Policy Notes

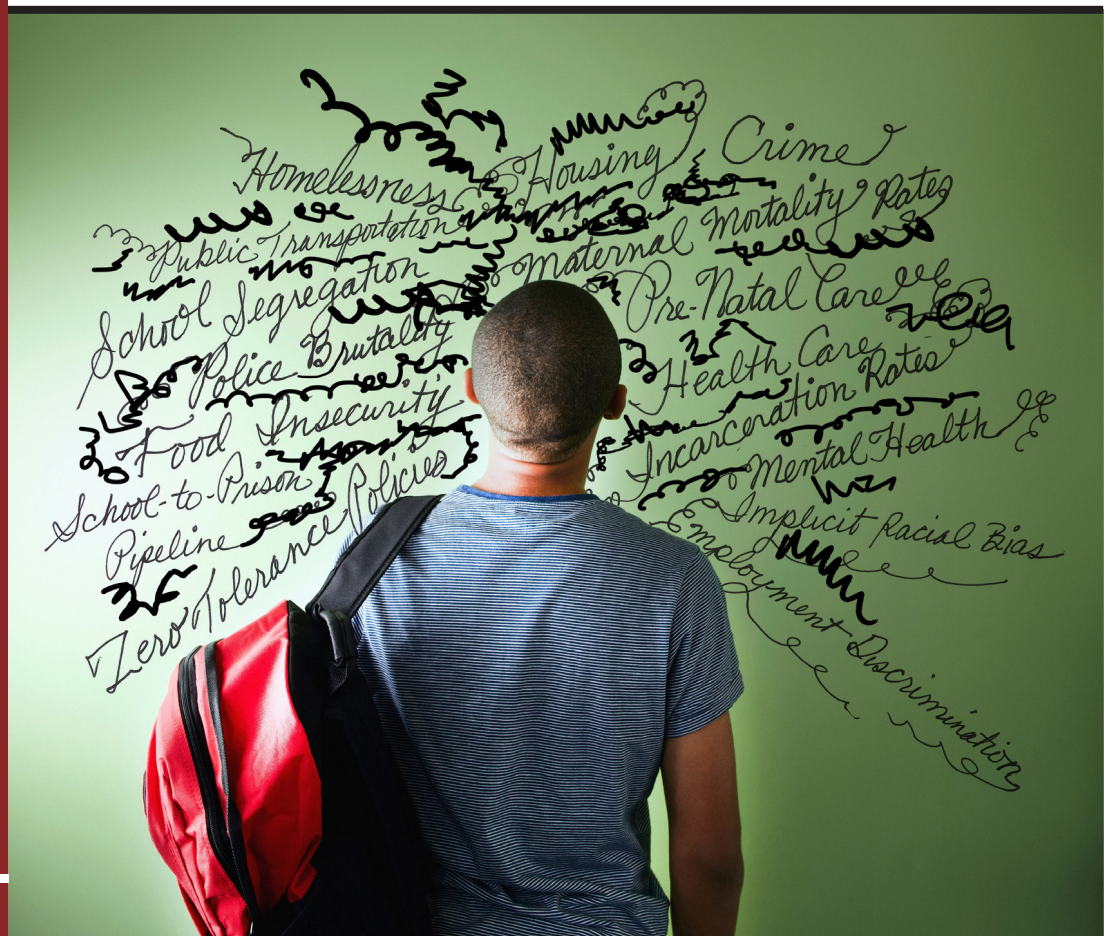# Taxing the African-American Student:

The Impact and Mitigation of Structural Stigma on Test Performance and School Success

ETS POLICY EVALUATION & RESEARCH CENTER

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Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College; Eldar Shafir, Princeton University; Cia Verschelden, Malcolm X College; Alford Young Jr., University of Michigan

In the United States, African-American students often face challenges that arise from structural stigma, which can inhibit their ability to learn and grow in the classroom and in their daily lives. Structural stigma, along with centuries of racist attitudes and policies, can impede student progress and is a challenge for policymakers, business professionals and all of us to overcome.

From April 15 to 17, 2019, ETS convened the *Taxing the African-American Student: The Impact and Mitigation of Structural Stigma on Test Performance and School Success* symposium, bringing together more than 65 leading researchers, practitioners and policymakers from different professions and perspectives. The goal of the meeting was for participants to share and learn about the challenges African-American students and their educators and community members face and to identify actions in research, policy and practice that can change the conditions for them and other stigmatized groups.

"What is structural stigma?"

The first day of *Taxing the African-American Student* focused on defining and establishing a common understanding of the specter of structural stigma. After all participants introduced themselves and shared their goals for the meeting, **Beverly Daniel Tatum**, President Emerita of Spelman College, began the first panel, "What is Stigma?," by explaining why the phrase "structural stigma" was chosen as opposed to "racism." Structural stigma is any preconception that a person must deal with because of who they are, including racist stereotypes. As she explained, stigma serves as a broader concept that can be expanded to include not only racial issues but also issues of class and poverty, which disproportionately affect African-American students. The use of the phrase "structural stigma" allows for a thorough examination of all of these obstacles that students of color face and does not limit the discussion to just race. Tatum went on to lay out a formula for investigating the impact of structural stigma. In introducing the concept, she framed stigma with three questions: "What?," "So What?" and "Now What?" "What?" refers to understanding the nature of stigma itself, defining it in words, explaining where it comes from and expanding on who it affects. The "So What?" is the meat of the matter: How does it impact individuals of color, and why does it matter? And

"Now What?" encourages an exploration of the steps that can be taken to mitigate stigma and develop a call to action. The latter question serves as not only a lens through which to view Tatum's panel, but also the symposium itself.

Speaking on his studies regarding African-American males and structural stigma, **Alford Young Jr.**, the Arthur F. Thurnau Professor at the University of Michigan, said, "Everyday action, everyday behavior … centers, in some sense, on working against or trying to negate the negativity that's associated with Black masculinity." Building upon what Young said, **Cia Verschelden**, Vice President of Academic & Student Affairs at Malcom X College and author of the book *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization*, introduced the concept of mental bandwidth. As she described, an individual's bandwidth is the total potential cognitive resources they have at their disposal. Each individual has a finite amount of bandwidth with which to go about their daily lives and a set number of things to which they can devote their thoughts and efforts. Students who do not have to deal with race or poverty have a greater total bandwidth to devote to their studies, while those affected by greater structural stigma do not. Structural stigma stands as an obstacle to the full utilization of an individual's bandwidth — in this context, a blockade on the mental resources of students of color, hemming in the amount of mental energy and resources that they can use to succeed in their studies and on standardized tests. Verschelden said that many African-American students who grow up in poverty consume a massive amount of their mental bandwidth even before racial and social stigma are piled on top of it. "Students are smart enough, but if their minds are occupied with food insecurity and other issues associated with poverty, they will not do as well in testing and at school."

Throughout the symposium, Maria Evans, Arts Council of Princeton, created sketch notes to capture the major themes, ideas and takeaways of the event.

Andrés Castro Samayoa, Boston College; Michele Minter, Princeton University

James Anderson, Fayetteville State University; Steven Culpepper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC Urbana-Champaign); Kadriye Ercikan, ETS; Candace Thille, Stanford University

Marcel Agüeros, Columbia University; Patrick Kyllonen, ETS

Alison Easterling, The Lawrenceville School; James Davis, Temple University

Robyn Ince, National Urban League; Chandra Muller, University of Texas, Austin

Panelists recommended concrete solutions to the bandwidth problem. These include moving standardized testing to the beginning of the month, when families have been replenished with food stamps and students are able to focus on the tests rather than on hunger, or providing flexible testing times so that students with younger siblings for whom they must help care can ensure their well-being. However, they all cautioned that true recovery of mental bandwidth cannot be achieved until structural stigma is met head on. As **Eldar Shafir**, Princeton University's Class of 1987 Professor of Behavioral Science and Public Policy, stated, "We cannot move forward with recovering bandwidth without interrupting the cycle of racism." That challenge, he continued, lies not just with African-American leaders and sociologists: it is also "incumbent on the privileged and the comfortable to help solve these problems that those with limited bandwidth alone cannot."

The introduction of structural stigma continued with an examination of case studies. In a discussion chaired by **Catherine Millett**, Senior Research Scientist at ETS, panelists shared stories of different examples of racial and class stigma that they have faced and witnessed. Two very different experiences came to light with the contrasting stories of **Robert Sellers**, Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion at the University of Michigan, and **Saran Stewart**, Deputy Dean for the University of the West Indies. Sellers told the story of his initial entry into the American collegiate system

Angela DelBrocco, College Board®; Kwame Osei-Sarfo, Columbia University; Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College; Dorainne Green, Indiana University; Stephanie Saunders, ETS; Jason Klugman, Princeton University Preparatory Program; Wade Henderson, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

at a time when African-American students were struggling to create a toehold in academia. Reflecting on the racism he experienced at the University of Michigan, he said, "I went into situations expecting racism, until proven otherwise … There were many times that I wanted to quit … to go home. But if I did, what would my family say?" This attitude of assuming racism "until proven otherwise" may reflect the attitude of older generations, who, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, had to prepare for the worst every time they went outside. He contrasted this with the attitudes of many young African-American people today, who want to believe that the world is moving past these racist views, but "… keep being proved wrong over and over again." Sellers' experiences underscore the story of African Americans born and raised under the specter of stigma, struggling to achieve success despite the odds stacked against them.

Stewart, a native of Jamaica, told of how she "first became an African American." She explained how race is not given as great a station in Jamaica, as an overwhelming majority of the island's citizens are people of color. When Stewart came to the United States to attend college, she found a very different world awaiting her. She described how, during registration, she was forced to put "African American" on her papers, as that was the closest demographic to her, despite her not even being American. As soon as she "became an African American," she was exposed to the structural stigma surrounding race in the United States. Professors and fellow students ridiculed her for how she spelled certain words (Jamaica uses British spellings, as opposed to American spellings), implying that, because of her race, she was not taught proper English and could not speak correctly. Stewart explained that the new perception of her based on race and heritage was an obstacle for her to overcome during her studies. Speaking on the difference in experiences in the United States versus those in Jamaica, she said, "I think America has a lot that it can learn from my country."

Terrell Strayhorn, Vice President for Academic & Student Affairs at LeMoyne-Owen College, honed in on the need for a sense of belonging in higher education classrooms. Everyone wants to belong, but in his research, Strayhorn noted, African-American students often feel they do not. For example, they arrive at their new college or university and enter the classroom, looking for cues, signs and symbols that

Keith Look, Institute for Student Achievement; Robert Sellers, University of Michigan; Catherine Millett, ETS; Saran Stewart, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus (UWI Mona); Terrell Strayhorn, LeMoyne-Owen College

implicitly reflect that they do belong here, but often find that lacking. Cues can range from things like proximity, eye contact, attention and vocal pitch of the teacher to more obvious things, such as having friends in the class, knowing students' names and including diverse perspectives — i.e., "people who look like them" — in the curriculum, in examples used during class, or even with guest speakers.

Keith Look, Senior Director of Programs at the Institute for Student Achievement, also spoke about creating an environment that makes it safe for learning at the secondary school level. "Schools," he maintained, "should use a therapeutic approach that addresses academic and non-academic barriers
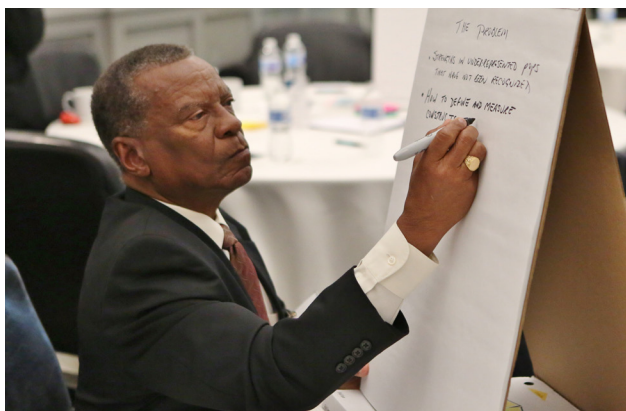
Ike Colbert, Hummingbird IRB

and the needs of students to create an environment that all students feel is safe for learning." Look acknowledged that there are many personal and institutional barriers that must be addressed and that the conversations needed to start this process can be difficult, but noted that "success may bring responsibility to teach others how to also improve."

Why Does Stigma Matter?

As Verschelden explained, structural stigma can limit the mental bandwidth students have, which can affect their ability to perform in the classroom. If an African-American student must spend time fearing that they do not belong in advanced classes or that they are unable to do well on assessments because of the stigma attached to the color of their skin, they will have less mental energy with which to excel in pursuit of their goals. The symposium's second day included discussions examining this toll of structural stigma on energy and effort. **James Anderson**, Chancellor of Fayetteville State University, led a discussion that centered around the impact of structural stigma on assessments, where students of color have lower scores than their White counterparts. **Steven Culpepper,** an associate professor of statistics

at the University of Illinois, described how this topic is one that academia is uncomfortable addressing, despite its far-reaching effects. "The papers that have been the most difficult for me to publish have been ones that deal with the issue of race."

One way to address stigma's impact on test scores, Culpepper and **Candace Thille**, an associate professor at Stanford University, stated, is the concept of "embedded continuous assessment." This is an alternative assessment method that seeks to examine a student's educational progress over time in a dynamic, hands-on way. In contrast to standardized testing, in which every student sits down at the same time to take a test, embedded continuous assessment allows teachers to assess their students in their daily lives in the classroom. This would be done not through abstract numbers on a testing page, but rather through real-life problems that incorporate the concepts on which they are being tested, without the student knowing that they are being tested. This may help minimize the impact of stigma on assessment, as students would not be in a high-stakes, standardized testing environment.

Kadriye Ercikan, Vice President of Psychometrics, Statistics and Data Sciences at ETS, talked about how these issues are ones that she works on with her colleagues every day. She stressed that we need to think about innovative methods in assessment items and the reporting out and use of assessment results. Ercikan stated that it is possible to collect information on examinee behaviors that can help identify students' test-taking processes and provide information for stakeholders, such as parents and the students themselves, about factors affecting performance. She added, "It would be irresponsible to not consider using the large amount of process data collected about the testing experience to improve testing experiences and how to interpret test scores."
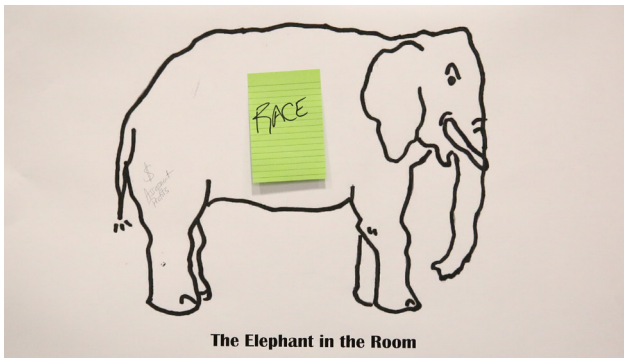

Rebecca Pringle, National Education Association (NEA); Jeresther Thorpe-Page, Heritage Hill Elementary School; Donna Harris-Aikens, NEA

Jason Carter, ETS

Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College; Patricia Gándara, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

The Elephant in the Room

The objective of this symposium was tackling the thorny issue of racially based structural stigma in our education and assessment systems.

While many see technological advances as a way toward mitigating structural stigma, **Ezekiel Dixon-Román**, Chair of the Data Analytics for Social Policy Certificate Program at the University of Pennsylvania, raised concerns. Dixon-Román contended that "technology is rooted in culture," and he worries that modern racial bias can seep into the creation of artificial intelligence meant to eliminate those same biases. In his view, technology cannot advance in this field until the legacies of history are addressed. He described the origin of structural stigma and bias as "Over 400 years … of an iterability of the sociopolitical constitution of the flesh — an iterability that has actually sedimented certain forms of difference in sociopolitical relations that have become taken for granted and are literally unseen." There is a perception of race as a hierarchy, which has been cemented into the popular consciousness, repeated over time, from generation to generation. Culture, technology and even methods of mitigating stigma are not independent of "those ingrained values," Dixon-Román said. He pointed to the legacy of colonialism and the systems of racial hierarchy established by the European powers as the ultimate source of this iterability. These hard truths, Dixon-Román continued, must be accepted and addressed before progress can take place.

Knowledge Café

The Knowledge Café format provided an interactive forum for four colleagues to share their work and have dialogues with fellow participants on the ways their respective work mitigates structural stigma, how they measure its impact and what opportunities they see for advancing their work. The participants were:

Jason Klugman, Director of the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP),[1] who discussed how the PUPP summer institutes and school year programming enables high-achieving, low-income high school students, many of whom are African American, to enter and succeed in selective colleges and universities.

Shawna Young, Executive Director for the Duke University Talent Identification Program® (Duke TIP),[2] who shared how Duke TIP targets middle and high school students to provide them with resources, activities and advice to combat stigma and prepare them for college.

Cheryl Talley, an associate professor at Virginia State University, who discussed Project Knowledge,[3] which looks at the role affective factors like academic identity and self-regulation play in student success and how interventions — such as mindfulness and education in human values — can help students develop strong academic identities and social behaviors.

Diego Zapata-Rivera, Managing Principal Research Scientist at ETS, who spoke about innovations in score reporting, adaptive learning environments and game-based assessments.[4]

[1] https://pupp.princeton.edu/about/
[2] https://tip.duke.edu/
[3] http://pkvsu.blogspot.com/p/background.html
[4] https://www.routledge.com/Score-Reporting-Research-and-Applications/Zapata-Rivera/p/book/9780815353409

Patricia Gándara, UCLA; Camille Charles, University of Pennsylvania; Geoff Cohen, Stanford University; Karen King, National Science Foundation (NSF); Chandra Muller, University of Texas, Austin; Rebecca Pringle, NEA

Working to Mitigate Stigma

Camille Charles, the Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, maintained that one of the first steps that should be taken toward the mitigation of stigma is putting an end to the one-size-fits-all approach to policymaking for African-American students. "If you were to come across a random Black student on campus, you would be hard-pressed to know if they came from a low-income or an affluent background, a predominantly White versus segregated minority neighborhood, a school with a lot of AP® courses or none, immigrant or multiracial or not." In this light, Charles stated, "Any 'you're a Black student, so here you go' policy is doomed to fail." Understanding the economic, social, cultural and racial diversity within the African-American community is key to understanding how to approach issues of race. She said that the way the education system views African-American students is detrimental to their development in the long term, compounding stigma,

even if the initial impetus for the policies is positive. "We need to be attentive to the ways that our institutions themselves damage our students," said Charles. "The problem is not the students. It is us."

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>
> *Camille Charles, the Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor at the University of Pennsylvania*

Chandra Muller, a professor at the University of Texas, Austin, spoke specifically about high-achieving African-American students and how they may be hurt the most by stigma and stereotypes. When constructing interventions, she said, one needs to particularly consider interventions that are especially effective for high-achieving students who are hindered by the effects of structural stigma.

Cheryl Talley, Virginia State University

Kelly Slay, University of Maryland

Shawna Young, Duke University Talent Identification Program

Patricia Gándara, Co-Director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, noted that standardized testing is seen in the United States as a measure of merit and intellect, irrespective of the factors that might come into play with each student. "I know we have to rebrand [standardized testing], but how do you do it?" This notion of rebranding was picked up by **Geoffrey Cohen**, a professor at Stanford University. "We need to revamp the notion of assessment so that we see it as assessing our society instead of the intellect of individual students." Cohen talked of mitigating the stigma associated with standardized testing by redefining the concept in the public imagination from a life-or-death skills assessment that determines the future of school children to a broader view of whether the educational system is properly servicing its students, noting that "A higher number is not necessarily a better thing."

"We need to revamp the notion of assessment so that we see it as assessing our society instead of the intellect of individual students."

Geoffrey Cohen, a professor at Stanford University

Test scores can provide us with information on how our schools are performing and better inform educators and policymakers about how to address shortcomings. However, this can only be done once the focus is shifted away from the individual student, lessening the spotlight of stigma and allowing for the use of assessment as a method of positive change in society.

Karen King, Program Director at the National Science Foundation (NSF), raised larger cultural concerns. "We have to change our culture to accept all people, not change all people to fit into our culture," she stated. King said that the society we have crafted

Darnell Cole, University of Southern California; Catherine Millett, ETS; Frank Tuitt, University of Denver; Saran Stewart, UWI Mona; Alison Easterling, The Lawrenceville School

puts students of color at such a disadvantage that even our methods of helping them become flawed. "We make certain assumptions about students … we make assumptions that poverty equals trauma. This is not necessarily true," King explained. "You can have a child growing up with few material objects, but in a loving and supportive household, or you can have a child in an affluent household where there is domestic violence. Projecting our culture's expectations onto students can be detrimental in the long run, hindering our ability to help in each individual case. … we are now working in a way which we call convergent research, bringing people together from different scientific backgrounds to look at a single problem."

> "We have to change our culture to accept all people, not change all people to fit into our culture."
>
> *Karen King, Program Director at the National Science Foundation (NSF)*

By combining different scientific outlooks and approaches, the NSF can better study and understand issues, such as the impact of stress on students in the classroom. Properly understanding these problems, King maintained, is in many ways the first real step toward addressing them.

Tying King's ideas of misperception together with the testing question, **Rebecca Pringle**, Vice President of the National Education Association (NEA), noted that while the manner in which testing is administered in the United States is flawed, and steps should be taken to address it, the larger issue is around equality before the test. She used high school sports as an example: "How do visiting student-athletes from struggling areas feel when they walk into a fancy school with

Diego Zapata-Rivera, ETS

Walt MacDonald, ETS; Ike Colbert, Hummingbird IRB

Sandra Smith-Jones, Manassas City Public Schools; Myra Burnett, Spelman College

Michael Nettles, ETS; Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College; Wade Henderson, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

a pool and brand-new equipment?" She stated that this adds a massive layer of stigma on the minds of students of color. Without addressing the issue of inequity in the quality of education that students in the United States are given, the issue of inequity of outcome will never be fixed. "This is a cycle that must be interrupted," Pringle said.

A Call to Action

Following the conclusion of the symposium's panels and formal discussions, **Michael Nettles,** Senior Vice President of the Policy Evaluation and Research Center and the Edmund W. Gordon Chair at ETS, invited the participants to join one of six groups to develop ideas for research and collaboration on the issue of structural stigma:

- New Approaches to Data Analyses
- Assessment for Inclusive Pedagogy
- Addressing Stereotype Threat in Test Administration
- Developing Tools and Affirmations to Promote Learning and Education
- Embedding Assessment and Learning How to Overcome Gaps and Stigma
- Postsecondary Skills Necessary for Life in the 21st Century and in a Technology-Driven World

After deliberating and discussing the various topics, participants came together in a plenary session to share their ideas and intentions with colleagues. Each of the six groups presented ideas, detailing what they found to be the major research problems and proposing potential research ideas and projects.

Steven Culpepper, UI Urbana-Champaign; Karen King, NSF; Ezekiel Dixon-Román, University of Pennsylvania; Christopher Moss, Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory; Andrés Castro Samayoa, Boston College

Reflections

At the close of the symposium, the participants pledged continuing attention toward this issue. Some, such as Gándara, expressed a desire to expand the discussion to include and investigate the impact of structural stigma appurtenant to Latino students as well. New collaborations were formed with participants from different fields, and participants also pledged to bring the lessons they learned to other colleagues in their organizations. **Wade Henderson**, former president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and the Leadership Conference Education Fund, said, "These conversations around stigma are on the fringe. ETS can legitimatize them and make them more routine and significant." Nettles agreed, saying, "We aim to take what we have learned here, disseminate it out to the public and collaborate to take the necessary next steps forward."

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