

Educating Beyond Stereotypes

Mariah Doze | December 2015

Stereotypes are like expectations. At school, the stereotype for black students is unintelligence. We're not expected to succeed academically. The surprised looks I get when I say something intelligent, and the lonesome AP classes where no one looks like me, remind me daily that, because I am black, I am perceived as "academically incompetent".

[Studies show](#) many teachers bring preconceived notions about black students into the classroom. I caught up with Brittany Packnett, the executive director of Teach For America in St. Louis, at a forum on educational inequality. She says stereotypes about Black students can lead to low expectations, and the consequences of low expectations can be dangerous.

PACKNETT: *Whatever expectation you set for a student, that's the one they'll reach. If you set low expectations for some students and higher ones for others, then that is going to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A lot of times stereotypes will limit the amount of belief we have in certain students, and that is why I think they are so dangerous."*

The stereotypes that harm Black students are reinforced through our school curriculum. In my classes, the authors I read and the people I learn about are overwhelmingly white. My brother DeAndre graduated from high school four years ago. He says, besides from a yearly lesson on Martin Luther King Jr., he hardly ever learned about people who looked like him.

DEANDRE DOZE: *They don't teach you anything about yourself. They're teaching white people about their selves, but they're not teaching Black people about their selves, other than that you're a slave, or that you used to be a slave, or that your ancestors were slaves. They don't say anything positive.*

When we only learn about things from a white perspective, it leaves room for misconceptions about people of color. At my high school, Lee Franklin teaches a class called African American Literature and Composition. He says schools have a responsibility to teach students about different cultures and identities they might not otherwise experience.

FRANKLIN: *Schools should be and can be the driving tool that brings the races together because they can provide platforms and areas in which we can immerse the cultures together and learn about other people.*

Bringing students together by teaching a diverse curriculum is one way to diffuse the power of stereotypes and make school a more inclusive place.

My mom, Dawn Allen, is an advocate for educational equality. She says the school system has to see all students as equally valuable.

ALLEN: *Education is to be concerned about all students. To be concerned about the welfare and the health of all students. Applauding the success of all students. Not just one.*

School needs to be an environment in which the cultures, histories, and experiences of all students are celebrated. My high school guidance counselor, Dr. Samuel Martin, says this kind of cultural affirmation is necessary for students to succeed.

MARTIN: *Seeing yourself reflected in the school culture, feeling a part of the school culture, is important. You have to feel safe in the culture of the school and feel like you belong here to reach your full potential.*

In school, we are all being taught to believe something about ourselves and others, whether we realize it or not. If school is to truly be the place where minds are nurtured and the drive for excellence is encouraged, we can't let stereotypes continue to be a barrier. We need to educate beyond stereotypes, so that all students can have an equal opportunity for success in school.

For Making Waves Youth Radio, I'm Mariah Doze.