

# CHAPTER

# 2

## Stereotype Threat

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The whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all this great diversity—that it's this or maybe that—you have just one large statement; it is this.

—Chinua Achebe

The journey of a social justice educator can be quite complex. This expedition entails many peaks and valleys. It forces us to meet many challenges around ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, and many more essential issues. We must reflect on our preconceived biases as educators. These biases will interfere with how we treat our students, particularly our minoritized students. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that if we fail to address the biases that we possess before engaging with our students, we may cause great harm to the students whom we serve.

Left unchecked, our biases can produce a toxic learning environment for our students—one where some do not feel valued, do not feel welcome, and do not experience a sense of belonging. As social justice educators, we must purposely strive to meet the needs of our minoritized students. We must strive to create welcoming learning environments that nourish and celebrate the great diversity that our students have to offer. We can only accomplish this goal by understanding who our students are, including their backgrounds and the many challenges and barriers they face.

One predominant challenge that minoritized students face in schools is stereotypes. Before we continue, consider the range of students who have been minoritized in your own community. Is the discrimination based on race and ethnicity? Religion? Gender and sexual orientation? Poverty? Language learning? What are the demographics and

characteristics of students’ identities that cause them to be minoritized? The answers to these questions should give us all pause.

Stereotypes can be defined as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (Allport, 1954, p. 191). Marginalized students are too often regarded negatively in their schools. As researchers suggest, this approach can be extremely harmful: “Imagine yourself in a situation where the people around you believe you are *not* smart or capable, and they came to this judgment without consideration of your past performance, your motivation to work, or your actual skills and knowledge, but instead based their evaluation on little more than your gender, your age, or even the color of your skin” (Rydell et al., 2017, p. 294). Imagine how it must feel to be regarded as less capable by those around you. Imagine how difficult it must be to succeed under these circumstances. Unfortunately, this might actually be your current situation at work, school, or home.



### Pause and Ponder

Think back to your own experiences as a K–12 student. What stereotypes affected you personally? Did those stereotypes play a role in how you felt as a student?

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Which stereotypes are used to describe students around you? Which stereotypes do/did you hold about others?

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## Understanding Stereotype Threat and Its Impact on Students

Social categorization is defined by Hewstone and Giles (1997) as a core cognitive process that involves “the segmentation and organization of the social categories or groups” (p. 271). As they note, the process serves several functions: “reducing the complexity of incoming information; facilitating rapid identification of stimuli; and predicting and guiding behavior” (p. 271). Being categorized into a group—whether it’s race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender—tends to be inevitable, so it’s important to recognize that our students are impacted by the stereotypes or stigma attached to the group(s) with which they identify. In particular, what happens when these stereotypes affect the academic performance of minoritized students? Claude Steele, an American social psychologist and professor of psychology at Standard University, spent years researching and analyzing the effect of stereotype threat on minoritized student performance.

According to Steele et al. (2002), stereotype threat is a situational phenomenon that members of negatively stereotyped groups experience when they worry about confirming that negative stereotype with their performance. Steele proved that minoritized students underperformed academically because of the pressure related to their constant worry about the stereotype associated with their identity group.

Steele conducted several studies to research the impact that stereotype threat had on the testing performance of African Americans. Steele and Aronson (1995) reasoned that “whenever African American students perform an explicitly scholastic or intellectual task, they face the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype—a suspicion—about their group’s intellectual ability and competence” (p. 797). This meant that African American students lost time and cognitive energy by focusing on the perceived stereotype even though they were fully capable of high achievement. Since they were also dealing with the anxiety and the self-doubt associated with stereotype threat, rather than focusing their entire cognitive energy on the assessment, African American students were bound to underperform.

During Steele’s studies (Steele & Aronson, 1995), African American and white college students who possessed the same cognitive skills were given a thirty-minute verbal test with components from the GRE. This study was split into three groups, a diagnostic group and two nondiagnostic conditioned groups. For the participants in the diagnostic group, “the test was described as diagnostic of intellectual ability, thus making the racial stereotype about intellectual ability relevant to African American participants’ performance and thus preempt any threat of fulfilling it” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 799). For the nondiagnostic groups, there was no mention of intellectual or verbal ability; instead, those participants were told that the purpose of the research was to understand the psychological factors involved in solving verbal factors. As you may

have guessed, African American students in the diagnostic group scored significantly lower than those in the nondiagnostic group.



### Pause and Ponder

What verbal and nonverbal cues might you be using in your classroom that trigger stereotype threats in your students?

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As Steven Spencer and his colleagues noted, “Stereotype threat, it is important to stress, is conceptualized as a situational predicament—felt in a situation where one can be judged by, treated in terms of, or self-fulfill negative stereotypes about one’s group” (Spencer et al., 1999, p. 6). Many studies have been done to examine the effects of stereotype threat on diverse social groups. For example, Spencer and colleagues (1999) analyzed the impact of stereotype threat on gender, particularly related to performance in math. A widely held societal stereotype is that women do not perform as well as men when given a difficult exam in math. To test this belief, Spencer and his colleagues set up a two-part experiment in which women and men of equal mathematical skills were given thirty minutes to complete a complex mathematical examination.

At first, the results of the initial study seemed to confirm the stereotype. Both women and men were told that they were taking a math test with two sections. The sections varied in difficulty. One section contained questions requiring higher math levels (such as calculus), and the second section contained questions revolving around lower levels in math (such as algebra). The women and men were given instructions and told that they would receive their test scores upon completing the test. The results showed that women and men scored similarly in the easy section of the test. However, in the challenging section of the test, women scored significantly lower than men. The researchers were puzzled: How could this be? The participants all had equal content knowledge. Why did women score considerably lower?

Their next study proved once again that removing stereotype threat would dramatically affect women’s test performance. The testing conditions of the second study remained the same, but this time the participants were told that the test’s purpose was to show gender parity in math abilities. The

researchers found that “characterizing the test as insensitive to gender difference was enough to totally eliminate women’s underperformance in this experiment . . . we believe that by presenting the test as one on which gender differences do not occur, we made the stereotype of women’s inability irrelevant to interpreting their performance on the test—this particular test” (Spencer et al., 1999, p. 12). Women in the second study scored at similar levels to their male counterparts. Removing the stereotype threat allowed the women in this study to focus all of their cognitive abilities on taking the test.

Social justice educators ensure that they create learning spaces in which all students feel competent, capable, and motivated to work. While the examples provided earlier refer to African Americans and women, Latino/a, Native American, and Asian American students, as well as members of other social groups, are also affected by stereotype threats. Therefore, we should question how we design our lessons, structure our assessments, and cultivate the environment in our classrooms to make them psychologically safe spaces for all students. Social justice educators ensure that they create learning spaces in which all students feel competent, capable, and motivated to work.

## Eliminating the Stereotype Threat

Many studies have shown that stereotype threat has a significantly negative impact on the academic performance of stigmatized groups. As social justice educators, we must all work to eliminate the perceived threats, judgments, and anxiety that students experience, and to create learning environments that allow minoritized students to focus on academic excellence. Next we’ll share some teaching strategies that you can incorporate to diminish and eradicate stereotype threat from your classroom.

## Building Trust

Julius Green, a high school English teacher, strives to eliminate the stereotype threat from his classroom by creating a culture of trust and emphasizing high academic achievement. He states, “I believe that my students must understand that I value who they are from the moment they come into the classroom.” Mr. Green emphasizes the importance of building trusting and meaningful relationships with his students, and he allows his students to feel safe, valued, and respected. As a direct result, Mr. Green has created a learning environment that will enable students to focus solely on their academic progress and achievement.

Jesus, a student in Mr. Green’s class, confirms the value of this approach. He explains, “Mr. Green’s class is different. I enjoy being in the class because he cares about us. You know, he doesn’t just teach. He is always talking to us about our families, our lives, the things we do outside class.”

Although Jesus may not recognize it, Mr. Green has found a way to incorporate his students’ identity and culture into the classroom. His students understand that he values their past experiences. They feel represented in the classroom, which immediately counteracts any stereotypical feelings they may have regarding their teacher.

But building trusting relationships with students is not enough for Mr. Green; he also expects his students to achieve high academic standards. He says, “I want my students to understand that I expect them to achieve such high standards because they are fully capable of achieving it. Each student is capable of learning. I want them to know that I grade them based on their academic merits.”

In Mr. Green’s school, the rubrics and assessments are carefully crafted to facilitate and assess learning. We must convey to our students that we believe in their abilities. To eliminate stereotype threats in our classrooms, our students must understand they are being graded fairly.

Isabella Benavides, a second-grade elementary school teacher, also understands the importance of intentionally building positive student–teacher relationships to foster trust in the classroom. Ms. Benavides explains, “Our students have to know that we care about them. Yes, that we care about their academic lives, but [that we care about] their personal lives as well. We care about them as people.”

Each morning, Ms. Benavides brings the class together for a morning community circle, and she designs questions to get students to learn about each other, problem solve together, and learn about different perspectives. She takes notes on the children’s answers so she can make a point to connect with students later in the day.

An enthusiastic second grader, Christine appreciates this approach. She says, “At lunch, Ms. Benavides asked if she could see my drawing book. I was thinking, ‘How did she know I had a special drawing book?’ But it’s because she remembered that I talked about that in community circle.”

Asking students for updates on their personal interests builds a classroom culture that is the foundation for academic achievement. Ms. Benavides expects these second-grade students to engage in learning that is challenging, and her approach helps ensure that they feel capable and motivated to take on the challenge.



### Pause and Ponder

How can you build trust in your classroom? In what ways can you eliminate stereotype threat when administering assessments to students?

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## Representation

Social justice educators can fight against the detrimental effects of stereotype threat in various ways. For example, the impact of stereotype threat can be mitigated by increasing the representation of people from underrepresented groups in highly regarded positions, such as inviting successful community members from various backgrounds into the classroom to give presentations on their careers. The mere presence of members of minoritized groups dramatically reduces the impact of stereotype threat.

Murphy and colleagues (2007) studied the effect of stereotype threat on women in math, science, and engineering settings, and their results provide insight into the importance of representation. They told study participants they were watching videos from a conference on leadership in the sciences, although in fact the people in the video were actors. The gender composition of the discussion groups in the video varied; study participants saw discussion groups that were either predominantly male or gender balanced. Then, researchers asked study participants if a local university should host the fictitious conference based on the discussion in the video they watched.

The researchers found that women who watched the videos of predominantly male discussion groups felt less comfortable attending the fictitious conference than women who watched the videos where discussion groups were gender balanced. Murphy and colleagues (2007) concluded, “when a setting contains threatening situational cues, it raises the specter of identity threat—prompting heightened cognitive and physiological vigilance, decreased feelings of belonging, and decreased desire to participate in the setting” (p. 884). In comparison, the female math, science, and engineering students who watched a gender-balanced video reported feeling a much stronger sense of belonging (scoring a 4.79).

*We must make every attempt possible to introduce our students to field leaders representing their social groupings.*

What does this study tell us about our own students? Like the women in this study, students are more likely to feel stressed, be anxious, and experience a lower sense of belonging when they feel underrepresented. Therefore, we must make every attempt possible to introduce our students to field leaders representing their social groupings.

Jessica Thibodeau, a high school science teacher, tackles this challenge by introducing her students to the “what does a scientist look like” lesson. She explains, “This is one of my favorite lessons because women and minoritized groups are unrepresented in science. I want our students to see that scientists represent all genders, ethnicities, races, and social backgrounds.”

According to Mrs. Thibodeau, when she asks her students to describe a scientist at the beginning of the lesson, they all describe a scientist who resembles Bill Nye the Science Guy—an older person who is male, white,

and intelligent. Sadly, most students who belong to a minoritized group do not describe a person who looks like them. It is precisely this type of stereotype that a social justice educator confronts head-on. Otherwise, our students will check out; they won't believe that a position that is held in such high regard is attainable. If our students don't think they can become scientists one day, then why would they invest their time in learning about science? Mrs. Thibodeau teaches her students about scientists who represent diverse backgrounds and social groups. At the end of the lesson, when she tasks students with reflecting on what they have learned, the students all highlight one overarching theme: "Scientists look exactly like us." (See Figure 2.1.)

**Figure 2.1** Student Self-Portrait as a Scientist



Similarly, the fifth-grade learners in Amaya Kim's class are greeted each month by a community member, and they have the opportunity to learn about a different career. As one example, Dr. Vanessa Leon pays the class a visit. She is a high school classmate of Ms. Kim and works as a family medicine physician in the area. Dr. Leon shows a picture of herself from fifth grade on the screen and shares, "I grew up in this neighborhood. I went to a school down the street. I was a student in fifth grade, just like you are."

Ms. Kim reflects, "This moment is powerful, because many of my students can see themselves, their culture, their language reflected in Dr. Vanessa Leon."

Fifth-grade student Eloisa wants to be a doctor like Dr. Leon. She says, "Seeing her in my classroom and knowing she came from my neighborhood, it shows me that my dream is possible." Eloisa continues, "She even gave me some advice. She says to always be curious about learning something new. I can do that."



## Pause and Ponder

Minoritized groups and women are underrepresented in the field of science. In what other areas are minoritized groups underrepresented? How can we increase the visibility of minoritized people in highly regarded positions or positions of authority?

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## Student Agency

There is no universal definition of student agency, yet every educator recognizes it when they see it. Students who put forth effort and recognize the impact or outcome of that effort have a strong sense of agency. Students recognize that they are central to the learning process—the decisions they make to put forth effort are part of the determining factor of their success. As noted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology (n.d.),

Learners with agency can “intentionally make things happen by [their] actions,” and “agency enables people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times” [Bandura, 2001]. To build this capacity, learners should have the opportunity to make meaningful choices about their learning, and they need practice at doing so effectively. Learners who successfully develop this ability lay the foundation for lifelong, self-directed learning.

*Student agency is malleable and learnable.*

Importantly, student agency is malleable and learnable. It’s not a personality trait that some students are born with and others are not. As part of their *Future of Education and Skills 2030* initiative, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) noted that student agency requires the “capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those

determined by others.” Here are the key points the OECD notes regarding student agency:

- ▶ Agency implies that students have the ability and the will to positively influence their own life and the world around them.
- ▶ In order to exercise agency to the full potential, students need to build foundation skills.
- ▶ The concept of student agency varies across cultures and develops over a lifetime.
- ▶ Co-agency is defined as interactive, mutually supportive relationships—with parents, guardians, teachers, the community, and each other—that help students progress toward their shared goals.

Research on student agency in schools identified eight dimensions: self-efficacy, pursuit of interest, perseverance of effort, locus of control, mastery orientation, metacognition, self-regulation, and future orientation (Zeiser et al., 2018). Let’s briefly look at each dimension in more detail.

- ▶ **Self-efficacy.** Students need to believe they can achieve their goals; this conviction is foundational to student agency. Children who possess a higher level of self-efficacy than their peers believe that they can reach goals. Self-efficacy, with an effect size of 0.71, reliably holds the potential to accelerate learning ([www.visiblelearningmetax.com](http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com)).
- ▶ **Pursuit of interest.** Think of this as consistency of passion for a topic. Students pursue their interests by reading books, talking with others, practicing, and searching for new challenges that will build their skills. An important aspect is that they stick with some interests for a period of time and don’t lose interest quickly (Peña & Duckworth, 2018).
- ▶ **Perseverance of effort.** Related to interest is the willingness to continue on when something becomes more difficult. A student’s persistence and concentration of effort to finish tasks has the potential to accelerate learning, with an effect size of 0.54 ([www.visiblelearningmetax.com](http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com)). A student with a higher degree of persistence understands that setbacks can happen but is willing to see a project or task through to the end.
- ▶ **Locus of control.** The key word is *control*. To what extent do learners believe that they are influencers in the successful completion of the task? Students with a strong internal locus of control place a higher value on their own skills and effort, while those with an external locus of control focus on the difficulty of the project or what other people’s skill levels are. An internal

locus of control is associated with higher levels of achievement (Shepherd et al., 2006).

- ▶ **Mastery orientation.** Goals drive all of us, but our motivation to achieve them is also important. The goals of students can fall broadly into two paths: a mastery orientation or a performance orientation (Pintrich, 2003). Students with a mastery orientation understand that what they are learning benefits them, whereas students with a performance orientation want to complete tasks and get the reward (grades, stars, etc.). A student focused on mastery is willing to invest a higher degree of effort. That kind of motivation has an effect size of 0.57 and can accelerate learning ([www.visiblelearningmetax.com](http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com)).
- ▶ **Metacognition.** Often described as “thinking about thinking,” metacognition develops in the first years of schooling and continues across a lifetime. Metacognitive strategies are embedded in instruction. As an example, we teach early readers to monitor their understanding so that when they lose meaning in a text, they can go back to reread. We teach older students to take notes and use them as part of their studying. Students with a higher degree of metacognition will notice what is confusing, ask questions, and mentally summarize what they are learning.
- ▶ **Self-regulation.** Closely related to metacognition is the self-regulation needed to learn. For example, students with a higher degree of self-regulation can reset their attention during reading when they notice they’re thinking instead about a video game. They can monitor their focus and use their tools to regain that focus when it is lost.
- ▶ **Future orientation.** Perceptions of what constitutes the future vary with age. However, one goal of schooling is to help students see that the learning they do today is an investment in their own future aspirations. Students with a strong sense of agency recognize that their efforts and outcomes influence their future learning as well as their current performance.

The intentional use of teacher practices specifically aimed at building student agency has shown promising results over time, as short as within a single school year (Zeiser et al., 2018). As Figure 2.2 shows, these practices can be organized into three categories: student opportunities, student–teacher collaboration, and teacher-led approaches.

Here’s an example of what this might look like in practice. The learners in Natalie Moore’s fourth-grade classroom are reflecting on the week. She asks students to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts studied over the last couple days: character analysis and text evidence. Students are allowed to choose how they will demonstrate their understanding. Tyler chooses to complete the weekly quiz, and Anaya chooses to write a short script.

**Figure 2.2** Teacher Practices That Support Student Agency

STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES
<b>Choice.</b> Students make choices about aspects of the content and process of their work.
<b>Group work.</b> Students have opportunities to work with peers to learn and practice skills necessary for group success.
<b>Harnessing outside opportunities.</b> Students have opportunities to demonstrate agency outside the classroom and make connections to its application in the classroom.
<b>Revision.</b> Students are encouraged to revise assignments or tests after they receive feedback.
<b>Student self-reflection.</b> Students self-reflect using journals, logs, or other structured templates or tools.
<b>Student-led instruction.</b> Students demonstrate agency by leading instruction on a particular skill or concept.
STUDENT-TEACHER COLLABORATION
<b>Developing relationships.</b> Teachers develop personal relationships with students to better understand their strengths, needs, and motivators.
<b>Feedback.</b> Teachers provide students with feedback and scaffold the process of students seeking feedback.
<b>Goal setting.</b> Teachers help students set learning goals while improving agency.
<b>Individual conferences.</b> Teachers hold one-on-one meetings with students to discuss elements of student agency and its relationship to academic work.
<b>Student voice.</b> Teachers provide students with opportunities to contribute to and provide feedback on key decisions in the classroom.
TEACHER-LED APPROACHES
<b>Assessment.</b> Teachers use tools to evaluate student agency.
<b>Direct instruction.</b> Teachers provide explicit instruction to develop skills related to student agency.
<b>Modeling.</b> Teachers model agency to demonstrate it for students in a meaningful context.
<b>Positive reinforcement.</b> Teachers provide positive reinforcement for demonstration of agency.
<b>Scaffolding.</b> Teachers provide students with tools, strategies, and resources to help scaffold students toward mastery of agency.
<b>Verbal cues.</b> Teachers provide brief spoken prompts in real time to highlight or remind students of behaviors that demonstrate agency.

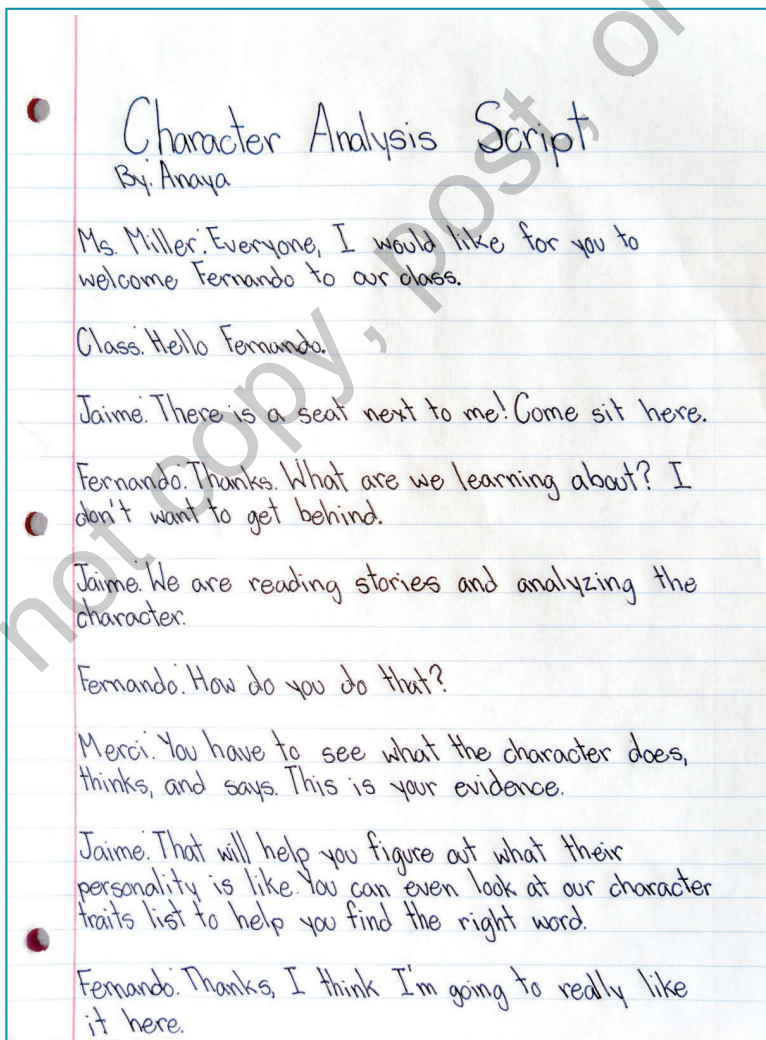
Source: Adapted from Zeiser, K., Scholz, C., & Cirks, V. (2018).

Ms. Moore explains, “It is important to me that students get to make some choices. Sometimes I provide choice in who students work with and what materials or manipulatives are available, but my favorite way to incorporate choice is to find times when students can choose how they will demonstrate their learning.”

Student opportunities for choice promote motivation and give students a sense of ownership and achievement. Anaya mentions that the class learned how to read and write scripts as part of their Readers’ Theater fluency practice. She says, “I want to be an actress or write scripts for movies one day, and I like it when Ms. Moore lets us choose how we are going to prove that we learned. Most of the time I pick script writing, but sometimes I write poems.” Figure 2.3 is a student example of how content and choice in demonstrating understanding can be merged together to increase student ownership.

*Student opportunities for choice promote motivation and give students a sense of ownership and achievement.*

**Figure 2.3** Character Analysis Script





## Pause and Ponder

Which teacher practices in the categories of student opportunities, student–teacher collaboration, and teacher-led approaches do you use to support student agency?

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## Conclusion

Negative stereotypes are prevalent throughout our schools. As social justice educators, we must be willing to stand and fight against these stereotypes. Introducing teaching practices that build our students’ trust and agency can help eliminate the detrimental effects that stereotype threats have in our classrooms. Better yet, we can help ensure that students believe in their learning abilities, are prepared to succeed in settings outside of school, and are confident that they can attain highly regarded positions as adults.



### 3-2-1 Chapter Reflection

Now take an opportunity to think about the content of the chapter and what it means to you.

- What are three important ideas from this chapter?

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- What are two action steps you can take based on this chapter?

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- What is one idea or concept you would like to explore further?

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