
Racial Stereotypes May Affect Test Scores

By ADAM EMERSON aemerson@tampatrib.com

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ST. PETERSBURG - The message is everywhere, black students say: You perform far worse than your white classmates, especially on high-stakes tests.

Preliminary research shows even the mention of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test can contribute to the achievement gap.

Last spring, two University of South Florida-St. Petersburg professors tested high school students to see whether expectations could foreshadow performance. What they found prompted a fall return to see whether certain methods could calm students for test-taking.

In their spring study of 81 students at Boca Ciega High School in Gulfport, Brett Jones and Tom Kellow investigated "stereotype threat," a phenomenon in which students worry their failure might confirm a negative belief about their race.

"People have been talking about the achievement gap so much over the last few years that that could make the stereotype threat worse," said Jones, a professor of educational psychology at USF-St. Petersburg.

The pair selected ninth-grade students, divided them into two groups and gave each group the same test of math skills.

They told members of the first group their performances would show how well they might do on the 10th-grade math FCAT but said nothing about how students of different races might score.

For the second group, the researchers did not mention the FCAT, instead suggesting students' scores would not vary by race.

Black students in the first group scored far worse than white students. In the second group, without any mention of the high-stakes test, black students and white students scored nearly the same.

The results call into question the validity of high-stakes tests because the tests may fail to show how well black students have learned, the researchers wrote.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act judges local schools by how well minority groups perform on state tests, issuing sanctions against schools that fail to meet education goals.

Neither Jones nor Kellow thinks eliminating the stereotype threat alone would close the achievement gap. But with the FCAT looming, both say, easing test anxiety could narrow it.

'There's More Pressure'

State officials proclaim they are making small gains in closing the achievement gap, "but right now, you can drive a Mack truck through it," said Kellow, who left the university and runs his own statistical consulting firm.

Thirty-seven percent of Florida's black students passed the math portion of the FCAT last year, up from 25 percent in 2001. Seventy percent of white students passed last year.

The gap was also apparent in reading: Thirty-five percent of black students read at grade level, compared with 64 percent of white students.

The stereotype Jones and Kellow studied probably plays a role in the poor showing on high-stakes tests among black students nationwide, said Ronald Ferguson, who heads the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University.

Because high-stakes tests measure how well educators are closing the gap, Ferguson said, the resulting differences by race may be exaggerated.

"If your group is negatively stereotyped, and you are put in a high-stakes environment, you are more likely to be anxious about your performance, and your performance is likely to be more depressed," he said.

Black students at Boca Ciega say they understand. They see newspaper and television reports on the gap, and their

teachers and peers talk about it at school.

"It's almost like they're saying that no matter what you do, when you get ready to take that test, being that you're African-American, you're going to fail," sophomore Orhian Johnson said. "If you think about it long enough, it's just going to stick in your head, and you're going to start believing it."

Freshman Pierre Coston said, "There's a lot of intelligent black students, but I think there's more pressure on us. It's easy for anybody to get on TV and speak on us, but we want people to see what it's really like."

Making Changes

Stereotypes will not disappear overnight, "but I do think there are ways to change the way students feel about the testing environment," Kellow said.

In the fall, the pair revisited Boca Ciega and also visited Gibbs High School in south St. Petersburg.

Each school was about to administer a test similar to the FCAT to its students. Beforehand, Jones and Kellow selected about 150 ninth-graders at each school for a study.

At Boca Ciega, the selected students watched a video showing how to overcome stereotype threat. The freshmen they picked at Gibbs watched a video explaining how the brain works and how knowledge is acquired regardless of race.

The rest of the students at both schools took the test without watching the videos. In the coming weeks, the researchers will comb through students' test results to determine whether the ninth-graders who saw the videos scored higher than the ones who did not. Their conclusions should be ready by March, when Florida's students take the math and reading FCATs.

Ferguson, of Harvard, calls the research "a good experiment."

A lack of skills - a result of factors ranging from indifferent parenting to inadequate teaching - represents "the lion's share" of the achievement gap, he said.

District administrators should worry more about how well schools educate black students and less about stereotype threat, he said. But teachers can watch for anxiety or for signs of students questioning their intelligence because of their races.

Those methods could be incorporated into a school's curriculum, Jones and Kellow say.

"We don't think this is going to save the world," Jones said. "But you have to get students thinking about what it means to be intelligent."

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