

# Identity Threats in Education: Navigating the Complexities of Belonging and Academic Performance for Minority Students

Boosting Academic Performance through Positive Psychology Research

By Lani Wright

As the field of positive psychology continues to grow, research has shown that self-affirmation has a multitude of benefits, ranging from reducing stress and improving mental health to increasing job performance and productivity. However, what is often overlooked is how self-affirmation can positively impact academic performance. In this article, we will explore the research on self-affirmation and its potential to enhance learning outcomes, highlighting strategies for students to incorporate self-affirmation into their academic lives.

Undoubtedly, students face numerous challenges in achieving academic success, but perhaps none more significant than the impact of stress on their performance. While there are many potential sources of stress in a young person's life, the struggle to find belonging and identify with a social group at school can be a major contributing factor. Identity development and a sense of belonging are crucial for psychological well-being and academic achievement in young adults, with social groups playing a pivotal role. Unfortunately, minority students are at a heightened risk of experiencing identity threats in academic settings, which can further exacerbate stress and negatively impact academic performance.

The impact of identity threat on academic performance cannot be overstated, particularly for students whose social group - such as gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity - may be devalued in the academic environment. Social psychologist Claude Steele's groundbreaking research on stereotype threat has highlighted the consistent underperformance of minority students when faced with identity threat. For example, students from marginalized groups, including Latino and African American students in the US education system or women pursuing STEM careers, are at a higher risk of experiencing identity threat and subsequently struggling to achieve academic success.

While the impact of identity threat on academic performance is undoubtedly significant, research has shown that practicing self-affirmations can reduce the psychological disruption caused by stressors such as prejudice against one's social group. By consistently practicing self-affirmations, individuals can broaden their perceived sources of self-integrity and feel less threatened by external factors. This shift in perspective helps individuals recognize that their identity is not solely defined by the social groups they belong to, but rather by their intrinsic qualities and values. As a result, they are better equipped to overcome the limitations that others may place on them and realize their full potential.

With a more broadened view of self-identity and who they are, students can better focus on the academic task at hand and can be better learners, studiers, and test takers. When you believe that your success or failure of these tasks don't actually affect your self or social-worth, you can actually do better on them!

Social psychological interventions that have included self-affirmations in their programs have produced long-term positive outcomes on learning and academic performance, such as minority students that experience stereotype threat feeling greater belonging in school and showing improved academic performance. In a study published in the research analysis and education policy journal, *Teachers College Record*, for example, African American middle schoolers who completed affirmation activities had improved grades that were maintained over the whole two years of the study.

Academic underperformance among minority students facing stereotype threat need not be an inevitability. Recent research has shown that academic motivation can fluctuate significantly based on the level of belonging experienced by the student on a given day. The good news is that students can shift their perception and attitude towards their identity without changing any physical circumstances, yielding impressive results. By taking control of their self-identity, students can learn to feel comfortable with themselves and find a sense of acceptance and belonging that is not contingent on the presence of stereotype threat. It is entirely possible to be part of a minority group that is systematically underprivileged and still feel confident in one's abilities and hopeful about future accomplishments. The challenges that minority students face do not have to define their sense of self-worth and identity.