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editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

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Nasir, Na'ilah Suad. (2012) *Racialized Identities: Race and Achievement among African American Youth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

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Reviewed by Stephanie Nicole Robinson
Walden University

Racialized Identities is based on the case study research of Na'ilah Suad Nasir with collaboration from other researchers. The book is similar in nature to the work of Joel Perlmann (1976) and Howard Ralph Weisz (1976) who maintained that there was a connection between racial or ethnic cultural values and academic achievement. The book differs from the previous works because it is not a comparative study among several racial and ethnic groups and the research does not include information regarding familial expectations of academic achievement. The book's thesis is that high school students' racialized identity as African Americans impacts their school achievement. The researchers used observations of extracurricular activities such as playing dominoes and participating in sports as well as students attending classes and interviews from focus groups as evidence. Two types

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of racialized identities emerged from the research: thug and school oriented (p. 90). Thugs were gangsters who spoke African American Vernacular English, did not do well in school, and listened to hip hop music (pp. 13, 91). They also wore baggy jeans, oversized t-shirts, and baseball caps (p. 91). School oriented African Americans did well in school, recognized racism, and linked their identity to the present African American community and slavery (pp. 13-16, 62-63, 99-100, 130). The book concludes by suggesting that school achievement can be increased if positive racial identities are supported with relational resources such as role models, ideational resources which emphasized the importance of education, and material resources which included textbooks, teachers, and other school resources (pp. 136-140).

Racialized Research

Many of the situations were labeled as “racialized” incidents because the people involved were African American although race was not mentioned by any of the participants. For example, coach and athlete interactions, and a game of Dominoes were observed by the researchers. The researchers wrote, “In fact, these practices were racialized such that African American racialized identity was often viewed as being congruent with participation in these activities; this congruence was reflected in both the cultural history of these practices in the African American community and in the nature of talk among the participants” (p. 34). The activities had nothing to do with racialized identities because they are not limited to African Americans. Track and field and basketball are popular sports in the United States and abroad. Dominoes is a board game that is popular in the international community and believed to have originated in China (Dominoes-Games.Com). Participation in sports and in the playing of board games does not reflect the cultural history of African Americans. An older person mentoring younger people is a common occurrence for all races. Because African American Vernacular English was used in the conversations, the interactions were perceived to be racialized. The researchers assumed the role of translators. In reality, African American Vernacular English is not a shared language. Like slang, it is very specific to a generation, neighborhood, or a group of youth. It is an insider language used to fit in with peers and to

communicate in such a way that adults or outsiders will not understand what is being said. The words and phrases also have an expiration date. There are multiple meanings for the same words and phrases. *Urban Dictionary* (1999) is an online resource where readers can post entries for African American Vernacular English words and phrases. Some of the entries have multiple pages for the same words and phrases. A language is supposed to be common to everyone using that language so that everyone understands it and can communicate using it. In a language, words can become uncommon but generally do not expire. Using uncommon words in a language does not promote ridicule for saying something that is old fashioned as it does when using slang. The worst consequence for using an antiquated word is someone asking for a definition. The premise that these were racialized interactions which promoted learning without conflicting with identity was not supported. The chapter does provide evidence to support the idea that learning can occur if feedback is given to bolster performance. Reinforcing expected behavior with positive feedback and correcting negative behavior or a shortcoming in athletic performance is not a racial interaction even if all of the participants involved are African American.

Race and School Achievement

The case study research that was conducted within the different schools was more explicit in its discussion of race than those conducted on extracurricular activities. Students were actually making references to race while at school. They were also specifically asked to discuss race by the researchers. Because the high school students did not cite racism as a reason not to achieve in school, they are accused of being meritocratic or color blind (p. 80-81). They are not color blind because they are discussing race so they are not blind to race. African American students also acknowledged racial inequalities in regards to how society and how some school administrators treated them when they get into trouble (pp. 70, 76). Since African American students are interacting with other races at school, they can relate on some level to the experiences of others and the possibility that others could also suffer from racism. One student remarked “Everybody gets mistreated shouldn’t say it’s because I’m black...you gonna treat me like whatever whatever, it’s just like that for everybody.

You shouldn't feel singled out. Black people shouldn't feel singled out because it happened to everybody" (p. 79). The researchers asked African American students questions about the racial composition of students enrolled in advanced placement classes and whether or not race is related to success in school (p.80). The students answered that everyone has a chance to be successful at school and there was an opportunity to enroll in advanced placement classes regardless of race (pp. 71, 80). At one of the high schools, it was noted that high school administrators encouraged students to enroll in advanced placement classes based on their potential to do well rather than their past academic achievement thus removing other restrictions which commonly hinder access to advanced placement courses (p. 89). There was no evidence that racially based tracking was occurring at any of the high schools mentioned in the book. In spite of its shortcomings, school was viewed as a safe place for students of all races (pp. 64, 89). The students trusted their teachers and administrators not to have ulterior motives to deny them equal educational opportunities because they are African Americans.

Societal Stereotypes in Schools

African American high school students were then observed to see how they used stereotypes to discuss race (p. 64). The researchers also argue that students positioned themselves as gangsters, girlfriends of gangsters, or scholars (pp. 92, 96, 124). Both points were subject to interpretation. One of the examples looked like a game of playing the dozens which is a part of African American cultural history. Playing the dozens is when teasing and mild insults are used in a light hearted humorous exchange (Fullwood III, 2011). In the incident which was attributed to embracing stereotypes, a student asked another student, "Why you eatin' that Snickers bar like a slave?You know how slaves used to have to eat out of their hands and stuff" while the other students laughed (p. 65). There was a similar incident when a man teased another man about wearing baggy pants saying he had a pocket full of rocks which is why his pants won't stay up but this was called social commentary (p. 55). Both examples can be called playing the dozens. They were not serious conversations meant to degrade or teach anyone anything. The

participants in both examples were using African American comedic traditions to entertain themselves.

There was another example which was used to show how students used stereotyping in schools. “Catherine began to sing, and when her peer asked why she was singing, she responded, ‘Because I’m black.’ A few moments later she chastised her classmates using similar language: ‘Ya’ll too black... [you’re] uncivilized’ (p. 65). It was interpreted by the researchers as the acceptance of stereotypes. It could also be perceived that Catherine was comfortable using the word, “Black.” Catherine also sounds a little sarcastic when she said she sang because she was Black. The use of sarcasm served to eliminate follow up questions. There was no suitable follow up response to her statement. Stating “because I’m Black” is also stronger than saying, “cause I am being me and I want to sing.” Why speculate about what Catherine meant when she could have been asked by the researchers for clarification? In the second comment, Catherine was telling her classmates that they are behaving like stereotypes. She was aware of African Americans stereotypes but it did not mean that she embraced them. Admittedly I was perplexed by the meaning of her statement. After all, how does one act too black? Are there degrees of blackness? In this instance, Catherine seemed to be using a stereotypical concept in the conversation with her peers. The idea of acting black is perpetuated by White Hollywood filmmakers (Fontaine, 2011). This concept is satirized in the 1987 movie, *Hollywood Shuffle* directed by Robert Townsend in a scene called Black Acting School where black actors are taught how to act like Black people by White instructors.

When the researchers asked African American students “What does it mean to be black?” the answers varied according to the point of view assumed by the students. The question was not specific in regards to according to whom. Some students discussed the answer from the point of view of the government and talked about the categories listed for race on forms (p. 67). Some answered from the point of view of White society and mentioned stereotypes (p. 68). Others responded from their own point of view and their personal experiences. One student remarked, “You act just like anybody else, ain’t nothing different about you. Ain’t nothing different about being Mexican, black, white, Japanese, or whatever” (p. 78). The answers

depended on how the person interpreted the question. The data were interpreted as African American students held conflicting notions about race (p. 81). Everyone heard the same question but did not comprehend it in same manner. The ambiguous nature of the question produced inconsistent results.

Thug and School Oriented

Thug and school oriented were binaries used throughout the book to categorized African American high school students. There were no students included in the book who had a typical high school experience having no discipline problems, passing all of their courses, and participating in clubs and sports. There was also no mention of how parents, family, or religious beliefs shape identity. The evidence provided was contradictory. Thugs and school oriented students dressed the same and had other overlapping characteristics. For example, Claude was described as a thug who did not attend class, shot dice in the hallway, and wore layers of oversized t-shirts and jeans (p.91). Jasmine was college bound, lived in the ghetto, had disciplinary problems, used drugs, was a former prostitute, and did not regularly attend class (p. 118). Alonzo was the salutatorian of his high school and wore large t-shirts and baggy jeans, listened to hip hop and used African American Vernacular English (p. 99). A student's grades can easily slip given a change of circumstances such as the case with Victor when he was transferred into an advanced placement classes several weeks after the course started (p. 114). As his grades fell, he became less engaged in class but he was not from the ghetto nor was he a thug (p. 112-116). The binaries presented in the book also overlooked youth culture. Youth culture determines how a generation dresses, talks, and the type of music that will be popular during a certain period of time. In the 1990's when the research for the book was conducted, baggy jeans, certain types of slang, gangster rap, and hip hop music were popular among teenagers of all races (Chun, 2001; Stillman, 2007; Spirer, 2005).

Recommendations and Implications for Schools

One of the recommendations in the book for teachers is the use of scaffolding but scaffolding can be difficult at the

high school level where classes can be overcrowded and students can enter and exit courses at different points in the course (pp. 114, 133). It seems like a partnership with local universities to add a lab to their teaching practicum courses can assist teachers with scaffolding. Pre-service teacher education students could be assigned a small case load about 5 students per course. In the lab, they can learn to create an individualized education plan and apply teaching strategies while being supervised by university faculty and a practicing high school teacher. The high school department chair or a group organized within a department could also be used at schools that have high teacher turnover or excessive teacher absenteeism.

Teacher education programs can benefit by adding a lab to their practicum courses because it can show the effects of teaching on student learning. High school teachers can receive assistance with students who are having academic difficulties. High school students can gain more individualized instruction and intervention outside of the classroom which can positively impact academic achievement (Kopp and Farr, 2011, pp. 23, 25, and 27). Pre-service teacher education students can gain practical teaching experience working to equip them with the knowledge and skills to work with diverse populations in supervised learning environments while earning college credit. To resolve issues with continuity, the lab could be part of a class having two parts which would allow the same pre-service teacher education student to work with the same group of high school students for the entire school year or the length of a high school course. High school students can then be assigned to another pre-service teacher education student for each subsequent course or the same if possible until they graduate, reach or exceed proficiency, or met the required number of years for study within the subject.

Other recommendations in the book focused on increasing resources which can be an obstacle for schools facing budget cuts (pp. 147-164). However, there were observations about learning in community-based activities which schools could be used to increase achievement. Nasir wrote: “Two critical features of community-based activities characterize successful learning settings for African American students. First, community-based activities where successful learning occurs are organized

in ways that support students' sense of safety, belonging and identification, self-esteem, respect, and competence ...Second, these settings often incorporate important scaffolds that support the learning and performance of novices....”(p. 33). Drop in tutoring and mentoring programs staffed by volunteers can be used to provide academic and social support. Some schools combine the two support systems in programs such as Second Chance, a program developed for an inner city school where the students were underachieving and had disciplinary problems (Thomas-El and Murphey, 2003, pp. 105-110). Volunteers from the local university who want to perform community service and the members of the local community such as retirees or church groups could be used to provide services before school, during lunch periods and after school. Ideally a core group of regular volunteers could be created.

Volunteers should be screened as rigorously as anyone entering a school interacting with students undergoing police background checks and drug tests for safety. An application, interview and transcripts could be required for quality assurance. To increase the frequency evaluation and immediate feedback in school settings as suggested by the book, a brief report of the session could be submitted to the teacher from the tutor or mentor. A short form with basic student demographic information, time and date, and concerns and actions taken during the session can be used as a template for the report (p. 134).

The stories included in the book also depicted the need for the school administration to provide an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. Nasir commented that “In one hallway on the third floor, gambling and smoking marijuana were common during school hours” (p. 98). She witnessed this as a researcher visiting the school but it indicated a need for someone to patrol the hallways and grounds. She also noted that students were walking out of classes at their own discretion. She wrote that a student named Jasmine “left classes that she viewed as being unproductive to complete work for other classes” (p. 120). She also noticed students joining other classes in which they were not enrolled (p. 98). The school administration at these schools should be responsible for knowing the whereabouts of the students at their schools. School administrators should also work with local law

enforcement for assistance to keep drugs off of school grounds.

The stories presented in the book can give pre-service teachers and students enrolled in school administration programs, insight into social and school-related issues which impact academic achievement in urban school systems. Chapters 6 and 7 contain recommendations based on historical studies of African American schooling and achievement but there is more recent research on successful urban schools that could be used to supplement these chapters. Due to the lack of corroborating evidence and the subjective nature of the data, a clear relationship between African American youth having a racialized identity and its impact on school achievement was not established in the book.

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About the Reviewer

Stephanie Robinson, faculty member of the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University. She earned her PhD and MA in educational policy studies from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Her research interests include multicultural education, immigrant education, and issues of race, class, gender in education. She has served as a peer reviewer for several publications including, *Multimedia Education Resource for Learning and Online Teaching* and the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. She is the author of Robinson, S.N. (2004). *History of Immigrant Female Students in Chicago Public Schools, 1900-1950*. New York: Peter Lang.

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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
