

Writing about values shrinks racial grades gap

Short essays raise school scores of low-achieving African-American students for two years.

Lucas Laursen

African-American school students asked to write about their personal values for fifteen minutes at the start of the school year earn higher grades for up to two years afterwards.

The work is a follow-up to a 2006 study¹ in which students were asked to rank the importance of values such as religion, relationships and art and describe what the top value or values meant to them. The intervention reduced the achievement gap between African-American and European-American students by 40%. Low-achieving African-Americans benefited most, getting better grades than students in a control group who were asked to write about why the values they ranked lowest might matter to someone else.

Now, the research team led by Geoffrey Cohen, a psychologist at the University of Colorado in Boulder, has found the effects of the brief assignment last up to two years, with the lowest-performing quarter of African-American students earning grade point averages 0.41 points higher on a 4-point scale than peers in the control group².

The timing of the intervention is important, says Cohen. "The initial performance has a disproportionate impact because it sets the initial trajectory" of a student's grades. "If you can intervene early in this cycle you might be able to deflect the trajectory of performance over time."

The team thinks that the intervention helps students to deal with the stress of being judged in light of negative stereotypes. Many studies have shown that when people are reminded that they are in a group which stereotypically performs poorly, such as African-Americans in an academic setting, they score worse than members of the same group who were not reminded of their group status³.

Students who completed booster exercises in the second year after the initial exercise did not noticeably outperform other students, suggesting that the first assignment alone was enough to lift grades for two years, says Cohen. "But it could be the case that we need to reinstate affirmations during stressful transitions such as high school," he adds.

Defanging the stereotype

Students taught that their intelligence is not fixed do better than students who believe intelligence is a fixed quantity, says Carol Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford University in California. "It combats stereotype threat by 'defanging' the stereotype, which is a message of fixed low ability," she says.

She says the new findings from Cohen and colleagues "could be used in tandem" with similar educational work.

But Cohen cautions against wide use of the intervention for now. "The question of how to scale up intervention raises all kinds of questions that need to be rigorously evaluated," he says, such as what happens when students and teachers are aware of the aim of the assignment. "It would be irresponsible to test it indiscriminately," he says.

Edward Zigler, the Yale psychologist behind the Head Start preschool intervention programme in the United States and a consultant to Cohen's research project, agrees. Teachers get "thousands of ideas across their table", he says, and persuading them to adopt a new intervention will require very strong evidence and further research.



Low-achieving African-American students who wrote about their personal values got better grades.

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15 Evolutionary Gems

"We have this big self-esteem

movement in the United States and I think it's misguided."

Self-affirmation tasks "enable [students] to transcend themselves", says psychologist Jennifer Crocker of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "It promotes a sense of connection to other people or to something outside the self", which helps students to learn in situations that threaten their self-image.

Jennifer Crocker
University of Michigan

But she warns that self-affirmation is different from creating a falsely optimistic self-image. "The concern I would have from this paper is that teachers and educators are going to say that 'Oh, what we need to do is make these kids feel great about themselves.' We have this big self-esteem movement in the United States and I think it's

misguided."

References

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US' Head Start has been a sour joke since 1965, currently with a \$6 billion/year punchline empowering dregs later to enjoy mandated diversity university admissions and full scholarships. Rather than foster brilliance we allocate for its suppression. The 2008 California Academic Performance Index for high school students (Los Angeles Times "California section" page B3, 05 September 2008): of the 40% of students who do not drop out, the overall normed IQ derived from test scores - reported by race - is 91. That is empowered, too: "A student could pass the math portion of the test without answering a single algebra question correctly". US education succeeded mightily from "McGuffey's Eclectic Primer" in 1835 through 1970, mass processing the most loathsome immigrant get in the meanest of conditions. Jackbooted State compassion them impressed and loosed a torrent of moronity that has no end in sight.

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