EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

Racial Identity, Academic Identity, and Academic Outcomes for Students of Color

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Experts in psychology and education have shown a strong relationship between identity construction in academics and academic achievement. Studies show that students' academic self-perceptions in math and science relate to academic performance (Bouchey & Harter, 2005); students' perceptions of their academic identities relate to their college aspirations (Howard, 2003); and identity matters in the books students choose to read (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Williams, 2004). Studies also show the effect of self-concept on motivation (particularly engagement and learning in the classroom) and on grades (Choi, 2005; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). This brief focuses on the racial component of one's identity and how educators can support students as they develop their identities and leverage it to improve academic outcomes.

PART I: RACIAL AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY

Identity is essentially the answer to the question "*who am I*?" A person constructs his or her identity throughout life. It is comprised of religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, economic background, and a host of other factors. In identity theory, an identity is "the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role and an incorporation of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" (Stets & Burke,

2000).

Many factors influence the ways in which adolescents view themselves (Fairbanks & Broughton, 2003). The cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds of students play an integral role in their beliefs, practices, and expectations for education (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Aspects of an academic identity and an academic self-concept are strongly related to and have an effect on the academic performance of students. Awareness of race and the ways in which structural/institutional racism affects students of color is key to helping them achieve their full academic potential (Howard, 2010).

Academic identity (or academic self-concept) has been generally defined as how we see ourselves in an academic domain. Academic identity is a dimension of a larger, global self-concept (Howard, 2003). Moreover, a student's academic identity can affect how he or she navigates the school environment. It influences behaviors and choices that students make which affect their educational outcomes. These student outcomes include achievement, academic performance, intellectual engagement, disidentification/ identification, goal orientation/learning goals, educational

and occupational aspirations, and motivation.

It is important for educators to have an understanding of how race and culture manifest in education and how race shapes how students see their worlds. On November 13, 2017, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) released data from the 2016 Universal Crime Report Hate Crime Statistics program. In 2016, there were 6,063 single-bias incidents reported to law enforcement agencies. Of that number, approximately 58% were motivated by bias due to race, ethnicity, or ancestry. And 9.9% of these issues occurred at a school or college. While not all incidents of bias are classified as hate crimes, they occur much too often to be ignored. This pattern of racial and cultural bias influences how students shape their world view and impacts their concept of self and academic identity.

As educators, we must understand a student's academic self-concept because it can explain their orientation to school (Plucker & Stocking, 2001). School factors help shape a student's self-constructed perceptions; for students of color in particular, academic identity is hard to separate from racial and gender identities (Howard, 2003).

Leveraging racial identity and racial/cultural awareness may be one way that educators can help meet the varied needs of students. Person-environment fit and self-determination theory provide a framework which suggests that certain student needs should be met in order for students to be engaged and motivated in school. As children develop, their needs change and the educational environment (including instructional practices and classroom structure) must shift to meet their needs.

Numerous studies conducted between 1992 and 2001 illuminate how multicultural learning and teaching help foster positive classroom behavior and superior academic achievement for students of color (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Banks, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2001).

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?

USE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Researchers and educators have looked to the role of cultural background, beliefs, and practices in student achievement. In particular, they have stressed culture as a primary link for understanding the academic performance of African American students (e.g., Boykin, 2002; Rogoff, 2003). To enhance the academic outcomes of this population, the curriculum and instructional strategies in public schools should begin to reflect students' out-of-school cultural experiences (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003; Wong & Rowley, 2001). Educators can improve cultural continuity between their students' home and school experiences by identifying and activating student strengths or situating learning in the lives of students and their families. These

strategies can be implemented in a number of ways such as incorporating multicultural books in instructional practices or teaching content by using issues in the students' community.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Racial identity has also been deemed an asset in helping students of color negotiate "exposure to risk associated with racial injustice" (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umana-Taylor, 2012; Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Caldwell, Aiyer, & Miller, 2013). For students of color, racial identity can serve as a protective and promotive factor of achievement-related outcomes (Oyserman, 2003; Rowley, 1998; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Wong & Rowley, 2001). One way that educators can help their students is to acknowledge the socio-political and historical role that race has played in the United States.

UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MOTIVATION, IDENTITY, AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Self-determination theory is based on the idea that people have intrinsic propensities to engage in active, curiosity-based exploration and to integrate new experiences into the self (Hadre & Reeve, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Skinner & Edge, 2002). This intrinsic motivation and self-regulation leads to positive outcomes such as achievement in school, better decision-making, and goal-setting behaviors. It occurs when certain psychological needs are met: the need for competence, the need for relatedness, and the need for autonomy. Competence refers to feeling capable to complete a task. Relatedness refers to a sense of belonging to the environment. Autonomy is the need for independence and the need to make choices.

Educators can meet the three psychological needs in a number of ways. To satisfy the need for competence, educators can provide students with tasks that they have the skills to complete. Educators can build upon these tasks, as the level of rigor increases, so that students feel capable of completing. To satisfy the need for relatedness, educators can provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively and share their interests and goals with one another. In addition, elevating and utilizing student voice and input increases their sense of relatedness to the environment. To satisfy the need for autonomy, educators can help students by enhancing their opportunities for decision-making and with setting goals. These psychological needs moderate

the relationships between risk factors and outcomes for African American students. Students may internalize negative beliefs about their racial group, which may negatively affect their performance in school. This is known as Claude Steele's notion of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The process of internalization, a tenet of self-determination theory, occurs because students begin to identify with and internalize messages they receive in their environment. Stigmatized individuals internalize messages and beliefs associated with their group stigma.

When educators meet these needs, students become more engaged and feel more self-determined. By understanding the role of racial identity and academic identity in the lived experiences of students of color, educators can recognize the underlying mechanisms between motivation, engagement, and school outcomes and reduce bias in the classroom and in schools.

Written by Karmen Rouland PhD.

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