think about being the only Black one, like in your class, and your professor is going to know that you skipped class [everyone laughs]. They always know YOUR name.

Said another:

I don't know if it's self-imposed, but I always feel like I have to prove that I'm not here because of affirmative action. Like I always feel that I have to show up in class, that I have to make myself visible to make sure that the professor knows that I am doing my work, that I know what is going on, that I have some creative intelligence. I feel like I constantly have to get the best grade in the class for me to feel better, and just prove myself maybe even to the White students who may be looking at me going, "Oh, she got here because of affirmative action."

The pressure not to prove the stereotype of intellectual inferiority means one cannot reveal weakness, or ask for assistance, even when justified in doing so, as this young woman explained:

I felt a lot of pressure too, never to ask for an extension. I wanted to be the superwoman where I never had a conflict in a schedule or I never got sick, or any of those normal things, and the first time that I did [ask for an extension], I felt really kind of bad about it.

Another added:

I thought I would be confident in my academic work, but I've really struggled with feeling comfortable going to my professors and getting the help that I need.

What is hopeful about our new understanding of stereotype threat and related theories is that they can guide us to change how we teach and what we say. As Steele puts it: "Although stereotypes held by the larger society may be hard to change, it is possible to create educational niches in which negative stereotypes are not felt to apply—and which permit a sense of trust that would otherwise be difficult to sustain." Receiving honest feedback that you can trust as unbiased is critical to reducing stereotype threat and improving academic performance. How you establish that trust with the possibility of stereotype swirling around is the question. The key to doing this seems to be found in clearly communicating both high standards and assurance of belief in the student's capacity to reach those standards.

Again the work of Steele and Cohen offers important insights. To investigate how a teacher might gain the trust of a student when giving feedback across racial lines, they created a scenario in which Black and White Stanford University students were asked to write essays about a favorite teacher. The students were told that the essays would be considered for publication in a journal about teaching, and that they would receive feedback from a reviewer who they were led to believe was White. A Polaroid snapshot was taken of each student and attached to the essay as it was turned in, signaling to the students that the reviewer would be able to identify the race of the essay writer. Several days later the students returned to receive the reviewer's comments, with the opportunity to "revise and resubmit" the essay. What was varied in the experiment was how the feedback was delivered.

When the feedback was given in a constructive but critical manner, Black students were more suspicious than White students that the feedback was racially biased, and consequently,
the Black students were less likely than the White students to rewrite the essay for further consideration. The same was true when the critical feedback was buffered by an opening statement praising the essay, such as, “There were many good things about your essay.” However, when the feedback was introduced by a statement that conveyed a high standard (reminding the writer that the essay had to be of publishable quality) and high expectations (assuring the student of the reviewer’s belief that with effort and attention to the feedback, the standard could be met), the Black students not only responded positively by revising the essays and resubmitting them, but they did so at a higher rate than the White students in the study.  

The particular combination of the explicit communication of high standards and the demonstrated assurance of the teacher’s belief in the student’s ability to succeed (as evidenced by the effort to provide detailed, constructive feedback) was a powerful intervention for Black students. Describing this two-pronged approach as “wise criticism,” Cohen and Steele demonstrated that it was an exceedingly effective way to generate the trust needed to motivate Black students to make their best effort. Even though the criticism indicated that a major revision of the essay would be required to achieve the publication standard, Black students who received “wise criticism” felt ready to take on the challenge, and did. Indeed, “they were more motivated than any other group of students in the study—as if this combination of high standards and assurance was like water on parched land, a much needed but seldom received balm.”

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: WHAT CAN WE DO?  

What, then, are the practical implications of Steele and his colleagues’ research? What are some specific strategies for teachers, mentors, and other adults to consider in an effort to reduce stereotype threat and increase trust in cross-racial interactions?

1. Make standards for evaluation explicit. Establish high standards and make clear to students what the criteria are for meeting them. When standards are made explicit, students are more likely to trust and respond to relevant criticism. Emphasize “effective effort” as the key to success, rather than “innate ability.”

2. Avoid overpraising for mediocre work. Students will perceive this as a sign of lowered expectations, and another reason not to trust the feedback.

3. Normalize help-seeking behaviors. For example, if all students are required to meet with the professor early in the semester or after the first exam, any stigma that students of color might feel seeking help outside of class is reduced.

4. When possible, include diversity of perspectives. Racial and cultural inclusivity in the curriculum and the teaching materials will communicate to the student that members of her group are valued and may increase the student’s sense of trust.

5. Encourage cross-group interaction in class. Consider assigning working groups rather than allowing students to choose group members themselves. Fostering interaction across racial lines or other lines of difference helps reduce stereotyping among classmates and increases the climate of trust in the classroom. However, clustering students of color within small groups is preferable to “tokenizing” them (placing no more than one student of color per group).

6. Revise your view of intelligence. Indeed, educators can revise their view of intelligence as an innate fixed capacity and can challenge those well-ingrained societal notions of