

Creating Identity Safe Classrooms for All Students

Stereotype Threat
Steele and Aronson

Identity Safety
Steele and Cohn-Vargas

Growth Mindset
Dweck

Bibliography/Next Steps

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About the Presenter – Jennifer Abrams

Jennifer Abrams is an international educational and communications consultant for public and private schools, hospitals, universities and non-profits. Jennifer trains and coaches teachers, administrators, nurses, hospital personnel and others on successful instructional practices, new employee support, supervision and evaluation, generational savvy, having hard conversations and effective collaboration skills.

In Palo Alto USD (Palo Alto, CA), Jennifer led professional development sessions and provided new teacher and supervisor trainings at both the elementary and secondary level. From 2000-2011, Jennifer was lead coach for the Palo Alto-Mountain View-Los Altos-Saratoga-Los Gatos Consortium's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program.

In her educational consulting work, Jennifer has presented at annual conferences such as Learning Forward, ASCD, NASSP, and the New Teacher Center Annual Symposium, as well as at the Teachers' and Principals' Centers for International School Leadership. Jennifer's communications consulting in the health care sector includes training and coaching work at the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula and Stanford Hospitals.

Her publications include *Having Hard Conversations* published by Corwin Press in 2009, "Planning Productive Talk," an article for ASCD's *Educational Leadership*, October, 2011, the chapter, "Habits of Mind for the School Savvy Leader" in Art Costa's and Bena Kallick's book, *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*, and contributions to the book, *Mentors in the Making: Developing New Leaders for New Teachers* published by Teachers College Press. Her upcoming book, with co-author Valerie Von Frank, is titled *Being Generationally Savvy: Learning and Leading Across the Generations* and will be published by Corwin Press in November of 2013.

Jennifer has been a featured interviewee on the topic of professionalism for ASCD's video series, Master Class, hosted by National Public Radio's Claudio Sanchez, and for the lead article on facilitating productive conversations for Learning Forward's "The Leading Teacher" Summer, 2013 newsletter; as a generational expert for "Tune in to What the New Generation of Teachers Can Do," published in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2011, and by the Ontario Ministry of Education for their *Leadership Matters: Supporting Open-to-Learning Conversations* video series.

Jennifer considers herself a "voice coach," helping others learn how to best use their voices - be it collaborating on a team, presenting in front of an audience, coaching a colleague, supervising an employee, and most recently in writing for the stage, as she did in her tenure as a Board Member of the National New Play Network. Jennifer holds a Master's degree in Education from Stanford University and a Bachelor's degree in English from Tufts University. She lives in Palo Alto, California. Jennifer can be reached at jennifer@jenniferabrams.com and www.jenniferabrams.com.

Purple

**In first grade Mrs. Lohr
said my purple teepee
wasn't realistic enough,
that purple was no color
for a tent,
that purple was a color
for people who died,
that my drawing wasn't
good enough
to hang with the others.
I walked back to my seat
counting the swish swish swishes
of my baggy corduroy trousers.
with a black crayon
nightfall came
to my purple tent
in the middle
of an afternoon.**

**In second grade Mr. Barta
said draw anything,
he didn't care what.
I left my paper blank
and when he came around
to my desk
my heart beat like a tom-tom.
He touched my head
and in a soft voice said
the snowfall
how clean
and white
and beautiful.**

Alexis Rotella

Equity/Inclusivity Barriers

Age	Ethnicity
Intellectual Ability	Power and Privilege
Sexual Orientation	Ancestry
Gender	Religion
Socio Economic Status	Culture
Gender Identity	Physical Ability
Race	Language

Creating Identity Safe Classrooms – Becki Cohn-Vargas

Introduction

Identity safety is a concept introduced in 2003 that recognizes the need for students to feel their identity is valued.

Identity safe classrooms validate students' experiences, backgrounds, and identities. These classrooms are free from negative relationships and teaching practices that implicitly, or explicitly, link students' identities (e.g., race, gender, religion), to academic performance. (D. M. Steele)

The premise stresses the need for schools to provide the appropriate conditions for students to discover or strengthen their identities and understand their uniqueness. In an identity safe classroom, each child's identity is viewed as an asset with which they may make life-long contributions to their culture and society as a whole. School environments need to assure that all students feel validated for who they are, because of and not in spite of their backgrounds and identities. In an identity safe environment, differences in identity are acknowledged and celebrated. The negative influences of stereotyping are averted. This leads to a climate that builds empathy and intercultural understanding, and makes it possible for all students to achieve.

Stereotype Threat Undermines Safety

Often the term “colorblind” is associated with an environment that is free of racism and bias. The sad reality is that racial divisions have not gone away, and neither children nor adults are blind to our differences, nor should they be. Colorblind practices are neither possible nor constructive for students who feel, and may have experienced, their own difference as a barrier to inclusion. When teachers ignore racial, ethnic and other student differences, stereotypes go underground.

We all have many different aspects or contingencies that make up each of our identities: our age, race, religion, and gender, to name a few. According to Claude Steele, renowned Social Psychologist “If you have to deal with things in situations because you have a certain identity, that identity will be important to you. Most psychologically impactful identity contingencies are those that in some way threaten the individual.” These contingencies have a tremendous hold over people's psyches, so strong that the person who is stereotyped is adversely affected even by being afraid to confirm a negative stereotype. This fear of possibly confirming a negative stereotype is what Steele dubbed “stereotype threat.”

Stereotype threat (Steele 2009) is a theory that suggests people whose race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other immutable aspects of one's identity have been negatively stereotyped are affected even when the stereotype is not overtly mentioned. Negative stereotypes are so pervasive that the people fear that they are being viewed through this negative lens. In hundreds of studies, *stereotype threat* has been shown to negatively impact student achievement and attitudes (see www.reducingstereotype.org).

As an antidote to the colorblind environment where stereotypes continue to manifest in both spoken and unspoken ways, an identity safe classroom creates a space where student differences are not ignored. Students feel valued and appreciated as they bring their whole identity into the classroom

Creating Identity Safe Classrooms, an Integral Part of Student Success

An identity safe environment is intentional. Characteristics of identity safe classrooms and schools have been shown to have a positive effect on student learning and their enjoyment of school, in spite of real stereotypes and powerful social inequalities operating in the outside world.

Characteristics of identity safe classrooms include building positive accepting relationships and creating a sense of belonging for students. Such classrooms are meaning-centered and challenging curriculum combined with a teacher's high expectations convey the belief that students will succeed. Teachers honor the different backgrounds of students and incorporate them into the curriculum. Students see themselves reflected on the walls of the classroom and learn about each other's cultures and backgrounds.

In an identity safe classroom, students feel accepted and have positive relationships both with their teacher and fellow students. They feel emotionally comfortable in a warm and caring environment. Pro-social behavior is taught as part of the curriculum and practiced through specific and meaningful activities where students can engage each other. Bullying or hurtful comments are reduced and students learn empathy and are taught positive ways to communicate and interact.

By providing opportunities for autonomy, students experience that their decisions matter and they take responsibility for their learning and behavior. To develop autonomy, they are given opportunities to exercise choices within the classroom and leadership in the school setting. Students have a voice in the life of the classroom.

These characteristics or elements identified above, when combined together, promote social and academic competence and belonging. These strategies of identity safety are doable in any classroom and work in powerful ways to improve student performance and create positive environments. The goal is to “unhook” the relationship between racial or gender group membership and school achievement by creating a classroom environment that reflects and makes use of the lived experience and perspectives of the different children—an *identity safe* classroom.

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(Becki Cohn-Vargas, Ed.D. (2012) Excerpt from *Not In Our School*, Video Action Kit)

ABCDE Strategies for Identity Safety

Autonomy, Belonging, Competence, Diversity as a Resource, Effective and Explicit Instruction

Adapted from Dr. Becki Cohn-Vargas based on the ideas of Stereotype Threat & Identity Safety from Drs. Claude and Dorothy Steele

COMPONENTS OF AN IDENTITY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Autonomy: student voice, choices

Belonging: identity, membership in the learning community, relationships

Competence: sense of self as an able learner

Diversity as a Resource: value to what student brings from his/her background

Effective & Explicit Instruction: practices that result in student achievement

The following is a series of possible suggestions for administrator and teacher behaviors that promote Identity Safety.

AUTONOMY

- Make sure all students' work is posted on the walls of the school, not just those with higher grades.
- Be deliberate in designing experiences for students to safely participate in discussions.
- Be concrete in adding in choices when assigning academic work.
- Scaffold student-led conferences so all students can be even more successful in the process.
- For quieter students, allow for small group share-outs vs. whole group share-outs. Plan for more rehearsal time and provide sentence stems for those students who are English Learners.
- Make sure students have clear instructions for how to listen well to one another.
- Make sure students know which behaviors constitute teasing, criticizing or making fun of another student and be clear these behaviors are not acceptable. School policies known by all.
- Allow for primary languages to be used in the school.
- Acknowledge student autonomy outside of the classroom. Be aware in some families students have taken on very autonomous and responsible roles.

BELONGING

- Express sincere liking of students through appreciation, pleasure, humor, and delight.
- Connect with each individual student. Be able to say you have greeted and/or spoken with each student every day. (with 150+ students in HS strive diligently to do so)
- Give directives and feedback in direct and clear ways with action verbs indicating what is to be done.
- Resolve conflicts in such a way that each student has a voice and learns to

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listen to others.

- Create opportunities for mixing and for clustering student with their own groups.
- Be mindful that your tone is warm and personal, supportive and not punitive, even when correcting a student.
- Anticipate and avoid situations that might make a student uncomfortable. Talking to students about vacations or assuming specific family dynamics.

- Address structural barriers that make a student feel inferior (e.g., when a scholarship is provided it isn't public knowledge, or when an after-school program is offered there is transportation to ensure all students can participate).
- Express interest in students' viewpoints and thoughts by asking questions, looking at students, nodding when they speak.
- Explain reasons for the rules in the school. Do not presume everyone knows the purpose of the rules.
- Recognize and validate student identity in all aspects of their lives, culturally, socially, etc.
- Help all students feel smart and important through verbal and non-verbal language.

- Reflect on language used when groups are described, check the types of words used, and avoid use of stereotypical language.
- Respond to a problem without seeking guilt or blame. Don't say, "We have to do this because so and so put us in this position."
- Communicate a diverse conception of what it means to be smart in this school. Acknowledge all types of intelligences.
- Be available to listen and respond to students, individually and in small groups. Don't stay with just one group or only be visible in one part of the campus.

- Give specific feedback, praise, and encouragement and explain why what the student did is a good thing and why he or she should continue the behavior.
- Assure adequate time to solve problems or respond to need for help.
- Provide training and support for students to solve their own problems (conflict resolution strategies).
- Ensure an absence of teasing, criticism, and anger in the school by reminders, norms posted, reflection.
- Continue to monitor ways one might be teaching within a 'dominant culture' climate. Recognize the need for a less individualistic and more collaborative model.
- Create classroom norms that don't invalidate cultural values that are less structured

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around white views of time, and oriented to process rather than product.

- Describe all types of families in a positive way,
- Design school meetings that provide opportunities for pro-social sharing and problem solving.
- Approach all students and validate them verbally and through proximity.
- Model patience with students of all ethnicities. Be aware when one is biased in one's lack of patience with one student's behavior, but tolerant of others exhibiting same behavior.
- Make sure students feel sense of fairness and that no racial or ethnic groups are given special or inferior treatment in the context of equity.
- Arrange materials and space so all students have access to supplies and equipment and are able to interact.
- Have school rules and norms described in positive as opposed to negative ways.
- Make sure there is no display of graded work nor hand out in a way that others can tell who earned which grade.
- Display evidence of pro-social values on walls (e.g., kindness, empathy, equity, social justice, and responsibility).
- Design opportunities for problems to be solved in a way to validate both students' positive intentions and make room for self-correction.
- Design cooperative learning strategies with all students having access to partners, as well as having roles that attribute equal value to all participants.
- Openly admit when mistakes by an educator are made.

COMPETENCE

- Provide scaffolding for students to move to proximal zones of development academically and socially.
- Celebrate student effort in any communication, assemblies, newsletters, websites.
- Express trust in students' abilities and good intentions, no matter the ethnic or racial group the student identifies. Do so in written, verbal and non-verbal ways.
- Try to make sure students don't give up and prompt students to keep trying by asking questions or scaffolding.
- Provide messages about the flexible and developmental nature of intelligence. (Growth Mindset)
- Explicitly teach of social competencies, code-switching and societal expectations without invalidating the home culture. (Code-switching refers to language or behaviors that may be different between the home and school culture.)
- Explicitly teach skills that build responsibility, restraint, and the capacity to resist negative peer pressure

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- Encourage questions and pause so students have time to ask them. Perhaps have students create questions with a partner so they don't feel 'on the spot.'
- Continually monitor and check for understanding for all students. Assess the data and see which students needs additional support.

DIVERSITY AS A RESOURCE

- Provide books, artifacts, and displays on the walls reflecting the cultures of students in the classroom, the school, and the world.
- Make positive references to culture without embarrassing students.
- Learn the correct pronunciation of students' names and expect other students to pronounce names correctly as well.
- Design curriculum in all subject areas that incorporates references to cultures including important contributions, multiple perspectives on history, and multi-cultural literature.
- Provide students opportunities to be in mixed groups, but also a chance to be in groups with at least one other student of the same background when possible.
- Respond to racialized/negative comments and intervene when subtle or obvious comments or conflicts occur.
- Teach students how to talk about race/ethnicity/culture in a positive way.
- Provide regular opportunities for students to draw from their backgrounds in projects and activities.
- Become more aware of the cultural background of all students and anticipate situations that may involve cultural differences that affect learning or life of the classroom or school. (e.g., students who fast for a religious holiday).
- Provide crayons and supplies labeled "flesh" reflect the color of skin of students in the classroom
- Validate the first language of the students, allowing opportunities for it to be used in the classroom and acknowledged in the life of the classroom and school.
- Highlight the fact that history and views of society have been skewed by inherent structures that promote meritocracy, racism, sexism, as well as ostracism and exclusion for people who are different or seen as other and do so in a safe and developmentally appropriate way.
- Expect students from dominant groups to be respectful and teach them to be inclusive.
- Take steps to better understand racial identity development theory and do not force integration, take personally or minimize some of the attitudes during exploration (the encounter stage).

EFFECTIVE AND EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

- Differentiate instruction to meet individual needs at the appropriate level of challenge with respectful tasks that differentiate according to content, process, and product, and according to interest, learning style, and level of readiness.

ABCDE Strategies for Identity Safety

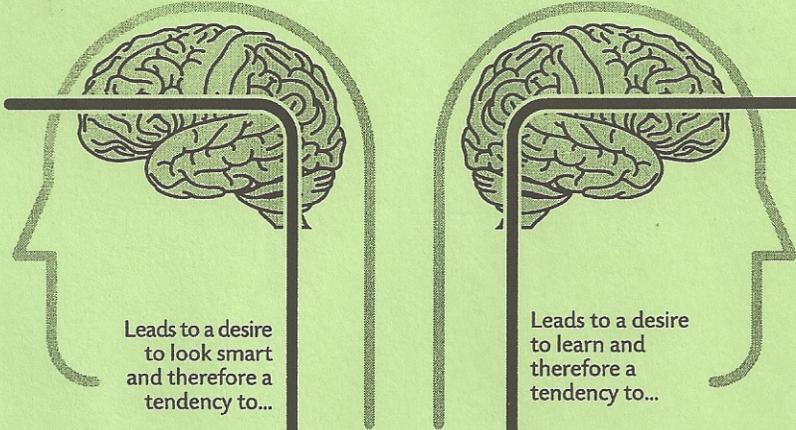
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- 'Mix the pot' allowing for flexible grouping that is varied and emphasizes differing strengths in a way that all students feel bright.
- Ensure classroom management strategies are respectful, taking into account the students' perspectives and teaching students to manage themselves.
- Use the "Elements of Instruction" and differentiation strategies that include:
 - Clear learning *objectives* at all performance levels at all levels of thinking.
 - *Anticipatory sets* that draw on prior knowledge of all students.
 - *Closure* activities that provide all students regular opportunities to summarize the learning.
 - *Active participation* that engage all students throughout every lesson.
 - *Monitoring* of all students during instruction and providing specific feedback linked to the objective.
- Give behavioral directives, articulate expected procedures and provide clear instructions.
- Explicitly teach organization, study skills, and the constructive use of time.
- Use English learner strategies. Explain vocabulary to make the lesson accessible to English learners and provide opportunities for them to develop academic language.

Fixed Mindset
Intelligence is static

Growth Mindset
Intelligence can be developed



Leads to a desire to look smart and therefore a tendency to...

Leads to a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to...

CHALLENGES

...avoid challenges

...embrace challenges

OBSTACLES

...get defensive or give up easily

...persist in the face of setbacks

EFFORT

...see effort as fruitless or worse

...see effort as the path to mastery

CRITICISM

...ignore useful negative feedback

...learn from criticism

SUCCESS OF OTHERS

...feel threatened by the success of others

...find lessons and inspiration in the success of others

← **As a result,** they may plateau early and achieve less than their full potential.

As a result, they reach ever-higher levels of achievement. →

Promoting Resilience in Yourself and Others – How Attitude Affects Achievement – “Voice Lessons” Newsletter – J. Abrams - April 2008

With May around the corner, everyone thinking of summer, and most of us having a just a few weeks left in school, I have been spending some time thinking about how we can help each other and our students continue to work to our full potential. How can we persevere, and show up as our best selves as the school year comes to an end? How do we keep our sense of discipline and rigor, especially if we are thinking things are ‘wrapped up’ or have a sense that whatever we do from here on out might not make that much of an impact at this point? This type of thinking is so prevalent around this time and it doesn’t serve.

At moments like this, positive self-talk for ourselves and for our students really matters. Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford, has written a book about this very topic. Dweck’s book, Mindset, is an incredibly readable study of two mindsets – the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. In a nutshell, most of us fall into two categories in terms of how we perceive our abilities – either that we have them (or not), *or* through our effort we can increase them. Her research on how living in the growth mindset will ultimately help us succeed is validating work for those of us who work with students – we need to teach them that their effort (and ours) will make a difference.

The fixed mindset can sound like this:

- Either I am smart or I am not
- One is born with a certain amount of intelligence and I don’t have enough
- Smart is making no mistakes, going fast, and about the outcome being perfect
- Failure isn’t an action, it is an identity – I don’t fail, I am a failure
- So if I fail, I might not just be judged, but I might also be unlovable

At this time of the school year, the idea of ‘giving up’ sounds awfully tempting. And for those of us who ‘default’ to the fixed mindset, the overwhelm that happens now can really push us to not push.

The growth mindset is more optimum frame of mind to be in, not only at this point in the school year, but all year. It can sound like this:

- I believe effort is a positive, constructive force
- Growing and progress are important to me – not just the product or outcome
- I can substantially change, stretch, and grow *and* it is fun
- Challenge is good
- Being on my learning edge is the smart thing to do

This way of looking at the world seems so logical when I put it out like this. So why don’t we live here?

- Larger society has said for such a long time that “success is about being more gifted than others, that failure does measure you, and that effort is for those who can’t make it on talent.”
- We don’t talk about vulnerability and struggle as good things – in our ‘insta-success’ society everything must sound “Great!” It just isn’t uncomfortable to admit we are having a hard time.
- It is hard for many of to sit with someone who is struggling or trying to cope.

What can we do to foster the growth mindset?

- As writer/educator Denise Clark Pope, author of Doing School, has said, we can live in a ‘culture of redemption and revision’
- We can work with Martin Seligman’s concepts from Learned Optimism and think of failures or struggles as short term, localized moments over which we do have control
- We can deliberately and consciously teach ourselves and our students the habit of mind of persistence – more information in the books on Habits of Mind by Art Costa and Bena Kallick
- Have conversations in which we ask ourselves:
 - What mistake did I make today that taught me something?
 - What did you try hard at today?
 - What did I do today that I struggled with and what did I learn?

Helping students and ourselves to end the school year with continued effort and strength is a goal worth striving for.

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Books

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Denise Clark Pope - Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students

Carol Dweck – Mindset: The New Psychology of Success – How We Can Learn To Fulfill Our Potential

Martin Seligman – Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being

Martin Seligman - Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life

Claude M. Steele – Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Can Affect Us