

Introduction

THIS BOOK is about identity processes and their relation to learning and schooling as they play out in the lives of African American youth.¹ It is a culmination of, and reflection on, years of research inside and outside of schools and draws on findings from several studies of African American adolescents. Some of these studies focused on the learning and identity that were afforded in out-of-school settings, such as basketball, dominoes, and track and field. Other studies explored the ways that identity processes took shape in schools—almost always urban schools, which struggled to establish an intellectual culture and build the infrastructure and practices to support students' academic potential.

My research on the identities of African American students takes place against a backdrop of widespread inequity in our schools nationally. Schools attended by African American students tend to be characterized by lower grading standards, less (and less deep) coverage of curriculum material, and less money spent per pupil and are more likely to be in physical disrepair (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2010; Ferguson, 2007; Oakes, 2004; Orfield, 2001). Teachers in such schools are less likely to be credentialed, are newer to the profession, and are more likely to teach by “drill-and-kill” methods (Darling-Hammond, Williamson, and Hyster, 2008; Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2002). To make matters worse, both

communities and schools are increasingly segregated, perpetuating and intensifying the unequal distribution of resources and the concentration of poverty (Kozol, 2005; Massey, 2007; Orfield, 2001).

Not surprisingly, given the unequal playing field, African American students are more likely than their white and Asian American peers to drop out before graduating from high school (Balfanz and Letgers, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007), score lower on standardized tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), take fewer advanced placement courses (Gamoran, 1992; Oakes, 2004), and are less likely to attend college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Achievement differences by race begin as early as the fourth grade and persist all the way through college. By the twelfth grade, African American students are about four years behind white and Asian American students (Haycock, Jerald, and Huang, 2001). The national graduation rate for African American male students is around 47 percent, compared with 78 percent for white male students. (Schott Foundation, 2010). Clearly, race is an important consideration in understanding national achievement patterns among African American students.

However, I am ambivalent about reporting (yet again) these widespread patterns of educational inequity by race. On the one hand, I think it is important to acknowledge the full extent of the challenge that African American students face as they seek to be educated in public schools in the United States. On the other hand, I worry that these achievement patterns have become one of the primary ways we frame the conversation around academic achievement and schooling for African American students—leaving African American students and communities to be defined by relative lack and ignoring the myriad of strengths and tremendous resilience that exist in urban schools and African American communities (Gutierrez, 2008; Lee, 2008; Martin, 2009; Spencer, 2008).

In this book, therefore, I not only focus on the challenges that social and educational stratification pose for youths' identities and access to learning but also highlight the possibilities for positive learning and identity trajectories. I view learning and identity simultaneously as individual processes that involve agency and personal sense-making and as social processes deeply influenced by social context, norms, and interactions with others in learning settings.

Critical to my work has been attending to both the individual learning and identity processes in which young people are engaged and the social, cultural, and institutional spaces in which these processes take place. Students' constructions of themselves racially and academically are deeply and profoundly influenced by the multiple settings that students negotiate daily, including but not limited to school settings, neighborhood settings, and families. Students' identities are also influenced by the broader societal context that perpetuates racial inequities on multiple levels and constrains identity choices for African American youth. In particular, media portrayals and stereotypes of African American youth may have important implications for the identity choices African American youth perceive for themselves (Spencer, 2006).

It is a fascinating time in our nation's history to study race and identity for African Americans. As I write this, the United States of America has just sworn in its first African American president. Some have argued that this event marked or punctuated a transition to a "postracial" America, where race is no longer a determinant for experience or opportunity (Blackwell, Kwoh, and Pastor, 2002; Steele, 2008). And yet, days before the inauguration, an unarmed twenty-two-year-old African American man, Oscar Grant, was shot to death while handcuffed and lying on the ground by a transit police officer in Oakland, California (Bulwa, Buchanan, and Yi, 2009). No action was taken against the officer until people took to the streets in protest. Months later, he was found guilty of manslaughter. This contradiction between being the first largely white nation to elect an African American man as president and being a country where an African American man can still lose his life because of police brutality is striking. As Blackwell, Kwoh, and Pastor (2002) note, "While there have been economic and social gains among people of color in the latter part of the 20th century, inequity remains a facet of the American social order" (48). It is a time both of great promise and of the manifestation of age-old stereotypes about African Americans.

The election of Barack Obama also raised several relevant and interesting dilemmas about race. Some debated whether Obama was African American at all, given the fact that his mother was white. Others worried about the ways that his campaign approached the issue of race, or failed to approach it. Steele (2008) argued that Obama's sophisticated use of

race and triggering of white racial guilt led to his election, but even very conservative Steele concluded that the racial inequities in our country are pressing and are unlikely to be resolved by the Obama presidency. The controversy over the use of race in the Obama campaign, and over Obama's personal racial identity (what makes him black or "not black enough?"), signals some of the important concerns with which this book wrestles.

In this book, I attempt to portray the complexity of identity as it occurs in both school and out-of-school settings, the ways that these settings make identities available to young African Americans, and the ways that students make choices about who they are and who they want to be. I consider learning identities, academic identities, and racialized identities, as well as the interactions among them. At times, the data make apparent the ways in which African American students are struggling to integrate these multiple identities. At other times, the data illustrate how students resolve the racialized/academic identity struggles that are so prominent in the media and in the scholarly literature, and how learning settings can be organized such that these struggles are not posed so extremely for students.

Race is a particularly challenging aspect of identity to study because it is lived and enacted subtly on multiple levels of experience. One challenge in studying race (particularly in relation to individuals) is the trouble that comes with assuming that members of racial groups are homogenous—in other words, essentializing. When we essentialize, we oversimplify the construct of race and fail to address the nuance and complexity that are inherent in the multiple ways we live race (Davidson, 1996; Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2005; Skinner and Schafer, 2009). One resolution to this problem may be to understand that the racial boxes we use for the purposes of categorization are not deterministic; rather, they are rough ways of indexing the cultural practices and experiences of people in this highly racialized society. It is in this spirit that I use racial categories in this book. In other words, I assume both regularity within groups and variability (Gutiérrez, 2004; Lee, 2007).

Throughout this book, I use the term "racialized" identities, rather than "racial" identities. In my view, the term "racialized identities" signals my underlying assumption about the fluidity and social construction of racial boundaries. Keating (1995) draws on Omi and Winant (1994) and critical race theorists to argue that the continued use of racial categories

to describe and define people perpetuates the assumption that race is a sociobiological concept and fails to problematize the racist roots of racial categorization. She issues a caution: “theorists who attempt to deconstruct ‘race’ often inadvertently reconstruct it by reinforcing the belief in permanent, separate racial categories. Although they emphasize the artificial, politically and economically motivated nature of all racial classifications, their continual analysis of racialized identities undercuts their belief that ‘race’ is a constantly changing sociohistorical concept, not a biological fact” (902). While I wholeheartedly agree that we must be careful about the ways that our work can reinforce existing racial hierarchies and boundaries, I also find that failing to discuss, describe, and account for issues of race in learning settings and educational processes renders us blind to the ways that racialization can play an important role in learning and schooling. Thus, my use of the term “racialized identities” is an effort to honor the idea that race (and thus racial identities) is not an inherent category but rather is *made racial* through social interaction, positioning, and discourse. These identities are continually reinforced and reinvented as researchers write about and study students.

Skinner and Schafer (2009) view this attention to racialized identities and the construction and maintenance of racial boundaries (which are part and parcel of how these identities are constructed in social settings) as key to our understanding of the experience of racial subjects in school settings. They argue, “We must pay close attention to the ways in which racial identities (or identifications), knowledge, and power are produced within educational institutions structured by ever-changing forms of racial oppression” (277). Thus, a focus on racialized identities in school settings is an important aspect of understanding how power and privilege are reproduced in such settings. However, we must be careful about reproducing assumptions about racial homogeneity and essentializing.

For example, one of the reasons why I chose to study basketball in my work on learning is because it is a common practice in the African American community. I do not, however, assume that all black people play basketball, although it can be conceptualized as a racialized practice, in that it is viewed in society as signaling African American racial group membership and identity. As another example, when I study African American racialized identity, I do make the assumption that such a thing

as African American racialized identity exists and that it can be studied. Yet, I am careful to define the content of that identity as my research participants see it and to understand that there will be tremendous variation in what being African American means to people. I study race in a range of ways, from students' explicit articulation of what racial group membership means, to the ways that certain cultural practices are assumed to be aligned with particular racial groups.

This book addresses several critical gaps in the existing research literature and popular conversation about race, identity, and learning for African American students. First, the literature is abundant with descriptions of the identities and achievement of African American students when identity *does not* support learning (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986); however, we know less about what it looks like when identities and learning *are* aligned in schools or other cultural practices. I attempt to understand the nature of this alignment of social identity and learning and the characteristics of learning settings that foster it.

Second, current views of culture, race, and identity too often portray these as global, stable traits and less often highlight their local and fluid dimensions. I attend in this book to the local and fluid nature of culture, race, and identity, offering data and analyses that acknowledge change over time and over social spaces.

Third, current psychological measures of racial/ethnic identity often highlight the extent of racial group affiliation but do not explore variation with respect to what racialized identity *means* for people. A smaller set of studies does focus on the content of racialized identity but asks about the presence or absence of particular content, rather than understanding racialized identity from the perspective of the youth themselves (Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke, 1998; Shelton and Sellers, 2000). This work also falls short in acknowledging the ways that we, as a society, racialize (or make racial) certain identities in certain kinds of ways. In the chapters that follow, I pay particular attention to variations in racialized identities for youth and on how youth understand their racialized identities compared with their local settings, remembering that these racialized identities are *made* racial by our collective understandings of race.

Fourth, there is a shortage in the literature of contextualized accounts of racialized and academic identities in schools and classrooms—

that is, research that helps us understand the role of schools in supporting or not supporting particular identities (a notable exception to this is the work of Davidson [1996], which is more than ten years old). I not only examine the role of the local setting in making available particular configurations of racialized and academic identities, I also describe how these settings and the people in them accomplish this work.

And finally, there are few accounts of the role of stereotypes (or racial narratives) in students' racialized identities and of the connections between youths' endorsement of stereotypes and their academic achievement and learning. I explore this role and these connections.

It is my hope that this book contributes to the body of research on identity and learning for African American students and helps us better understand how learning and identity processes inform schooling and how they take shape as students engage a range of learning settings in and out of school.

Expanding the Conversation on African American Learners

In addition to enriching what we know about identities and their relation to learning, this book seeks to expand the conversation that currently dominates research on African American students. Too often, African American student learning and achievement is framed too simply as a problem of "achievement gaps" (Burris and Welner, 2005; Gutierrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Viadero and Johnston, 2001) or "oppositional identities" (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Tatum, 1992). When framed as a problem of achievement gaps, researchers most often ask, *Why are the black kids achieving less well than the white (or Asian) kids?* This question has led to a range of answers, from Eurocentric and deficit-oriented theories about African American families and communities to indictments of core inequalities in schools and society (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Grubb and Lazerson, 2004; Haycock, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006). When framed as a problem of oppositional identities, researchers ask, *To what extent do the black kids have identities by which they define school as "white" or themselves as not students?* In search of answers to this question, researchers have studied the ways African Amer-

ican students think about themselves and school and have articulated challenges with developing strong racial and academic identities (Carter, 2008; Graham, Taylor, and Hudley, 1998; Mikelson and Velasco, 2006; Morghan and Mehta, 2004; Osbourne, 1997; Tyson, Daroty, and Castellino, 2005). Research on African American students has largely been limited to these two framings.

At one level these framings are informative and useful, but limiting our inquiry to these two lenses is problematic because they both perpetuate what Perry (2003) and Martin (2009) have argued is a “master-narrative” about African American students in both scholarly and popular writing about education and race. By master-narrative, they mean the “dominant stories told by those in power from positions of privilege” that exist in the broader society (Martin, 2009, 8). That is, neither of these ways of framing African American student learning and achievement challenges the ways that our society thinks about and defines blackness—including viewing blackness as oppositional to whiteness and viewing African American students as not intellectually capable and not culturally prepared for achievement. Akom (2008), Lee (2008), and Spencer (2008) remind us that implicit in these portrayals of blackness are longstanding and deeply held hegemonic and normative beliefs about whiteness. And the vast literature on racial stereotypes confirms these aspects of the master-narrative regarding African American students (Devine and Elliott, 1995; Krueger, 1996; Hudley and Graham, 2001).

In this book, I attempt to offer a different angle on the issues facing African American students and their communities with respect to education by highlighting processes of identity and exploring the variety of ways they play out in and across learning settings. I do not adopt a frame that compares black students with white students, with white students representing the norm. I do not view African American students or their communities as problems. But perhaps most important, I hope to challenge in multiple ways common assumptions about African American students and the overwhelming focus in research on individual students’ pathology rather than on the ways that our society organizes for the success of some and the failure of others (Varenne and McDermott, 1998).

Although clearly this book is about African American students, I don’t view it as being *just* about African American students; rather, I am

using African American students as a case with which to explore core questions about the nature of identity, the fundamental ways that identities are linked to social contexts, and the implications of these links for teaching and creating optimal learning environments.

In the chapters that follow, I draw on data from students who have found success in school and students who have not. However, rather than focus on the individual characteristics or adaptations that make students more or less successful, I focus on the organization of learning environments and the ways in which settings create more or less access to identities as learners. I take as central how broader societal institutions, norms, and structures come into play in relation to access to learning settings and identities as learners. Thus, this book wrestles with several critical questions:

- How can we understand the relation between processes of learning and processes of identity? How are identities and learning related for African American students as they take part in school and/or community-based learning settings?
- How do learning settings make identities available to students, and how are certain identities made available and not others?
- What role do racialized identities play in engagement in school learning settings for African American students, and how can we conceptualize these racialized identities in ways that are not oversimplified or essentialized?

Through addressing these questions, I hope to contribute to our conceptual understanding of learning and identity processes as being linked in fundamental ways to culture and context. I also hope to add to the conversation on the relation between identities and achievement for African American students and deeply consider what resources local contexts offer as students seek to learn and to establish a sense of self.

I rely on qualitative accounts of identity in this book; that is, I discuss identity by drawing primarily on interview, observational, and case study data. I do so largely because qualitative data support the portrayal of the kind of nuance and complexity of identities and learning that I hope to describe.

Overview of the Text

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical groundwork and guiding assumptions of this book and orients the reader to the scholarly conversation to which this book seeks to contribute. Chapter 2 describes interactions between learning and identity processes in learning settings outside of school and highlights the ways in which these settings provide resources for learning identities to African American youth. I also consider the relationship between racialized identities and learning in these spaces.

Chapter 3 is the first of three chapters that take up the relation between engagement and achievement in school and students' racialized identities. In it I explore students' perspectives on what it means to be African American, attending to the contradictions and complexities in their conceptions of race and racialized identity. I also attend to how they talk about stereotypes in relation to blackness. In Chapter 4, I describe two very different configurations of the relation between racialized identities and academic identities and explore how the school context supports each. In Chapter 5, I examine the racialized and academic identity configurations of students who are in the midst of managing multiple conflicting racialized and academic identities, illustrating the complexity and multifaceted nature of identity.

Chapter 6 highlights important themes across the previous chapters, including the linking of learning to students' developing social identities, the ways that identities and learning processes support one another as young people participate in social and cultural activities, and the complexity of racialized identities and the ways they interact with learning identities. Finally, Chapter 7 considers the implications of this work for classroom teachers and articulates several important lessons for teaching practice, interactions with students, and the design of learning environments.

I hope that this book comes close to doing justice to the full humanity and perspectives of the students whom I have studied and that it contributes to the scholarly conversation about race, learning, and identity. I also hope my research and perspectives foster a conversation in the field that honors the complexity of identity processes and their relation to learning and acknowledges the ways that we, as a society, fail to develop

the potential of so many African American youth as we perpetuate debilitating stereotypes about who they can become. Furthermore, I hope this book serves as a call for more people to attend to the multiple ways that race influences the learning experiences and outcomes of African American youth and to take up the formidable challenge of providing positive, supportive, enriching learning spaces for young people.

Note

1. Throughout this book, I use the terms “African American” and “black” interchangeably.