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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Belonging and Inclusion in Identity Safe Schools, by Becki Cohn-Vargas, Alexandrea Creer Kahn, Amy Epstein, Kathe Gogolewski.

LEARN MORE about this title!
Welcome to the Identity Safe Classroom and School

This book is a call for educators to come together and realize a vision of schools as transformative places of opportunity and equity for all students. Identity safety is an approach in which educators create conditions for students of all backgrounds to achieve at high academic levels, based on the assumption that each student is competent and capable and will thrive in an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.

For students facing negative stereotypes or being viewed as different, identity safety is an essential condition for learning. For all students, it builds respect for self and others in ways that are essential for the future of our communities and the world.

Many schools have sought to employ a color-blind approach as educators attempt to not see color, essentially to ignore cultural differences as a tool to eliminate negative discrimination. It made sense to many that to treat all students alike was both fair and just. And yet, when differences in identity, such as race, religion, culture, and other social identity features are ignored, students of color continue to fall far short of their academic potential. These students need to be “seen”—accepted and valued for who and what they are—as do all students. Academic failure, ostracism, and marginalization are a few of the repercussions incurred from ignoring students’ diverse identities. This “blindness” channels us into a state where students of color are subjected to unequal access.
in educational opportunity as a result of prolonged disengagement with their needs. Students of color are more frequently suspended and expelled, and they often fail their classes. This can turn into a path that has been accurately labeled as a *pipeline to prison*. We need to take action, and it is within our grasp to transform these conditions. Research has provided substantial direction for what we need to do. In line with this research, identity safety and equity pedagogy hold great promise to disrupt these damaging patterns of negative stereotyping while promoting classrooms that treat diversity as an asset. This, in turn, will support students of all backgrounds to prosper both socially and academically.

The beauty of an identity safe approach is that it is a holistic one, offering concrete ways to enhance content, pedagogy, and classroom culture in a way that affirms students’ identities and encourages their capacity to learn together with their peers. This book is built upon everyday strategies and stances that give us the power to change harmful educational approaches. We have learned a lot about what it means for a student to feel a sense of belonging in a classroom. We have also come to know what happens to one's psyche when a sense of well-being does not exist for all students. Counternarratives offer an alternative perspective on a history of racial oppression—narratives that allow students to challenge and counter negative stereotypes that have likely plagued them all their lives. Identity safe practices provide students with an inviting and active membership in their classrooms and, consequently, a sense of agency in their educational experience.

Part I: Welcome to the Identity Safe Classroom and School begins with Chapter 1: The Introduction, where we present the concept of identity safety. We describe the research study—the Stanford Integrated Schools Project (SISP)—that demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the needs of students of all backgrounds, particularly those whose identities have been impacted by stereotype threat. We offer a set of principles that serve as a guide for identity safe practices. We situate identity safety in the context of equity pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching and show how identity safe practices are very compatible with the theory of the growth mindset. We also explain how the book is organized and offer suggestions for ways to approach the use of this book. In Chapter 2: Educator Identity Safety and the Importance of Self-Awareness, we explain how educators are better able to create identity safety for students when they examine their own identities and interrogate the impact of our beliefs and assumptions on our teaching. In this chapter, we also share a bit from our own journeys as we “take a field trip into ourselves.” Subsequent chapters in this book are organized around the components that emerged in the SISP study.

As you read this book, we hope that you can incorporate identity safe practices into a larger context for changing our system from one that privileges some and creates barriers for others to one that is compassionate, welcoming, and supportive for everyone. This will both support the students who experience it as well as prepare them to go forth and share these values in the world.
When people hear the term identity safety, they may first think of it as a way to protect themselves from identity theft. When you are subject to identity theft, you lose control over your money and cannot function as you usually do. It is a scary proposition; simply ask anyone who has experienced it. Now, imagine if your actual identity is stolen from you on a psychic/emotional level. Your sense of self—who you think you are—feels compromised. Your identity is negatively impacted or stereotyped. You are judged as inferior, or you simply feel that you are not allowed to be yourself. Suddenly, identity safety takes on a whole new meaning. What we mean by identity safety encompasses the sense that who you are matters. In an identity safe environment, you are not invisible and do not have to leave part of yourself at the door to feel a sense of belonging. You can be yourself, just the way you are, and thrive in the world.

Identity safe teaching is an evidence-based and student-centered approach in which educators create a classroom environment that promotes respect, acceptance, and belonging. “Identity safe” classrooms are those that validate students’ experiences, backgrounds, and identities to promote academic and social success for all students. In 2013, Dr. Becki Cohn-Vargas and Dr. Dorothy M. Steele published Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn, which includes ideas that apply to all grade levels, but with strategies aimed primarily at Grades PreK–5. Many secondary educators used the book and resonated with the ideas; however, they requested more examples for older students. This book is a response to that request. We share student-centered practices for Grades 6–12 with vignettes and strategies for creating identity safety in classrooms. We include references to adolescent development to highlight the many aspects of their unfolding identities. This book also contains ideas for educators at all grade levels, expanding on the content of the first identity safety book. Many new examples can be used or adapted for younger students as well. In addition, we explore the identities of ourselves as educators and individuals, examining our own identity safety, first and foremost, so that we may engage fully in ways to support students.
Principles of Identity Safe Classrooms

Identity safe teaching is not a program with a set of step-by-step strategies, nor is it a specific road that brings you to a particular destination. It is an approach, with a continuous process of reflection and a way of teaching that embodies the following principles that serve as guidelines for educators working to create identity safety:

1. Color-blind 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 need to examine their own social identities and feel a sense of identity safety to convey that feeling to students and create 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 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.

Identity safe educators work to create a sense of belonging by valuing diversity and cultivating interdependence across race, gender, religion, and other differences. They employ a constellation of practices that draw from students’ lives, cultures, and interests, while promoting prosocial development. They also work to help students learn to manage their own learning. Educators seek to operate from a growth mindset and convey that understanding to classes. Students are taught that mistakes and errors can be their “friends” that provide valuable information on specifically how to improve. Little by little, students gain a sense of competence that leads to academic growth. This will ultimately help them develop confidence in their own capacities and abilities.

The identity safe classroom is intentionally not color-blind in practice, nor does it seek to minimize or ignore individual and cultural differences. Rather, educators acknowledge the strength of diversity and look at individual differences as assets that provide richness and value. Educators work on a daily basis to eliminate stereotyping and offer counter-narratives to negative messaging about intelligence, gender, and race. They also examine implicit and explicit biases that serve as barriers to achievement. Identity safe classrooms support students of all backgrounds and social identities in reaching their capacity to achieve at higher levels.
Some diversity professional development models focus primarily on the educator engaging in self-examination of privilege and implicit biases, while others focus on specific strategies for engaging students. In our approach, we seek to both harness and bridge the two. We work on multiple levels simultaneously. We work to examine ourselves, our beliefs, assumptions, and our own identities. We aim to implement strategies that allow students to become competent learners and thinkers, which will lead to a sense of confidence in themselves as they navigate their lives in and out of school. We work to help reverse the feeling some students have internalized that they are not smart and capable. And we seek to understand and take steps to change the policies and practices that perpetuate inequities, often deeply embedded in many of our educational systems.

We suggest that educators practice these research-based principles in a holistic way rather than as a linear or sequential program. The many examples of strategies we offer are not specific “things to do” in a particular order, but rather they are shared to illuminate how educators can develop mindsets and teach in ways that engage their students and lead to identity safety. It affords the opportunity for each educator, along the continuum of experience, to become increasingly centered on transformative ways of thinking and being that make a safe space for all to belong.

**Situating Identity Safety in the Context of Culturally Relevant Teaching and Equity Pedagogy**

Identity safe teaching works in concert with a variety of approaches described as culturally responsive pedagogy and equity literacy. Asa Hilliard (2002) explains that culture refers to a shared set of beliefs and practices for a group of people who navigate their environment and lives together. Let’s take a moment to look at how culture has been approached by educators in the United States over the last five decades.

In the 1970s, *multicultural education* was the term educators employed as they recognized and valued the different cultural backgrounds of their students. I (Becki) am reminded of my first job. In 1973, I was as an assistant preschool teacher at the West Santa Rosa Multicultural Center (2019), which still exists after 50 years in the same facility. At that time, educators were just beginning to incorporate content integration as the definition of multicultural education. Often, the content we used was limited to learning about diverse leaders and multicultural celebrations. Curriculum that only highlights “heroes and holidays” was a good start—necessary, but not sufficient.

In the 1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) proposed an expanded view of “cultural relevance” that extended beyond merely integrating aspects of the student cultures. She sought to overcome the negative impacts caused by the policies and practices of the *dominant culture* (defined here as the attitudes and behaviors of the most privileged set of the population; in the United States, this faction consists of White people, males, and heterosexuals). Ladson-Billings stated that one primary aim of culturally relevant teaching, for example, is to provide African American students with the opportunity to work toward academic excellence while maintaining a connection to African and African American
culture. She also explains that the purpose of including the students’ cultures does not mean drawing information from students to simply form a bridge for them to assimilate into the dominant culture. Later, Dolores Lindsey and colleagues (2007) developed a continuum for educators to become culturally proficient. They claimed that educators need to learn about, esteem, and advocate for the cultures of their students in a process that also includes understanding the impact of the dominant culture on their students. Sonia Nieto (2013) describes the terms cultural relevance and cultural proficiency as having similar definitions, explaining that she incorporates aspects of both when she uses the term culturally responsive teaching. The latter she defines as a stance where teachers learn about their students’ backgrounds and lives, teaching in a way that reinforces and affirms student identities.

However, another caveat merits consideration. When seeking to acknowledge student cultures, educators run the risk of stereotyping a student based on a set of descriptors commonly associated with the student’s group. To address this issue, Kris Gutierrez and Barbara Rogoff (2003) use the term repertoires of practice, meaning that individuals can draw from a range of practices that include their life experiences. They suggest, in turn, that drawing from our students’ repertoires of practice, rather than defining their cultural traits, will likewise benefit students by acknowledging and valuing their experiences, while educators may use the information to inform their practice. This will help educators who seek to acknowledge culture avoid the tendency to stereotype an ethnic or other group of people.

**Equity Literacy**

Professor Paul Gorski (2017), expressing concern that educators might address culture in a cursory manner while ignoring the need to create equitable conditions, introduced the concept of equity literacy. Gorski’s equity literacy framework provides a focused approach for educators to recognize and observe inequities and seek to redress them. Gorski describes equity literate educators as those who identify and interrupt inequitable interactions, curriculum, and school policies. Equity literate educators strengthen their skills and capacities to facilitate dialogue and take action both in the moment and in the long term. They move to rectify inequities and seek to create bias-free environments.

**Identity Safe Educators Incorporate Culturally Relevant Teaching and Equity Literacy**

Identity safe teaching practices are anchored in culturally responsive pedagogy. Educators explicitly affirm their students’ identity, extending beyond culture and race to all aspects of their multiple social identities as a condition of belonging in the classroom. Identity safe educators seek to become equity literate as part of efforts to ensure students do not feel invisible and devalued while engaging in efforts to generate accepting and equitable environments. Identity safety is not possible in an environment that is not equitable. Conversely, a school environment is not equitable unless all students feel a sense of
identity safety and belonging. Educators incorporate equity literacy by breaking down stereotypes and working to remedy discriminatory practices and policies.

Where did the concept of identity safety come from?

**Stereotype Threat and the Origins of Identity Safety**

The concept of identity safety originated as an antidote to a social-psychological phenomenon known as stereotype threat. In stereotype threat theory, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about social identity manifests when people worry that they will be judged by a stereotype—and even without realizing, unintentionally confirm it (C. M. Steele et al., 2002). Claude Steele (2019) explains that threat may arise even when a person does not feel that a stereotype about them is personally true:

> Sometimes, this is a worry about behaving in a way that would result in them being perceived that way. But as long as they are identified with school, I believe they resist believing or internalizing the stereotype. That’s the struggle. Once they give up on schooling and find another domain of life to identify with, they may or may not believe the stereotype. At that point, though, it is largely irrelevant to them since they no longer care about school. But until then, I believe they are fighting valiantly not to believe the stereotype.

Researcher Dr. Mary Murphy (Mitchell, 2016) describes how stereotype threat can be at play even when it is not overtly expressed. She says it is like having a “snake loose in the house.” You do not need to see it to feel frightened. In the same way, a person who fears they will be judged negatively can allow this perception to affect their performance. In her presentation at Harvard, Murphy pointed out that at Harvard’s Annenberg Hall, many statues and portraits of predominantly White men are displayed. She says that walking through that hall every day can serve as a signal to women and people of color that they do not belong, even those who have been accepted to Harvard with its rigorous standards. First Lady Michelle Obama wrote this in the introduction to her senior thesis at Princeton University (Robinson, 1985):

> My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “Blackness” than ever before. I have found that at Princeton, no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong. Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second. (p. 2)

Negative stereotypes, whether believed by the student or not, have been found to lower performance and achievement, particularly affecting students of color (Steele et al., 1995; Steele, 2010). Imagine how these stereotypes can imprint students over time. This phenomenon affects a person’s sense of confidence and competence and ultimately can adversely influence their opportunities in life.
Charles, a middle school principal, tells about a time he was called into the superintendent’s office. The superintendent stated that a parent had reported that Charles had been seen hugging another man on the school grounds. At first, Charles was confused. He was not public about the fact that he was gay, and to his recollection, he had never hugged any man at school. Later, he realized it was the time his brother had visited the campus. Being called out made Charles feel very uncomfortable. He felt the superintendent was insinuating he had done something inappropriate. An experience such as this exemplifies how stereotype threat can damage a person’s sense of belonging. The fear that he was being judged as behaving inappropriately stayed with him and took years to overcome. Charles explains that only at age 47 and 16 years into his career, when he moved to a different district and gained the confidence to feel that he was an effective administrator, did he feel safe to tell his school community that he was gay.

Stereotype threat also is communicated when people feel ignored. A feeling of invisibility can trigger a sense of threat for Native Americans students when their identities are not validated while negative stereotypes surround them in mainstream media. When classrooms are not identity safe, students from negatively stereotyped groups can experience a visceral and deep-seated sense that they are not considered smart, concluding that they do not belong in academic settings.

Stereotype Threat Research

To investigate stereotype threat, researchers Claude Steele and Josh Aronson (1995) gave White and African American college students a portion of the Graduate Records Exam (GRE). One group was told that the tests measured intellectual ability. The other group was specifically informed that this was not a diagnostic test of intellectual ability. Black students in the first group who thought their intellectual ability was not being tested scored equal to White students (controlling for SAT scores). In the second group, with students who thought they were being tested for mathematical ability was being measured, Black students underperformed.

Stephen Spencer and his colleagues (1999) had similar results when triggering the negative stereotype that women are less competent than men in mathematics. Two groups of college students were given a math test. Female students who were told the test did not show gender differences performed equally well as male participants. Female students who thought they were being tested for mathematical ability underperformed in relation to men. Multiple research studies (Spencer et al., 2016) have tested the impact of stereotype threat across many arenas (e.g., race, gender, age) with similar results.
CHAPTER 1. THE INTRODUCTION

From Reducing Stereotype Threat to Creating Identity Safety

As the extensive research on stereotype threat demonstrated the pernicious and pervasive nature of stereotypes, Claude Steele (2010), along with his wife, Dorothy Steele, and colleagues at Stanford University, wanted to identify requisite educational conditions for positive identity development, conditions strong enough to overshadow negative and racially biased stereotypes. They coined the term identity safety, highlighting the fact that people need to feel safe, free from threat, and confident within the context of their social identities. They proceeded to examine qualities that might constitute an identity safe environment where social identities are valued as assets as opposed to liabilities. Their assertion was that such an environment would be strong enough to inoculate students against the pervasive power of negative stereotypes. They posited that if an environment contained enough cues to lead a person to feel identity safe, perhaps it could aim to neutralize the threats. In Chapter 7: Using Diversity as a Resource, we share additional specific strategies for reducing stereotype threat. The Steeles were also cognizant of the fact that due to stereotypes that abound “in the air,” the idea of a color-blind environment as an effective means of treating inequity is an illusion in US society and actually detrimental to students of color.

The Dangers of a Color-Blind Classroom

It is likely you have heard someone say, “I don’t see color; I don’t care if a person is red or blue or green, I treat everyone the same.” However, in the world-at-large, differences
continue to be significant, whether they are manifested as racial profiling by a police officer or the misidentification of a Latinx keynote speaker as a maid in a hotel. And in the case of education, the differences manifest in the predictability that students of color are ranked at the bottom.

Luvvie Ajayi (2018) explains the effects of the “color-blind” approach:

> It erases our history and the very relevant events of the past that have led to our present situation. It dishonors our ancestors and the work they’ve done, and it lets people off the hook for centuries of race-based injustice. Saying you don’t see race is saying you have nothing to fix. “Colorblindness” and cultural erasure help perpetuate this system of oppression because forced politeness and fear of the “race card” trump actual work and progress. (para. 10)

Ajayi (2018) points out, “Being able to live without having to be defined by your skin color is the hallmark of privilege” (para. 6).

We want to assure readers that we make the assumption that educators who seek to be color-blind are not intentionally trying to stereotype students. We trust that they do not realize that by ignoring differences in identity, students will feel invisible. We believe that once educators become aware of the harm of color-blind practices, they will change their practice.

In a color-blind classroom, differences are ignored or treated as inconsequential. Some educators worry that highlighting racial/ethnic differences and other aspects of identity can be divisive. Yet there is a greater risk when identities are not acknowledged. The interplay of multiple identities within each of us and the complexity of racial and ethnic categories is much deeper than what can be seen on the surface. For example, a student “coded” Black may have a variety of elements that feed into that identity, such as a different ethnic background (Caribbean) or nationality (British). An educator who stereotypes the identities of students might inadvertently negate the identities of Latinx, African, or Asian students through lumping together cultures that are deemed to be alike. An educator who completely ignores differences erases each person’s uniqueness.

Across history, societies have continuously withheld recognition of women and people of color. Simone de Beauvoir (Bergoffen, 2018) claimed that most societies constitute a centric view of the male as the primary “self” with the notion of the female as “other.” The view of self that portrays women and non-White groups as the “other” has very deep roots and sheds light on why it is so difficult to close the achievement and opportunity gaps and equalize status. The hegemony of White males continues to be prevalent today, resulting in the alienation of women and non-White cultures whose perspectives and contributions have systematically been excluded from history textbooks. Often, when different cultures and ethnicities are highlighted, they are described as the “exotic other,” indicating another manifestation of inferiority. The ideas of inferior differences are profoundly rooted in our language, societal structures, and attitudes. Together,
these influences contribute to a discourse that is internalized by both dominant and nondominant groups alike. The good news is that research and awareness have brought these issues to light where they are being challenged, disrupted, and redirected.

As culturally responsive educators, we can acknowledge the impact of this biased history both consciously and unconsciously through ways that people interact. To begin, we can acknowledge multiple perspectives on identity and from there teach a critical approach that promotes questioning the status quo (see Chapter 7). The classroom is set in a social context where meaning is created through learning new information, skills, and concepts in conjunction with social interaction as the students grow and develop. In Chapter 2: Educator Identity Safety and the Importance of Self-Awareness, we will talk about ways to reflect on our own attitudes, language, gestures, and behaviors and take a critical approach to help students discover their own social identities.

**Counternarratives**

We are a bit like fish in a polluted pond who become accustomed to the murky water they swim in and can no longer see it. In our case, we are swimming in toxic water in that we cannot see that the way we view the world is impacted by a series of narratives that set up hierarchies offering advantages based on race and conditions stemming from centuries of White power and privilege. Attitudes still prevail that we live in a meritocracy where personal gains are achieved by merit and people can just pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Negative stereotypes define non-White people and immigrants as lazy, unintelligent, and prone to violence and crime. Unfortunately, this is the water we swim in with our students. The way to begin to change it requires unpacking the racist and biased histories behind this mainstream narrative and seeking out the counternarratives.

Counternarratives are significant for students on two important levels:

1. On the personal level, students need to hear specific counternarratives that contradict internalized fears that their own potential is limited and help them reframe views of their intelligence and their capacities.

2. Learning counternarratives at the community and societal level helps students gain an understanding of oppression and learn to deconstruct the dominant narratives that undermine the value of groups they belong to—dominant narratives that form barriers to their education and other opportunities.

At the personal level, students need to hear counternarratives about their own potential. Mainstream narratives promote the predictability of the “achievement gap” and have contributed to a sense of hopelessness. Zaretta Hammond (2015) speaks of ways that educators can use counternarratives to help students change their internal self-talk and the accompanying negative explanations. She explains that mainstream narratives can cause students to develop insecurities and low expectations that are reinforced by teachers
in a negative loop that returns and reinforces the impact to the students. Hammond points out that White supremacy is designed to work in such a way that after students experience years of failure, they learn to internalize their perceived weaknesses, and by the time they reach high school, they are doing it to themselves. By teaching about the growth mindset and offering counternarratives with an alternative perspective on history, expressing genuine belief in their capacity, students come to value their potential and will begin to change their own self-talk and explanatory stories.

Offering counternarratives does not merely serve to debunk negative characterizations or respond to inequities. Counternarratives also include helping students of dominant and nondominant backgrounds discover a wealth of community assets, including the strength, courage, resilience, and tenacity available from people of color (Yosso, 2005). Moving away from a deficit mindset helps students recognize the wide range of contributions by individuals and communities of color.

Counternarratives also benefit students by providing a foundation that serves to equalize status by inviting everyone to join efforts to create an equitable society. This can be accomplished by providing views of history from multiple perspectives and using primary source texts (historical materials written by the people involved, in addition to those by historians of color and others). In addition, counternarratives can be drawn from the voices of local community members, as well as through analysis of current events from a range of sources. Even if you are not an English or history teacher, you can still share information with students to motivate them to seek information beyond the traditional presentation, including everything from the arts to math, the sciences, and the study of languages. We suggest strategies for incorporating counternarratives throughout the book.

**Identity Safety as an Antidote to Stereotype Threat: The Research**

In 2001, Dorothy Steele, with Claude Steele and a team of social psychologists, initiated a study to examine effective ways to mitigate stereotype threat through a yearlong study of third- and fifth-grade students in 84 integrated elementary school classrooms. The Stanford Integrated School Project (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) sought to identify classroom practices that lead to a sense of identity safety. Rather than begin with a set of practices, this study looked at a whole range of teacher practices from the bottom up. Researchers sought to identify practices that helped students feel identity safe and also experience higher levels of achievement.

To do this, a pair of observers, who were not informed about identity safety, visited each of the third- and fifth-grade classrooms three times, completing a 200-item classroom observation form each time. The form was designed to record specific practices that were viewed in the classrooms. The observers rated the presence of what they saw and heard that demonstrated high expectations, classroom relationships, and inclusive and cooperative practices, along with methods of embedding diversity as a resource for learning. In
addition, students themselves completed questionnaires that aimed to capture their sense of identity safety, belonging, and autonomy. Standardized test scores were used to examine the impact of identity safe practices on student academic performance.

The data from this study demonstrated the following results: In classrooms with higher levels of identity safety (as observed and reported in student questionnaires), students from every ethnic group demonstrated a more positive feeling about school. These students scored higher on standardized tests and were more motivated to succeed at school than their peers in less identity safe classrooms (classrooms with the presence of fewer observed identity safe practices). This research offered a promising potential for classroom environments that could mitigate the impact of stereotype threat and support achievement and school success for students of color and all students. A constellation of factors emerged that together constitute identity safe practices. These factors we refer to as the components of identity safety and are clustered in four domains to create a framework, which is how this book is organized.

THE FOUR DOMAINS AND 12 COMPONENTS OF IDENTITY SAFE CLASSROOMS

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 as a Resource

5. *Using Diversity as a Resource*: 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

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**Domain 3: Classroom Relationships**

8. *Teacher Warmth and Availability for 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 connects 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

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**Additional Research on Putting Identity Safety Into Practice**

In 2006, with the support of Dorothy Steele, I implemented a dissertation study to begin the process of describing the identity safe components more fully as they appeared in practice. I formed a study group of elementary teachers who worked for one year to define and describe the many ways the components could be approached in classrooms where educators worked to create identity safety in an environment that values the many student identities while countering stereotypes. The book *Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn* (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) brings together Dorothy Steele’s SISP (Stanford Integrated Schools Project) research data as well as further work she conducted with a teacher study group and descriptions of the identity safe components from my dissertation research. The research on identity safety continues. Stephanie Fryberg (2016) describes identity safe spaces as culturally congruent places, free of prejudice and stereotypes, where all people feel they can belong and experience success, and where diversity is positively valued. She is currently engaged in research with Mary Murphy, who seeks to link the concepts of the growth mindset with identity safety. Other researchers have also developed identity safety experiments in the laboratory, where positive contact and role models were found to promote identity safety (Davies et al., 2005; McIntyre et al., 2003; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) has incorporated identity safe teaching as a key component of their *Whole Child Framework for Educational Practice*, based on a synthesis
of research (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). LPI is currently conducting a case study at the Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA), a school in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD; Ondrasek & Flook, 2020). According to teacher interviews and observations, researchers observed the use of identity safe practices incorporating trusting relationships and creating a positive climate drawing on diversity as a resource. Humanitas has a high graduation rate that surpasses district averages. In the 2017–2018 LAUSD School Experience Survey, nearly all Humanitas students responded that they “feel safe at school,” and 86 percent of Humanitas students said that they “feel like they are part of their school.”

The Growth Mindset and Identity Safety

Let us take a moment to explain the connection between identity safety and the growth mindset. These two revolutionary ideas work well together.

Stanford researcher Carol Dweck (2006) found that mindset plays an important role in how people perceive their own abilities. Those who held the belief that their intelligence could be developed with effort and that their brains were malleable, which she called an incremental or growth mindset, progressed better than those who believed that intelligence was innate and unchangeable, which she called a fixed (entity) mindset.

In Dweck’s research with children ages four and up, she found that those with a growth mindset continued to apply effort when faced with difficulties, often even enjoying the challenge. On the contrary, those who believed their intelligence was predetermined at birth (described as having fixed mindsets) would give up when they encountered difficulty and stop trying. The good news was that researchers have found they can foster a growth mindset even with students who initially believe otherwise. Students in a range of ages learned about their brains through the metaphor that the brain is like a muscle that can get stronger with use. Students in these studies believed their brains could grow stronger and increased their intellectual abilities and performance.

TWO GROWTH MINDSET EXPERIMENTS

In One Experiment

Four-year-olds were given a choice to work easy puzzles again and again or to try to complete a harder puzzle. Some children believed that intelligence was fixed and chose to repeat the easy puzzles, and others who demonstrated the growth mindset enthusiastically asked for more challenges (Dweck, 2006, p. 17). The researchers found that even at age four, children fell into the same two categories as adults who participated in similar experiments.

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In a Hong Kong Study

Adults were asked to agree with one of two statements: (a) You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you cannot do much to change it (that view is called an “entity” or “fixed” mindset); or (b) you can always substantially change how intelligent you are (that is the “incremental” or “growth” mindset; Dweck, 2006, p. 17). All participants were university students studying in English, but they were not fluent. The researchers invited them to take a course to improve their English skills. The majority of those with a fixed or entity mindset (a group) were not interested in taking this course. Those with the incremental or growth mindset (b group) wanted to take the course.

Dweck’s theories have been put into practice by many educators. In a 2015 article, Dweck reflected on a few things they have learned since the publication of her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Dweck explained that the growth mindset is not merely about working harder and using more effort. To be effective, effort must incorporate what has been learned along the way, from both previous tries as well as additional input from other sources. Otherwise, a student can get stuck or keep pushing forward, hitting a wall without progressing. She also says that simply acknowledging effort without combining it with higher-level thinking does not help the brain grow.

As in any new theory, obstacles are often revealed in the details or in the complexities of its application. For example, when educators attribute a student’s lack of progress as the result of a fixed mindset or equate a student’s achievement exclusively to a growth mindset, they are placing all the onus on the student. Rather than using these mindsets as a tool to label students, it is up to us as educators to communicate and teach a growth mindset perspective to students and empower them to apply the theories to and for themselves.

It is also incumbent upon us to ensure that our words match what we truly believe. Dweck (2016) calls it a false growth mindset when educators promote a growth mindset without matching their actions to their words. For example, an educator may praise a student's effort so they do not feel left out, even when the student may not be trying and the work is not progressing. Dweck considers one of the worst manifestations of false growth mindset occurs when an educator blames a student’s mindset for failures. She describes observing in a school where students were taken to task for not having a growth mindset. She suggests that educators observe, question, and reflect on our own mindsets. When we make mistakes, do we see them as learning opportunities or failures? Do we find ourselves saying, “I am just not good at . . . ?” She also points out that as growth mindset researchers, they came to realize that they created too great a dichotomy between growth and fixed mindsets. She asserts that we all demonstrate a portion of both.
Why is the growth mindset an important element of identity safety? With a growth mindset, stereotypes and stereotype threat do not necessarily become self-fulfilling prophecies. Students do not need to feel limited by external definitions of their intelligence. As we help our students by motivating effort, we can also guide them to discover for themselves and learn to recognize how they are progressing, defying the stereotypes about fixed mindsets and limited capacities that may have dogged them.

Working on developing our growth mindset also helps us as educators to open our perspectives regarding all of our students, watching out for how stereotypes influence our views of them. We can deepen the belief that each of our students has great potential, freeing opportunities for truly promoting identity safety and belonging.

**Culturally Inclusive Growth Mindset Culture**

Mary Murphy (2018a) describes a *culturally inclusive growth mindset culture* as one that communicates to students the values of a growth mindset in the context of a community of learners. It is the idea that as a classroom community, we are working together as a team to grow our brains and increase our capabilities. Murphy explains that this type of environment highlights interdependence as a way to draw in students from cultures that are traditionally more focused on community and interdependence. This includes an array of cultures (e.g., African American, Native American, Latinx, Asian, and Middle Eastern). This approach transforms a competitive classroom environment to an inclusive space that is more motivating to students from interdependent cultures and may well be transformative for those from more competitive cultures.

An individual’s growth mindset is amplified in a classroom culture where no student is left out and students feel that everybody’s success is part of their own. Challenges are shared as well. There are many ways to communicate that feeling. For example, students can share strategies they use and describe the different paths they took to solve a problem. The educator can post the different strategies, and when a student is at a loss, the educator can refer the student to the strategy board. This has another metacognitive advantage because it shows how everyone solves problems differently. With a team approach to the idea that we learn from our mistakes, we can help one another tackle challenges together.

**Educator Growth Mindset**

A significant new research study on educator growth mindset was recently released (2019). Elizabeth Canning, Mary Murphy, and colleagues gathered data from 150 STEM university professors and 15,000 students from across the United States. They collected data from faculty self-reports, including their personal beliefs regarding their own mindsets, and they combined those with student evaluations of their professors and course grades. Researchers analyzed the results and found that for professors with fixed mindset beliefs, the racial achievement gaps were double those of students in courses where the professors endorsed a growth mindset. Also, they found that this was true in spite of the racial background of the professor or the length of time that person was teaching.
The study found that there were four critical points where the growth mindset can be communicated to students for optimal impact:

1. Giving explicit messages about how effort, practice, and learning from mistakes will help their intelligence grow
2. Providing repeated opportunities for practice with specific feedback (see examples in Chapter 10: Teacher Warmth and Availability for Learning)
3. Offering encouraging comments that express high expectations and give direct feedback on how to improve when a student fails or performs poorly (see examples in Chapter 8: High Expectations and Academic Rigor)
4. Ending a semester with final remarks that offer encouragement and hope regarding a student’s future potential (see positive presuppositions in Chapter 14: Attention to Prosocial Development)

As educators, it is worth taking time to reflect on our mindsets. We may have fixed mindsets about some things while exercising growth mindsets about others. By educating ourselves and seeking to counter some of our own internalized attitudes and embedded stereotypes and explanatory stories about ourselves and others, we can expand our views of our students’ potential. By listening to the words we use with students, we can change the way we communicate. In subsequent chapters in this book, we offer many strategies.

**Anchoring Identity Safety in the Context of Adolescent Development**

As you consider adolescent development, it is important to examine your operating assumptions, beliefs, or biases when you think about this time period of development. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is adolescence?
- What are critical considerations to explore as you engage in your work with adolescents?
- What personal experiences will be important to examine, combat, or leverage in the service of your students’ needs?

In the United States, stereotypical positive and negative associations abound with respect to adolescence. Among them can be everything from associating it with emotional angst and risk-taking to linking it to a sense of freedom. And while some patterns may exist within adolescence with respect to puberty, the construct of adolescence as we know it is largely a Western construction that gained momentum at the beginning of the 20th century (Fass, 2016). In the United States, the model we use to understand
and interpret adolescence was actually largely driven by American values, beliefs, and economic conditions reflective of the early 1900s. Rising from these attitudes, new at the turn of the century, two critical institutions were formed: high school for all and juvenile court. These institutions created new social structures, laying the foundation and context for what we currently know as adolescence (Fass, 2016).

We know from new advances in brain research that there are biological and cognitive differences between teenagers and adults. Specifically, teenage “brains have both fast-growing synapses and parts that remain unconnected. This leaves teens easily influenced by their environment and more prone to impulsive behavior, even without the impact of souped-up hormones and any genetic or family predispositions” (Ruder, 2008, para. 3). Further, we know from research that the adolescent brain not only processes information differently, but that additional substances dramatically impact the teenage brain much more strongly than the adult brain. Understanding the neurobiology of the teenage brains supports educators in being able to shape practices to better meet the needs of adolescent students.

In sum, it is critical that we challenge some of the socially constructed “truisms” of adolescence so that we may learn and understand the role that we need to hold to best support the unique needs of teenagers. While there are many facets of what constitutes “adolescent development” for the purposes of our book and the connection to identity safety, we stress the use of a developmental approach to understand the various dimensions of what it means to be in this particular period of life.

Holding a developmental stance for adolescents equips practitioners with the skills to employ identity safe practices with the important nuance that it requires. In an interview about their study *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Chauncey, 2007), Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis suggest that if adults take the time to learn about some of the patterns of adolescent development, we can strengthen our capacity to understand the actions of our students. By doing so, we will find ourselves better prepared to meet their needs. By holding an “applied developmentalist” lens, educators can “resist pathologizing . . . and instead look for opportunities to participate in their growth.” Challenging our assumptions and searching for new understanding and awareness create opportunities for connection and a reimagining of possibilities for students during this period of time.

A final and essential consideration for enacting a developmental lens for adolescents is attending to our implicit bias. In a 2018 study (Priest et al.), researchers found that “some of the strongest levels of negative stereotyping reported by White adults working with children were reported toward teenagers. . . . Black and Latinx teens were between one-and-a-half to two times more likely to be considered violence-prone and unintelligent than White adults and White teens.” In working to create identity safe environments for students, we must unpack and develop a deep awareness of our cultural biases and how they interact with how we view teens.
Implications for Practice

Throughout the book, we approach identity safety through a developmental lens. The implications for educators can be found in the following chapters:

1. Equalizing student status—Chapter 3: Listening for Student Voices and Chapter 11: Positive Student Relationships
2. Identity development—Chapter 7: Using Diversity as a Resource
3. Implicit bias—Chapter 3: Listening for Student Voices
4. Expectations—Chapter 8: High Expectations and Academic Rigor
5. Gender identity—Chapter 6: Classroom Autonomy and Chapter 7: Using Diversity as a Resource
6. Relationships—Chapter 10: Teacher Warmth and Availability for Learning and Chapter 11: Positive Student Relationships
7. Trauma-informed practices—Chapter 10: Teacher Warmth and Availability for Learning
8. Self-regulation and executive functioning—Chapter 6: Classroom Autonomy
9. De-escalating conflict—Chapter 12: Teacher Skill
10. Managing emotions and mental health—Chapter 10: Teacher Warmth and Availability for Learning
11. Social pressure and popularity—Chapter 14: Attention to Prosocial Development

What Is in This Book and How You Might Use It

We wrote this book with the goal of providing information drawn from research and organized around descriptions of each of the identity safety domains and components. We include many vignettes to bring the ideas to life and a plethora of practical strategies for implementation. The vignettes, some of which are composites, come from educators from a range of urban, suburban, and rural areas. We use first and last names when they have published either a blog or produced a video. Identity safety is an approach rather than a program, so there is no checklist of strategies or step-by-step implementation procedures. Rather, it is a gestalt, or a constellation of ideas that create a holistic environment.

Part I gives an introduction with an overview of identity safety and includes three chapters. Chapter 1: The Introduction defines identity safety research and a description of the principles and components, along with its origins. We situate identity safety within the field of culturally responsive teaching and equity literacy. Stereotype threat research and the growth mindset are explained and connected to identity safety. Chapter 2 is an exploration of ways educators can explore their own identities and beliefs in the context
CHAPTER 1. THE INTRODUCTION

of belonging and connecting at school. This self-examination is fundamental for allowing educators to create an environment that fosters student identity safety. Each of the authors shares how we view our own social identities and connect it into our roles as educators.

Parts II, III, IV, and V introduce each of the four identity safety domains—one part for each domain—and encompass Chapters 3–14. Each chapter defines the components within that domain. An overview is offered at the beginning of each part.

Chapters begin with “Why It Matters,” an explanation of why the component is important and how it links to identity safety. From there, the chapter moves to “Making It Happen,” which offers many research-based strategies for implementation. For each component, we seek to identify and describe one or two dilemmas or points of tension that educators may face when they address that area of identity safety. Every chapter ends with a “Chapter Summary,” a set of “Check Yourself” questions, and an “End-of-Chapter Activity” or two. At the close of each part, we highlight the big ideas from the part that demonstrate the Identity Safety Principles, and we also provide additional resources.

We close with a brief Epilogue as a call to action and an invitation to stay connected in the journey toward identity safe classrooms and identity safe schools.

Using the Book

This book can be used in a variety of ways and approached from multiple entry points. Educators can read it from start to finish or begin with the first chapter and then move to any other part or chapter as desired. Each part or chapter can stand alone or work in concert with others. Individual educators or partners can read it, reflecting on their practice with the “Check Yourself” questions and the “End-of-Chapter Activities.” We highly recommend schoolwide study groups that allow teams to work through the book over many months and perform the activities together. This approach can transform, instill, and empower the school with a safe and accepting culture that feeds prosocial development, promotes academic success, and even eliminates many instances of bullying.

Another possibility is to select relevant chapters to share in a jigsaw fashion. Webinars, full-day workshops, and ongoing sessions are available with the authors through our Identity Safe Classrooms website, www.identitysafeclassrooms.com. Often, the culture can even spread to the wider community. Feeling good is contagious!

A note: The identity safety approach weaves together mindsets and practices that we continually describe as being intertwined. Yet, to communicate clearly, we have shared it through the lens of the various components. As readers, you may wonder why a particular topic is described as part of one component rather than another. We made intentional choices for where to place the topics. For example, we placed trauma in the part on educator–student relationships because we felt that trauma-informed practice was a fundamental set of skills and mindsets that educators need to develop to create supportive relationships with students who have experienced trauma. Other aspects of
behavior management were placed in the part on Chapter 12, a chapter that highlights basic fundamental skills that educators need to be effective.

You will find that the components overlap in some ways and topics emerge from them through different angles in the various chapters. For example, supporting students with diverse gender identities is viewed through the lens of agency in Chapter 6. Then in Chapter 7, we circle back to looking at inclusive practices that enable students with different gender identities to experience the feeling of belonging in the classroom. Later in Chapter 11, gender identity is discussed in the context of relationships. Each time, we refer the reader to the places where the topic has been addressed earlier.

A Word About Terminology

The concept of social identity, as defined by social psychologists, refers to how our identities are derived, which often involves the sense of belonging that we get from our membership in different social groups and the emotional value placed on those memberships (Abrams, 1990). We all have multiple affiliations with self-perceptions in regard to each of our social identities. Examples of groups that people can belong to include ethnic, racial, and religious groups, as well as groups that identify with varying gender identities and sexual orientations and those who are differently abled. Social identity can be found in the autism spectrum as well as professions, sports, and other social groups that have relevance in our lives.

As part of creating identity safety, we often use students of all backgrounds because in our approach to belonging, we aim to be inclusive of the many diverse social identities in our classrooms. We use the term Black to refer to students of African American, African, and Caribbean backgrounds and the term Latinx to refer to students with backgrounds from many countries in Latin America. At other times, we refer to students of color, which includes Black, Latinx, South Asian, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American students. LGBTQ is a term that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning identities. The term intersectionality refers to people with more than one oppressed identity (e.g., Black and transgender). We examine intersectionality further in Chapter 7.

Throughout the book, we more frequently use the term educator (as opposed to teacher) to honor our broader audience of teachers, counselors, administrators, and paraprofessionals—in essence, everyone who works with students.

Finally, please note that we use the words they/them/their when describing an individual (e.g., “A person can get support if they are willing”). This usage is now accepted in the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (“They,” 2020). We find it to be more inclusive, and it is often used in common parlance.

Meet the Authors and Leadership Public Schools

Becki Cohn-Vargas is the primary author of this book, with Alex Kahn and Amy Epstein writing as contributors. We each have varied skills and experiences, contributing from each of our unique perspectives: Becki is the coauthor of Identity Safe Classrooms,
written to address elementary classrooms. Formerly, she was an early childhood and elementary teacher, K–8 principal, curriculum director, and superintendent in rural, urban, and suburban public school districts. Now, she is retired from public education and works as an author, presenter, and consultant.

Alex is the chief academic officer at Leadership Public Schools (LPS). She teaches Adolescent Development at Stanford University in STEP, its teacher education program. She has worked as a secondary teacher and principal.

Amy is the executive director of data, assessment, and tiered support at LPS. She is an expert on gathering and using data and has many years of experience in public school districts and nonprofits supporting equity in education. She is leading a major identity safe formative assessment project at LPS and draws from that experience in her writing for this book.

We each share from our own identity safe journeys, as well as stories and vignettes from our experience working with students. As the primary author, I (Becki) use the first person to share vignettes. Amy and Alex also share vignettes and offer numerous examples of equitable practices from LPS. We have also drawn from videos taken of LPS students, describing their perspectives, experiences, and feelings.

Leadership Public Schools (LPS) is a nonprofit, three-high-school charter network in the San Francisco Bay Area in California with schools in Hayward, Oakland, and Richmond. LPS lives up to the mission statement found on its website (n.d.), which states, “Leadership Public Schools is a network of urban charter high schools whose mission is to create educational equity. We empower students for college, career, and community leadership and share our practices on a national scale.” The theory of change that guides them includes developing flexible resources with a particular focus on access for students of diverse identities. LPS makes its resources available to the larger educational community through publishing open-source curriculum, lessons, and guides. It cocreates some of these materials as part of various partnerships with national and local educational organizations.

Collaboration on this book was initiated after Becki started working with LPS educators to increase identity safe practices in their system. We also draw from the collective experience of LPS educators working to implement identity safe formative assessment. Throughout this book, they share many innovative LPS strategies and tools that promote identity safety. When we refer to LPS, we are referring to districtwide policies and practices. At other times, we indicate a particular LPS high school to describe a particular practice or share a vignette.

Chapter Summary

In The Introduction, we introduced identity safety and presented the identity safe principles. We provided background to help readers understand the theory of identity safety, providing its theoretical antecedents from stereotype threat research. We highlighted a foundational principle that students who feel different in any way do not thrive in a color-blind classroom that ignores differences.
We situated identity safety in the context of a brief history of culturally responsive teaching and equity literacy. We then proposed that students need counternarratives to combat the pervasive influence of deficit thinking and attitudes that devalue and stereotype them. We explained that counternarratives with identity safe practices can enlist all students in an affirming climate that creates access and works to equalize status.

We shared the identity safety research from the Stanford Integrated Schools Project (SISP) and other studies and introduced the domains and components of identity safety that form the basis for the structure of this book. We introduced the growth mindset in this chapter because research has demonstrated a close connection between the theory of the growth mindset and identity safety. We situated identity safety in the context of a developmental approach to adolescent development and pointed out chapters of the book with implications for practice. Finally, we closed with suggestions for ways to use the book, our use of terminology, and an introduction to the authors and to LPS.

TRY IT OUT: END-OF-CHAPTER ACTIVITY

Considering Identity Safety and Your Plans With the Book

Each chapter will conclude with an activity that will allow you to reflect and apply the ideas. For the introductory chapter, we have some questions to help you consider how to approach your use of this book.

1. Reflect on the topics addressed in Chapter 1. Which ones resonate with you, and why?
2. What aspects of identity safety have you already been employing in your role as an educator?
3. What is your experience with counternarratives? Have you used them in your own life? Have you used them with students?
4. Have you read about, studied, or participated in professional development on culturally relevant teaching, diversity, antibias training, and/or equity pedagogy? Share from your own knowledge, experiences, ideas, and opinions as you embark on exploring identity safety.
5. What is your plan for using this book? We recommend finding an accountability partner, study group, faculty team, or several colleagues to work with as you try out the suggested ideas.

Available for download as a full-page form at https://resources.corwin.com/IdentitySafeClass6-12