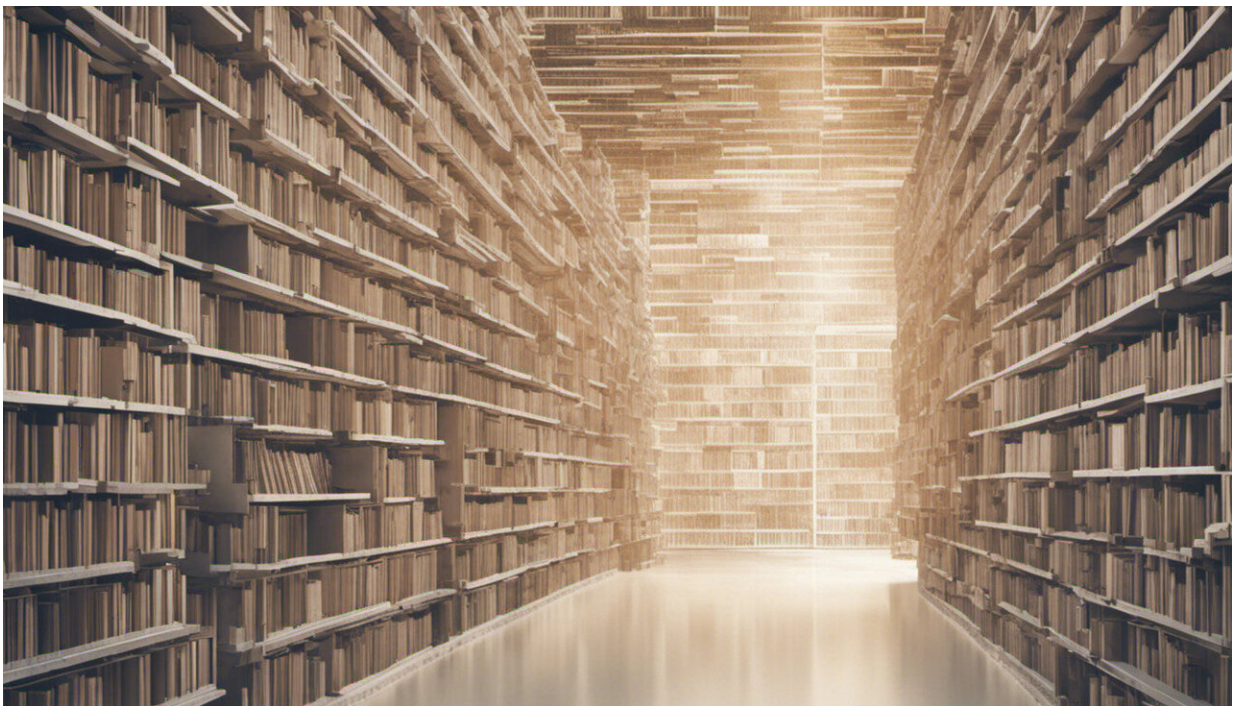


Simple efforts bridge achievement gap between Latino, white students, researcher finds

February 15 2013, by Marguerite Rigoglioso



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The achievement gap in academic performance between academically at-risk minorities and white students has concerned educators for decades now. It's a troubling fact that Latino Americans and African Americans, for example, earn lower grades on average than their white peers and are

much more likely to drop out of high school.

Amid such sobering statistics, a bright spark has appeared in the form of research being led by Geoffrey Cohen, a professor of education and of psychology at Stanford, and David Sherman of the University of California-Santa Barbara. In an article published online Feb. 11 by the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), Cohen, Sherman and seven co-authors write that a simple intervention made with middle school Latino American students reduced the [achievement gap](#) significantly. What's more, the positive effect persisted over time.

The matter comes down to overcoming the negative effects of "stereotype threat," a phenomenon that researchers have identified and documented over the last two decades. What they have found – in numerous studies – is that the stress and uncertain sense of belonging that can stem from being a member of a negatively stereotyped group undermines [academic performance](#) of [minority students](#) as compared with white students.

Cohen and his colleagues have been looking for remedies to stereotype threat. In the first study described in the article, the researchers devised well-timed "values-affirmation" classroom assignments given to both Latino and white students as a part of the regular classroom curriculum. In one exercise, middle schoolers were given a list of values, such as "being good at art," "being religious" and "having a sense of humor." They were asked to pick the ones that were important to them and write a few sentences describing why. In a second exercise, they reflected in a more open-ended manner on things in their life that were important to them, and in a third they were guided to write a brief essay describing how the things they most consistently valued would be important to them in the coming spring.

Students completed several structured reflection exercises in their class

throughout the year. The tasks were given at critical moments: the beginning of the school year; before tests; and near the holiday season, a period of stress for many people.

The control group was guided to write about values that were important to other people, but not themselves, or about other neutral topics.

Dramatic results

The results were dramatic: Latino students who completed the affirmation exercises had higher grades than those in the control group. Moreover, the effects of the affirmation intervention persisted for three years. The task had no significant effect on white students.

A second study looked at whether affirmation interventions could lessen the persistent threat to [Latino Americans'](#) identity caused by the overt or subtle presence of racial and ethnic stereotypes and prejudices. Researchers administered values affirmation tasks and also assessed students' perceptions of daily adversity, identity threat and feelings of academic fit. They did this several times over the school year as reflected in diary entries, and again measured students' grades.

Surveys completed by children in the classroom indicated that Latino students who had participated in the affirmation exercises were less likely to see daily stress and adversity as threatening to their identity and sense of belonging in school. Once again, their grades were higher than those who did not participate in the affirmation assignments.

"Self-affirmation exercises provide adolescents from minority groups with a psychological time out," said Cohen. In an environment many minorities find hostile, such tasks provide reassurance about who they are and what's really important at a critical time in their lives.

As to why the interventions affected minorities but not white students, Cohen said, "Latino Americans are under a more consistent and chronic sense of psychological threat in the educational setting than their white counterparts on average. They constantly face negative stereotypes about their ability to succeed, so they are the ones to benefit the most from affirmations that help them to maintain a positive self-image."

Multiple benefits

Such affirmations not only help students feel more confident, they allow them to reframe adversity and challenges as temporary phenomena rather than looming signs that they somehow don't belong – or, worse, that they are fulfilling negative stereotypes about their inferiority.

The studies also underscore that underperformance is frequently not a function of individual inadequacy, but rather systemic failure. "A threatening environment can make smart kids less likely to show what they know, whereas a positive environment might pull out qualities that make the seemingly average student shine," said Cohen.

Cohen's study represents the latest advance in decades-long work on minority student achievement pioneered by a group of researchers across the country, most notably Stanford Graduate School of Education Dean Claude Steele. His book, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, chronicles the discovery and explanation of stereotype threat. Working in this arena for the past decade, Cohen, often in collaboration with Steele, Stanford psychology professor Greg Walton and others, has used insights from previous research to explore measures that might reduce its effects.

Cohen cautioned that such interventions are not a magic bullet. "Psychological threat might not contribute to a group's performance in some schools," he said.

And he noted that such interventions echo what great teachers already do: continually affirm children. "Small gestures of affirmation can have lasting consequences, especially when they are woven into the student's daily experience," he said. Teacher training, he indicated, should ensure that teachers make them a part of their toolkit.

"At the school level you need committed teachers, and a solid curriculum," Cohen said. "When these factors are in place, when opportunities for growth are there, psychological interventions can help students change their lives."

Provided by Stanford University

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