

## **“I’m Trying To Bring the Scores of My School Up, Man!” Standardized Testing, Stereotypes, and High-Performing African American Elementary School Students**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study investigated factors that produced or perpetuated standardized test-based stereotype threat effects for a group of African American children. Findings revealed 4 themes: a perception of education as strictly test preparation, test-based stress and anxiety, racial salience, and stereotypes. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

The standardized test performance of African American students has long been a serious concern and source of debate. The dominant discourse (e.g., Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003) largely focuses on a cultural deficit model to explain the racial test score gap.<sup>1</sup> Such an explanation downplays the effect of racial stereotyping and students’ subsequent responses. *Stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995) refers to the risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group in a particular performance domain (e.g. standardized testing), and has been shown to significantly depress the performance of African American students at all levels (McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Given the possibility of positive intervention (e.g., Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009), a necessary next step is to examine *how* children experience stereotype threat. This would seem to be of particular importance when addressing potential remedies for the racial gap in standardized test scores.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) has substantially increased the importance of standardized testing at the elementary grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). This has lead to an unbalanced focus on test practice material in elementary schools serving primarily African American students, and a subsequent tendency for these students to tie their identities to their test scores (Cawelti, 2006; Kozol, 2005). Steele (1997) has suggested that individuals most affected by stereotype threat are those highly identified with the domain in question. In such cases, students who are more *domain-identified* will not only have traditional testing concerns, but also the added pressure of not confirming a prevailing stereotype about their group.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how domain-identified African American children in an urban elementary school navigate through the school year approaching the standardized test, and specifically to explore whether the standardized testing experiences of African American children in an urban elementary school are related to their stereotype awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “test score gap” is used in place of “achievement gap” in this paper to indicate that it is solely in reference to gaps in standardized test scores, which are not the only measure of “achievement.” The author recognizes the “achievement gap” characterization as problematic, in that it (a) infers that the burden for underperformance is solely students’, and (b) it uses White students’ normative performance as a universal standard (see Hilliard, 2003). The terms “opportunity gap” or “resource gap” could better characterize the totality of the phenomenon in many cases by placing the burden for underperformance where the author believes it more rightly belongs.

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### Theoretical Framework

Within the past decade or so, researchers have applied critical race theory (CRT) to educational issues (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT is defined as a theoretical framework that counters the dominant dialogue on race as it relates to education by examining how educational praxis and policy subordinates certain racial groups (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), and establishes the experiences of the dominant group as the norm (Duncan, 2002). CRT is described as an appropriate lens for qualitative research in the field of education (Delgado Bernal). Critical qualitative researchers utilize CRT to “examine the impact of race and racism along the entire educational pipeline from elementary schools, through middle and high schools, and on to the university” (Lynn & Adams, 2002, p. 89).

### Method

In order to characterize stereotype threat effects of children through a CRT lens, it was important to understand completely their subjective experience in this context. In this vain, the current study sought to acquire, through in-depth focus group interviews, a comprehensive record of factors that produced or perpetuated stereotype threat effects for a group of African American children.

#### *Participants*

The participants were a purposefully selected group of 4 African American elementary school students highly domain-identified with Reading. That is, the students reported very high performance in their Reading class and that performing well was very important to them. The student composition of the school was 80% African American, 19% Hispanic, and 1% White, and over 90% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch (MDCPS, 2006). The school had never made *Adequate Yearly Progress* (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) by NCLB standards (based on standardized test scores), and had implemented several test-preparation protocols mandated by the state as a result. These characteristics are typical of many schools in urban centers in the United States (Kozol, 2005). The final sample included 4 nine year-old African American fourth-graders: 2 boys (“Floyd” [humorous] and “Johnny” [intellectual]) and 2 girls (“Asia” [outspoken] and “LaTavia” [pensive]).

#### *Procedure*

The design of the study included focus group interviews supplemented by classroom observations. The researcher interviewed participants on six occasions throughout the school year with questions related to standardized testing (specifically the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) and potential mediators of stereotype threat. Each interview lasted approximately 45 min. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, a data analysis plan rooted in grounded theory was implemented. The transcripts coded and organized into themes. Conclusions on perceptions of influencing factors were drawn from the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. This data was supplemented with fieldnotes from classroom observations. The classroom observations took place in 1 hr blocks over a four month period, for a total of 30 hrs.

### Findings

This section describes the findings from the data and offers some general comments on how test preparation curricular protocols in the urban elementary school context lead to an environment susceptible to stereotype threat experiences for African American students. Using Figure 1 as a guide, this section explores four themes that emerged from the data: (a) a narrow perception of education as strictly test preparation, (b) test-based stress and anxiety, (c) concern

with what “others” think (racial salience), and (d) stereotypes. Participants expressed an overall perception of test preparation as the reason for education, as represented by the center circle. This perception was complemented by 2 major overlapping themes: test-based anxiety, and concern with what “others” think (racial salience). Students were more likely to report stress and anxiety when the purpose of education was most narrowly associated with standardized test preparation, and students were likely to reference what “others” thought in terms of stereotypes. This is represented by the intersecting circles: Anxiety was sometimes expressed as related only to test preparation, whereas in other instances it was also related to racial salience. Within the theme of racial salience, race-based stereotypes were a salient part of the interviews, and students either repudiated or perpetuated these stereotypes, sometimes associating these stereotypes with their anxiety. In this vein, subthemes were created as the codes were analyzed. Specifically under the stereotypes theme, subthemes included (a) perpetuation and (b) repudiation of relevant stereotypes. Also, under the anxiety theme, subthemes included (a) physiological consequences, and (b) feelings related to self-doubt.

#### *Education as Test Preparation*

The focus group participants spoke almost solely of standardized test preparation in descriptions of their day. Asia clearly explained, “We have to do this book... in Math and Reading, and it helps us to understand more about the [state test]...almost every day for the whole year.” Field observations made it clear that in a large respect, the classrooms were test-preparation centers. During one-third of the field observations, the researcher spent the time observing students taking a practice test.

Data from the focus group interviews clearly indicated that this group of students viewed the test as the driving force for the curriculum. “If I was a teacher,” LaTonya explained, “I think I would give them stuff that related to the [state test], so they could be more focused.” The other students indicated their agreement. When asked what kind of “stuff,” LaTonya replied, “I don’t know – whatever’s on the [state test].” Data analysis revealed several instances where students agreed that preparing for the state test was the goal of their education in Reading. The focus group interviews indicated that they perceived their Reading class largely in the context of a diagnostic testing situation. Diagnostic testing environments are susceptible to stereotype threat for African American students (McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

#### *Test-Based Stress and Anxiety*

The [state test] is the most important thing in the world. You can’t even drop the thing! If you drop it, how you gonna breathe, man, how you gonna breathe!? (Floyd)

In the quote above, Floyd vividly captures the focus group’s feelings towards the state test. The students explained how the prospect of the upcoming state test made them nervous to the point of negative physiological consequences. Floyd put it vividly, “like I feel nervous in my stomach, and this crazy sensation turning and turning. When your stomach is turning...it’s turning so much, it turns into butter.” Some of these top performing students felt confident despite their nervousness, while others let their nerves affect their expectations. Floyd predicted he would fail, although he later earned the second highest score in his class.

The students suggested that they may not experience as much anxiety if the name of the state test were removed from the teachers’ vocabularies. LaTonya explained, “I want to scratch out the word ‘[state test]’ out of every test that has it... we wouldn’t be as nervous because we don’t see the word ‘[state test].’” Asia said that if she were a teacher, when the students were being tested she would tell them, “it’s not an [state test] practice test; it’s just a regular test that we do. It would make things feel, like, less nervous.” These suggestions are consistent with

stereotype threat research, which suggests that the performance of African American students is depressed when the test is characterized as a diagnostic (McKown & Weinstein, 2003).

*Concern with What “Others” Think (Racial Salience)*

“White people gonna be thinking that it’s just an F. White people gonna be thinking maybe to themselves, ‘Forever, [our school] is gonna get an F...’” – (Asia)

As indicated by Asia’s comment above, the students believed that White people held negative opinions of their school. LaTonya explained, “It makes me feel kind of sad because – well it’d kind of make me a little mad because just because I go to a D school, that does not mean that I’m a D student.” These remarks are consistent with stereotype threat theory. The students expressed a desire to not confirm negative stereotypes against them.

Johnny explained that when someone looks at their school online, they can also find information about the school’s “population.” He said, “It’s on the Internet. You go to – you see schools and everything, and then you see this school, you see the grade, and then you see where it’s at, the population.” He continued, “there’s some White people that are still angry with Black people...they still are hating Black people, so they still think that Black people are stupid and dumb.” Analyses revealed how the school’s test scores made race a salient factor for this group of students.

*Stereotypes*

The kids are from the streets. They act like little thugs. (Johnny)

The focus group made it a point to repudiate many stereotypes of their school. “Just because [some students at our school] wear pants below they waist, that doesn’t mean they have to get a bad grade,” Asia commented as the rest nodded and yelled “yeah” in agreement. At least in part, the participants put the responsibility upon themselves for raising the school grade, and positively changing these stereotypes. “I’m trying to bring the scores of my school up, man!” Floyd said adamantly. In addition to the normal stress and anxiety associated with high-stakes tests, these students felt the extra burden of saving their school. Asia said clearly, “we are going to put maximum effort because ...[we] don’t want the school to be teared down.” A nearby school elementary school was recently shut down by the state for consecutive years of poor test scores.

At the same time, however, as evidenced by Johnny’s quote above, the focus group sometimes perpetuated the same stereotypes they repudiated about the students in their school onto students in a neighboring school with identical demographics. The “kind” of students that don’t do well, Johnny explained, are “ones who wear their pants below their waist—pants be hanging, and boxers be showing.” Interestingly, this was exactly the same stereotype he repudiated about the students in his school.

### **Implications**

This research has important implications for both educational policy and praxis. Findings provide important information for educators about how standardized testing based curricula may undermine the achievement of certain student populations. NCLB professes an aim of addressing the racial “achievement gap,” and articulates an emphasis on high achievement for all students. The legislation aims to achieve this goal primarily through increased accountability measured by standardized testing. However, the implementation of high-stakes testing regimens may make race particularly salient for African American students, and have adverse effects on performance. Such information is of particular importance to educational policymakers interested in standardized achievement based legislation, especially in light of the fact that test-preparation

curricular protocols are overwhelmingly implemented in schools serving low-income African American children (Kozol, 2005).

This is also of particular importance to teachers of African American children in that attention to the environmental details surrounding standardized testing situations can potentially prevent maladaptive consequences for their students. Positive intervention has been demonstrated in middle school populations by reframing performance tasks as nondiagnostic (McKown & Weinstein, 2003), by teaching students to view intelligence as malleable rather than fixed (Good et al., 2003), by having students reaffirm their sense of self-worth (Cohen et al., 2009), and by incorporating positive in-group role models (Marx et al., 2009). If educators are interested in ameliorating the racial test score gap, implementation of interventions to help prevent the negative performance consequences evoked by stereotype threat is essential at earlier ages. Therefore, future research in an elementary school setting examining the effects of these interventions on academic performance is critical.

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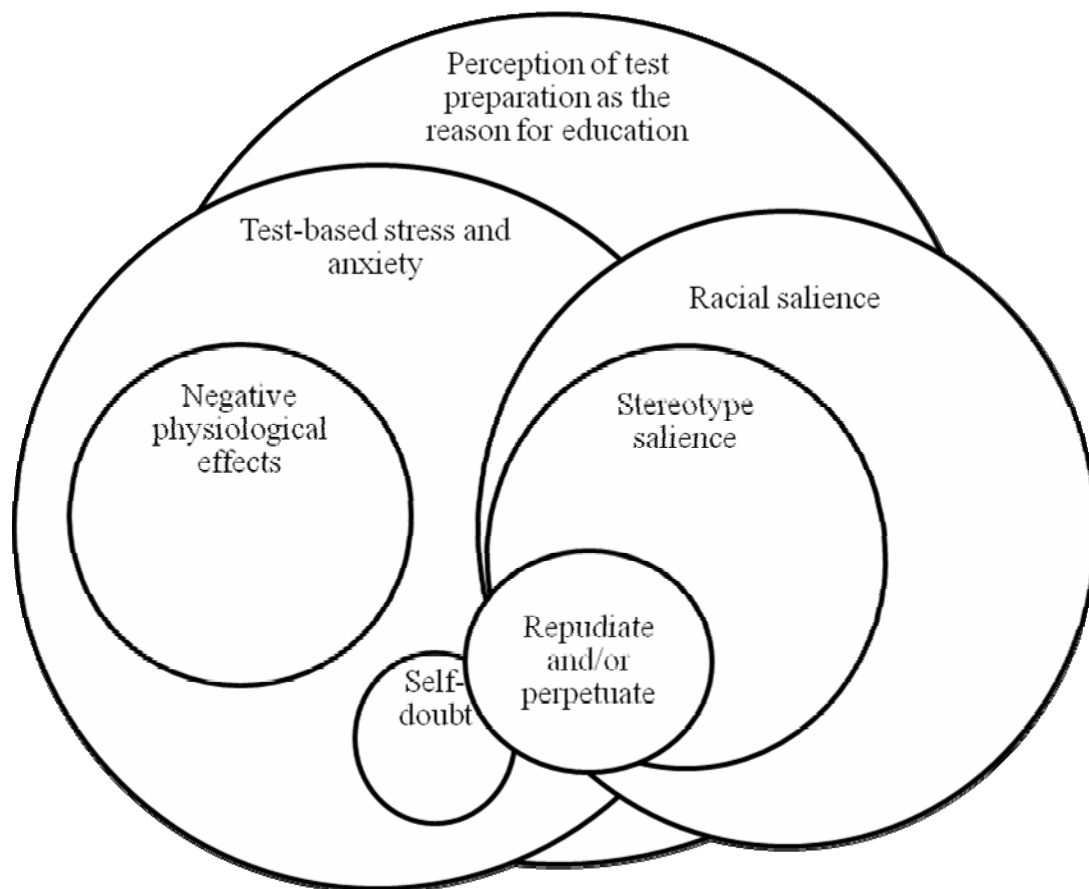


Figure 1. Themes that emerged from data.