryberg (2016), professor at the University of Michigan and a member of the Tulalip Tribes, along with Mary Murphy (personal communication, September 20, 2018), professor at Indiana University, feature identity safety aligned with growth mindset in their research on creating culturally responsive spaces and belonging for all students. Stanford professor and director of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018) focus on identity safety as an essential element in educating the whole child to create "a caring, culturally responsive learning community in which all students are valued and are free from social identity threats that undermine performance," explaining that "identity-safe classrooms promote student achievement and attachments to school" (para. 19).

Research on stereotype threat and its remedy, identity safety, have sparked further study as researchers develop identity safety experiments and case studies where positive contact and role models were found to promote identity safety (McIntyre, et al., 2003; Purdie-Vaughns, et al., 2008). In "How to Help All Students Feel Safe to Be Themselves," Ondrasek and Flook (2020) highlight an LPI case study at the Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA) in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). There, researchers observed trusting classroom relationships, attention to prosocial development, incorporating diversity as a resource, and other identity safety components in action, leading to improved achievement and a high graduation rate. Students who were surveyed reported that they "feel safe at school."

Making It Happen

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR AN IDENTITY SAFE SCHOOL CULTURE

In this book, we focus on bringing each of the components, and the guiding principles that support them, to life across a school campus—from the front office to the classrooms, yards, lunchrooms, and auditoriums—weaving them into a school culture to create safety and inclusion for students of all backgrounds, especially students of color and students with varied gender identities.

In the books *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades K–5* (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) and *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6–12* (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2020), we introduce identity safety as an antidote to stereotype threat and offer a detailed overview with vignettes and examples of teaching strategies for each of the domains and their respective components. We explain that identity safe teaching is an

approach and not a program. We refer you to both those books for more information on teaching strategies.

To create a meaningful approach for implementation, we developed the identity safe components into a set of guiding principles that apply to both the classroom and the school. The principles draw from the components and are presented in a condensed form. Further in this chapter, we will elaborate on each of these guiding principles in their capacity to manifest the ideals of an identity safe school culture.

Identity Safety Guiding Principles

1. **Colorblind teaching** that ignores differences is a barrier to inclusion in the classroom.

2. **To feel a sense of belonging and acceptance** requires creating positive relationships between teacher and students and among students with equal status for different social identities.

3. **Cultivating diversity** as a resource for learning and expressing high expectations for students promotes learning, competence, and achievement.

4. **Educators examine their own social identities** to feel a sense of identity safety and convey that feeling to students, creating an identity safe environment for them.

5. **Social and emotional safety** is created by supporting students in defining their identities, refuting negative stereotypes, and countering stereotype threat, giving them a voice in the classroom while using social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies.

6. **Student learning** is enhanced in diverse classrooms by teaching for understanding, creating opportunities for shared inquiry and dialogue, and offering a challenging, rigorous curriculum.

7. **Schoolwide equity** flourishes for everyone in identity safe schools where the climate, the structures, practices, and attitudes prioritize equity, inclusion, and academic growth for students from all backgrounds. Leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence; attend to student needs; address racism, bias, and privilege; and serve as the architects of ongoing change.

These principles can be seen as individual trees in the woods. With the principles in mind, we can pull back to observe and manage the entire forest. From this vantage point, we can see where and how the principles are working together to support the greater culture that permeates the entire system. We can also identify the areas that need attention.