Paper

Human Development 2012;55:285–301
DOI: 10.1159/000345318

Human Development

Racial Storylines and Implications for Learning

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Key Words
African American students · Learning · Racial stereotypes

Abstract
In this article, we theorize the relation between race and schooling and consider the implications for learning. While the body of research on culture and learning has come to define learning as an inherently cultural and social process, scholars have few theoretical tools to help us think about the role of race and racism in relation to students' access to identities as learners and to learning. We draw on both theoretical and empirical literature to make three core arguments: (a) racial 'storylines' or narratives are prevalent in our society and have powerful implications for learners, particularly for youth from marginalized communities; (b) these racial storylines are a critical aspect of life in schools, which serve the purpose of racially and academically socializing students; and (c) as these storylines are invoked in school settings, certain identities are made available, imposed, or closed down. Such identities have important implications for students' opportunities to learn and their engagement in learning settings. As we conclude, we consider the potential of alternative spaces, which can serve to counter dominant narratives about who is capable of learning and how learning takes place, and open new spaces for identity and learning.

In recent years, scholarship in education has made strides in thinking about culture in relation to learning [Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lee, 2007], and schooling as a racialized process [Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 2005]. For instance, the work of Cole [1996], Lee [2003, 2007], Gutiérrez and Rogoff [2003],

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and Nasir [2002, 2010] and colleagues has conceptualized schools and classrooms as cultural spaces, where the cultural practices and repertoires that children encounter outside of school can be important to the learning process in school. Research on equity in education has demonstrated that vast racial inequalities still exist in schools at multiple individual and institutional levels, across classrooms, schools, and districts [Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2003; Irvine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Noguera, 1995; Oakes, 2005; Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004]. Scholars have also theorized the role of race and racism in relation to this stratification [Carter, 2005; Leonardo, 2009; Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2004]. While researchers have routinely documented that race and racism can have detrimental effects on the socioemotional development of young people and negatively influence their academic performance and access to important resources for health and well-being [Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006; Neblett, Philips, Cogburn, & Sellars, 2006], much less is known about how race and racialized experiences might influence learning. The focus of this paper is to synthesize what we know about race, racism and schooling, and to consider how race and racism might influence the learning process.

When we say *learning*, we are referring to the process by which learners take up new information, acquire and deepen conceptual understandings of subject matter, and come to understand the natural and social world in new ways. This is related to but distinct from academic achievement, which highlights attaining markers of success (such as high grades) but does not necessarily integrate or appropriate academic content. Our perspective on learning is aligned with sociocultural approaches to learning, which purport that the learning process is fundamentally linked to social and cultural processes and identities in the learning setting [Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, & Angelillo, 1993; Saxe, 1991].

In this article we explore how race may influence students' access to a sense of themselves as learners and their opportunities to learn. Identity is an important mediator in one's access to learning in that learning requires engagement which is facilitated by students' identities within learning settings. We highlight racial stereotypes or 'storylines' as being central, although it is important to note that we do not limit our definition of racial storylines simply to ideas that people encounter and decide either to take up or not. Storylines are not just what people carry around in their heads; they get enacted in social interactions in schools and classrooms as students are positioned (and position themselves) as learners or as certain kinds of learners [Nasir & Shah, 2011].

Specifically, we argue that the relation between race, racism, and learning might be understood as three related processes: (a) racial storylines are pervasive in our societal discourse; (b) racial storylines are a critical aspect of life in schools, and they serve the purpose of socializing students racially and academically; and (c) as these racial storylines are invoked, certain identities are made available, imposed, or closed down, and influence the engagement and learning in school settings. We begin with an example of one student, Bradford, who was a participant in a recent study of the experiences of African American male students in a northern California school district and whose experience illustrates how these three processes work together to influence engagement and learning in school.

The Case of Bradford

Bradford was an African American male student in the ninth grade in a large public high school. While discussing the obstacles he faced as a Black male in his school, he shared his perspective that the way that African Americans are perceived by the world detrimentally impacts the way they are received. He said:

> Cause, they probably still on the prejudice side … sayin umm, stereotyping Black people. … he's gonna be a ratchet ghetto person. Umm, and he's gonna make umm, my job, my school seem like it's low down so, I'm not going to have him in my school. So they think Black people are dirty and low-down.

Bradford articulated what he viewed as a racial storyline about African Americans that affects how they are able to move in the world. He also saw this storyline as playing out in key ways in his school. When asked about what it is like to be a Black male at his school, he said: 'Gotta face a lot of umm, gotta face a lot of, prejudice, gotta face a lot of umm, struggles, because they're not, just gonna pass you, umm even though you're making good grades.' He went on to say that while White or Asian students' primary concern is to keep their grades up in order to get into college, African Americans face a number of other challenges that make academic success more daunting. Where White students are free to wear any clothing style (even those associated with urban youth, like 'sagging' their pants), Black students do not have the same freedom to experiment with identity. The racial storylines about who Black people are – particularly when they subscribe to certain forms of dress or body language – socialize students about the kinds of racial and academic identities available to them.

Bradford also articulated the ways that being stereotyped in school can affect the opportunities he has to establish himself as a good student. He recalled an instance where he and a White male partner submitted the same work. He received a 'C' while his partner received an 'A.' He attributed this to racial prejudice. He also described an interaction after the conclusion of the class in which the teacher remarked on his being a dancer but did not mention his academic work. This signaled to Bradford that he was valued for his physical contributions but not for his academic ones. Bradford also described attempting to sign up for an Advanced Placement class and being initially denied by a teacher. He attributed this to 'prejudice … yeah that, they don't want me to be successful … in college, and unsuccessful in school in general.'

Although Bradford was able to gain entry into the advanced class after much lobbying, he felt as though he was fighting a battle that not everyone had to face. He was fighting a battle against the identity the school offered him. Unfortunately, his ability to understand and articulate this conflict did not preclude his being affected by it. Here Bradford sums up the effect on him as a student:

Bradford:	I mean I could understand, you saying you can do better than this, but don't say, that you're, that you're gonna fail or something like that, cause that's gonna make you think, since it's in your head, and like, it's like reverse psychology … if it's in your head, then you're gonna fail.
Interviewer:	Uh huh.
Bradford:	Say you're an 'F' student and I'ma try and be a 'F' student … say you're an 'A' student, I'ma be, I'ma try an be 'A' student.

Bradford argues here that the expectation of failure creates failure while high expectations create success. Bradford's story, then, illustrates the three processes that we will describe in more detail in this article. He articulates the pervasive nature of *negative racial storylines in society*, and he describes how these *storylines exist and are acted out in schools*. These storylines then socialize students to a particular way of thinking about race and schooling, thus *making certain racial and academic identities more or less available* and, thus, opening up or closing down opportunities to engage as a learner.

Three Key Processes

In articulating these three processes, we seek to move across multiple levels of analysis because the impact of racial storylines on learning spaces and individuals can only be understood as an interaction between social ideas and ideologies, institutional and cultural practices, and individual sense-making processes and goals. In doing so, we follow in the footsteps of other scholars [Cole, 1996; Lemke, 2000; Saxe & Esmonde, 2005] who have argued that processes at one level of analysis often shape and fundamentally interact with processes at other levels.

In this paper, we address each of the three processes by describing the nature of racial storylines, the ways they are manifested in schools, and how they may influence young people's identities and engagement in learning settings. We also reflect on how these processes might affect the learning process itself. As we do so, we build on scholarship and data[1] on the experience of African American students in particular because they are the group that is discussed most often in the classic literatures on race, racial socialization, and racial stereotypes. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the ways that alternative school and out-of-school settings have sought to support students in developing adaptive counter-narratives, which allow them to reject the common negative racial storylines, reauthor their identities in positive and productive ways, and engage in learning settings more deeply.

Conceptualizing Racial Storylines

> Terell: Well, [to] tell you the truth black men got it hard. 'Cause there's a lot of stereotypes that you know, that people see and it's like we – we're just – basically like what they see on the news and that type – that's basically what they think about all people. But not all people, but not all African Americans, like, we're just not, we're not good for nothing. That's what they basically saying. To me its different. Like, you know we not, with – everybody is not the same. He might kill him, but I'm not gonna kill him. Like, just because that guy rob you does not mean I'm gonna rob you. It's okay to have your guard up all the time but it's also not okay to like judge you by how you look and stuff like that. I've had a grill[2] in my mouth, I had – probably be saggin[3], might be the most intelligent man you ever met.

[1] Throughout the paper, we draw on data from a recent study on African American male students' experiences of race in schools to illustrate our model and the processes and theoretical tools that we describe. Since this is primarily a conceptual paper, we will not go into detail about the design of the study or the data collection methods here.

[2] 'Grill' refers to gold fronts worn over the teeth.

[3] 'Sagging' refers to a style of dress where the pants are worn very low on the waist.

In the quote above, Terell, a ninth grade African American male, highlights the racial storylines that are prevalent about Black males in society. Specifically, he points out the criminal or thug stereotype, and argues that someone who seems to embody that stereotype (by having a 'grill') actually may be 'the most intelligent man you've ever met.' Similar to Bradford, Terell is keenly aware of the negative views of African Americans that he perceives others to apply to him.

In the psychological tradition, issues of race have often been studied in terms of attitudes and individual beliefs. Most often, the term commonly used to capture prevalent attitudes and beliefs about race is *stereotypes*, defined as 'mental representations of the characteristics of a particular social or cultural group that are shared among members of a society' [Stangor & Schaller, 1996; cited in Hudley & Graham, 2001, p. 202]. This framing is limited in that it obscures the social nature of racial phenomena and ideas about racial groups. It seems to indicate that stereotypes exist inside of people, and it does not attend to the ways these ideas are rooted in and kept alive through social processes.

An alternate approach is to conceptualize race (and ideas about race) as a discourse, or the totality of expressions, cultural symbols, institutional policies, and relations that run between them [Goldberg, 1993]. Central to racial discourse are racial storylines, which are vehicles for both how individuals make sense of race and how they appropriate and deploy race to position themselves and others in everyday activity.

Common racial storylines in the USA span a variety of social issues and domains, from aesthetics (e.g., 'lighter skin is beautiful'), to work habits (e.g., 'Latina/os are lazy'), to perceptions of intellectual capacity (e.g., 'Asians are smart'), and to physical ability (e.g., 'African Americans are good at sports'). A key attribute of racial storylines is that they are implicitly relational. For example, a narrative about Asians being good at math implies that there must exist other racial groups that are *not* good at maths [Nasir & Shah, 2011]. Similarly, the emergence of the 'model minority' narrative implicitly contrasted Asians against other 'unruly' or less-than-model minorities, namely African Americans and Latina/os [Prashad, 2000; Wu, 2003]. The relational aspects of racial narratives are connected to their social function; racial discourse exists in order to create and maintain racial hierarchies [Goldberg, 1993].

However, racial storylines are not uniform or monolithic; their fluidity opens the possibility for individuals to resist predominant narratives. Individuals who identify with historically marginalized groups often repurpose racial discourse by creating and leveraging *counter-narratives*. For instance, one counter-narrative to typical racial storylines about African Americans might be that the African American community has a long history of fighting for educational access dating back to the intense struggle for literacy during slavery and postemancipation [Anderson, 1988]. Counter-narratives challenge what society takes for granted as common sense about racial and ethnic groups.

Understanding these messages as racial storylines captures the ways that these processes are not simply individual sense-making processes [Hirshfeld, 1998; Smith, Marsh, & Mendoza-Denton, 2010], but rather they are part and parcel of a system of domination that serves to maintain the privilege of some at the expense of others. It also emphasizes the fluid way that these narratives are invoked in local settings such as schools. The prevalence of racial storylines about Black male students in schools is evident in the students' quotes, which articulate common narratives about African

Americans. The prevalence of negative storylines about Black students in general and Black male students in particular as unintelligent, lazy, inclined towards criminality, and as constituting an endangered species is overwhelmingly supported by the research literature [Bobo, 2001; Devine & Elliott, 1995; Schott Foundation, 2010].

Racial Storylines in Schools

Interviewer:	How would you say, your experience as a young Black male here, is you know similar or different then the experience of let's say an Asian male here?
David:	I think they got it easier. I think us as Black we get it harder than they, than what they do.
Interviewer:	Why is that?
David:	Because like, the teachers, not all teachers, but some of these teachers, like they expect us to like get kicked out and, get kicked out of class and mess up and get referrals, but they don't expect the Asians to do that, so if the Asians do that, that's like a big surprise to them. They, they're shocked if that happens. But if for us, they, they see that every day.
Interviewer:	How do you, how do you know, what makes you think that they expect that of you?
David:	I know that, that's for a fact.

The quote above from an interview with David, a ninth grade African American male student, makes clear that the racial narratives that exist in society as a whole are also a standard part of life in schools. Not only do students articulate the ways that they have been positioned in relation to racial narratives in school, but they also locate those schooling experiences with race as a part of the broader set of experiences with racism that comprise the experience of being Black. There is an expansive research literature that articulates the process of people becoming aware of race. This process is generally referred to in the research literature as *racial socialization*.

The Process of Racial Socialization

Scholars have defined racial socialization as the ways in which society, parents, peers, and others convey information about norms and values about race and ethnicity to children [Hughes, Johnson, Smith, Rodriguez, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006]. Individuals and society continually communicate values and storylines (covertly and overtly) about racial and ethnic groups, and such messages have implications for how individuals see themselves in relation to others in society. Racial socialization scholars argue that positive messages about one's race are necessary for people of color to develop a healthy identity and to mitigate the impact of racism [Stevenson, 1994]. Boykin and Toms [1985] conceptualized the process of racial socialization for Black children as including three interconnected components: (a) mainstream socialization in which children are taught to navigate White middle-class norms, (b) minority socialization in which individuals are taught about racism and productive strategies to cope and navigate within racialized contexts, and (c) cultural socialization in which children are taught about Black cultural and social traditions.

Different forms of racial socialization have different consequences with respect to identity and outcomes. Positive and affirming messages about one's race have been found to positively influence the individual's social emotional development in many ways, including one's racial identity [Demo & Hughes, 1990; Marshall, 1995], self-esteem [Constantine & Blackmon, 2002], academic performance [Bowman & Howard, 1985], and ability to cope with racism [Brown, 2008; Scott, 2003]. Alternatively, negative messages about one's race have been found to lead to less positive perceptions about one's racial group or groups, lower academic preparation, and less adaptive methods for coping with racism [Bowman & Howard, 1985; Demo & Hughes, 1990].

While the bulk of research on racial socialization has focused on the family as a social context for learning about race [Bowman & Howard, 1985; Hughes et al., 2006], much less research has focused on understanding how schools become contexts for racial socialization. However, scholars studying racism in schools have discussed how children come to develop a sense of racial consciousness and how educational environments influence this consciousness [Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2004].

Racial Storylines as a Means of Racial and Academic Socialization

Schools serve as institutions in which messages about race are made available, resisted, taken up, or contested. This occurs both at the level of the way schools are organized structurally and as a part of teacher-student and student-student interactions like those described earlier by Bradford and Terell. As we have noted, messages about race are not *created* in school settings so much as they are filtered, reproduced, reimagined, and enacted there; storylines in schools reflect and build on broader societal storylines.

Racial storylines in schools function as a means of socialization for young people, both with respect to race and with respect to school. Research has documented this process in relation to both young children [Schaffer & Skinner, 2009] and adolescents [Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2004]. In early elementary schools, Schaffer and Skinner [2009] document the range of ways children take up racial categories to position themselves and others. The works illuminated the process of socialization with respect to race (i.e., what it means to be a member of a particular racial group), and with respect to school (i.e., what it means to be a student, and who gets to be what kind of student). The students in their study not only began to draw boundaries around who was in what racial group, but they also learned to attach meaning to membership in those groups.

At the high school level, Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones [2009] report findings from a study of race and identity in a predominantly African American urban high school in which students were coming to understand who they were as African Americans and who they were as students. One mechanism for this socialization was the friendship groups students were a part of; the ways these groups made meaning of what it meant to be African American held implications for what kind of student one was. For example, one group of students identified doing well in school as part and parcel of what it meant to be African American. They saw academic competence and giving back to their community as vital to being Black.

Their study also highlighted how storylines were reinforced or disrupted by institutionally shaped access. Students in the Advanced Placement track had higher-quality teachers, a more rigorous curriculum, access to college tutors, information about college, and they were positioned by teachers and administrators as being college-bound. Another group had little to no access to information about college, had poor-quality teachers, and was not viewed as being headed to college. Thus, the prevailing racial narrative was purposefully recrafted for the first group but not for the second.

In the next section, we consider the implications of these storylines for students' identities (and engagement) in learning settings. In doing so, we conceptualize *how* racial storylines relate to processes of learning and identity.

Racial Storylines, Identity, and Learning

> Arthur: … Say if say if, I raise my hand and then, then the Asian or white person raises his hand, like they would go to the Asian person first and then help the other one later, because they think we gonna say something either stupid, like you know like ohh what is this problem? What page is this on? Or like you know, umm. Like they just will say, they think that Black people will say something out of pocket …

Not only does Arthur point out that racial storylines are perpetuated in school settings, but also that they have implications for the ways that one can or cannot participate in the classroom. In other words, students' ways of being a student, their academic identities and access to opportunities to learn and potentially the learning process are constrained as teachers act in accordance with racial storylines. As young people are positioned by teachers and others in line with prevalent racial storylines, they also engage in a sense-making process about who they are (racially and academically). They can draw on the available racial storylines or, conversely, the counter-narratives as they author themselves in school settings. This process of racial authoring has important implications for academic self-authoring and for the ways students participate and learn in school.

It is important to note that while, thus far, we have discussed common racial storylines which are quite pervasive, they do not preclude adolescents and others from developing alternative storylines that support academic engagement and promote learning.

Being Sutured into Identities

In order to theorize the impact of racial narratives on students' academic engagement, we leverage poststructuralist perspectives on identity formation. While *poststructuralist perspectives* are a rather broad category within which there is much variation, they do generally coincide on a few basic principles. First is the idea that discourses afford a multiplicity of *subject positions*, which can be thought of as possible selves or ways of being [Davies & Harré, 1993]. Second is that individuals do not necessarily have total freedom to choose who they want to be in every instance. Rather, as they participate in everyday activity, individuals are constantly being

'hailed' into particular subject positions, or what Stuart Hall [1996] calls being 'sutured into a story.' And finally, as a result of this positioning, some forms of subjectivity are made more available while access to others is curtailed. Of course, this suturing is not the end of the story; identities arise only after individuals accept these hails or reject them and reposition themselves [Hall, 1996; Weedon, 1997].

Conceptualizing identity formation in this way is useful because it can shed light on the learning experiences of students in schools. For example, in research conducted at an urban Muslim school in Northern California, Nasir [2004] profiled a student named Malik, whose disruptive behavior in most schools would lead to him being labeled as 'resistant' or 'oppositional.' However, the teachers at this school were unique in their philosophical commitment to viewing all of their students as both 'family members' and 'spiritual beings' in need of ongoing support. Thus, through a variety of institutional practices and discursive moves, the faculty continually sought to keep open academically productive positions available to Malik, thereby providing him opportunities to reposition himself in ways more consistent with the school's ethos.

Hailing (and rehailing) with respect to race and school can also occur in family settings outside of school. Goldman Pea, Blair, Jimenez, Martin, and Esmonde [2010] write about a high school student, Renee, whose Mexican immigrant mother and older sister continually position her as a math learner by encouraging her to take high-level math courses, engaging her in discussions about math at home, and doing everyday math together. Even when she is not positioned this way by teachers, her family's insistence that she is a math learner opens up a math learning pathway for her.

In the anecdote at the beginning of this section, Arthur recounts a routine classroom practice, teachers calling on students to participate in class discussions. Insofar as Arthur perceives this practice as racialized, the act of his teacher calling on certain students and not on others takes on a discursive dimension. That is, it codifies and deploys a predominant racial storyline about Blacks being less academically competent than Asians or Whites. It is in that moment – when Arthur raises his hand and does not get called on – that Arthur is hailed and that the forms of subjectivity available to him are constrained. However, Arthur's response to this positioning remains undetermined. He can still exercise his agency and resist this racial hail. And yet, even though his teacher may not have intended it, the wheels of racial and academic identity formation have been set in motion. This hailing also has potential consequences for learning. Arthur may 'check out' and disconnect from the process of learning in this classroom, or he may engage even more intensely in order to prove that he is intellectually capable.

The process of suturing itself may not be a straightforward or uniform one. Not only can students resist the subject positions that the social world attempts to invoke for them, but also the identities offered to students across settings or over time are not always consistent [Dreier, 2000; Polman & Miller, 2010; Wortham, 2006]. For example, Polman and Miller [2010] have used the term 'trajectories of identification' to capture the ways that multiple instances of positioning build up into shifting identities over time.

While young people are clearly positioned or sutured by the social world in powerful ways, they are also active agents in this process. In other words, youth do not simply accept the identities ascribed to them by virtue of racial storylines; they resist,

draw upon counter-narratives, and position themselves outside of the scope of the standard racial storylines [Carter, 2005; Davidson, 1996; Nasir & Shah, 2011]. For instance, Davidson [1996] documents the unique strategies of both high- and low-achieving students of color in resisting the marginalization and identities imposed upon them by the school. Carter [2005] also writes about a group of students who resist typical racial storylines about race and school in that they are what she calls 'cultural straddlers.' In other words, they strive to maintain both status and cultural modes of being in their Black and Latina/o peer groups and to achieve academic success in school.

Connection to Learning

Thus far, we have discussed racial storylines and how their presence in schools socializes students and mediates students' access to certain identities. However, we have not yet explicitly discussed the connection between these identity processes and learning. To elaborate on the relationship between racial and academic identity processes and learning, we draw on a theoretical model put forth in Nasir [2002] explicating the relationship between learning, identities and goals in cultural practices.[4]

Nasir argued that learning, identity, and goals are intimately related to one another, and coconstruct one another as learners take part in learning settings. Specifically, she asserted that *identity*, *goals*, and *learning* can be conceptualized as three prongs of a triangle, with bidirectional arrows between each two points. There are three important assertions in this model. The first is that learning creates identity, and identity creates learning. Nasir [2002] writes: 'As members of communities of practice experience more engaged identities, they learn new skills and bodies of knowledge, facilitating new ways of participating, which in turn, helps to create new identities relative to their community' (p. 239). Thus, learning and identity are viewed as reciprocal processes that support one another. When African American students, for example, are supported in seeing themselves as learners – as math learners, science learners, as readers and writers – they engage learning activities more fully [see Bang, Warren, Rosebery, & Medin, this issue] and learn more. And when African American students are in classrooms that provide rigorous learning opportunities, their identities as learners are strengthened.

The second proposition is that learning creates goals, and goals create learning. Learning involves both coming to understand new problems and reconceptualizing old problems. When problems are understood in new ways, new goals emerge in problem solving. New goals require further learning as one seeks to accomplish these new goals. With respect to African American students, as rigorous opportunities to learn academic content are opened up, students' learning goals and goals in relation to pursuing academic content are enriched. When students are encouraged to develop expansive learning and academic goals, they learn more.

The third assertion is that identity creates goals, and goals create identity. In other words, as one comes to take up new identities, new kinds of problems emerge, as do new kinds of goals. For African American students, developing identities that

[4] The following several paragraphs are adapted from Nasir [2012b].

eschew typical racial storylines fosters the construction of new learning and academic goals; as young people pursue these goals, for instance pursuing a science learning pathway, new identities are constructed.

Thus, identity, learning, and goals evolve together in social practice, creating a cycle that builds on itself. A critical aspect of this cycle is the ways that identities, as a participant in a practice and as a learner, are bidirectionally related to learning in that practice. Racial storylines are a core part of the identities that individuals construct, and to the extent that these racial storylines incorporate negative messages about intelligence or academics, they can preclude or eclipse the development of a learner identity in school. One clear connection between the racial storylines described and engagement in learning is then the way the racial storylines can shift the nature of access to learning identities.

The data presented in Davidson [1996] support this argument in that she illustrates how students make sense of and are positioned by the discourses of race and achievement in their schools and classrooms. More specifically, several of the students she profiles report being acutely aware of the racial storylines about Latina/os in their school and see these racial storylines as limiting their willingness to participate in classroom discourse and learning activities. As nonparticipation or limited participation in classroom activities occurs, identities as nonstudents or weak students are reinforced.

To some extent, though, the research we have cited thus far deals only implicitly with learning and the learning process. While there is a paucity of research that speaks directly to the role of race, racism, and racialization on the learning process, we discuss two bodies of literature that touch on this connection.

Research on Culture and Learning. There is a significant body of research that highlights the ways that learning is inherently cultural, that learning is fundamentally tied to one's culturally rooted perception of the context, and that being positioned as having valid knowledge in a learning setting is important [Bang, 2010; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lee, 2007; Majors, 2003; Nasir, 2002; Taylor, 2009].

Research based in Vygotskian perspectives has utilized a cultural practice approach which highlights culturally organized activities and practices as a unit of analysis. In doing so, these studies make salient that learning takes place in culturally and socially organized settings, occurs in relation to social others, and is guided by culturally defined goals. Seminal work in this area included work on alternative counting systems in New Guinea that highlighted the cultural construction of number systems and their use [Saxe, 1999; Saxe & Esmonde, 2005], research on alternative ways of understanding and expressing literacy in blue-collar work settings [Majors, 2003; Rose, 2004], and research on the cultural construction of learning in classrooms [Yackel & Cobb, 1996]. Studies have also found that the way cultural groups engage learning activities (e.g., the way they are socialized to learn – for instance, learning by observation) can organize access to learning content and can be consequential for the skill set one gains through activities with different participation structures [Rogoff et al., 2003].

Key to these findings is that learning is always tied to learners' culturally rooted perceptions of the learning settings and one's cultural relation to the content. This was illustrated in studies of learning mathematics in and out of school in which researchers found that people solved mathematical problems outside of school more

conceptually than when they were asked to solve school-format mathematics problems [Carraher, Carraher, & Schleimann, 1985; Nasir, 2000; Saxe, 1991; Taylor, 2009]. People knew more mathematical content when they were solving problems in a cultural practice with which they were familiar. These studies underscore the point that the nature of academic (i.e., scientific, mathematical, etc.) content itself is culture laden, embedded with cultural assumptions and knowledge that can be both political and racialized.

The valuing of only one version of science or using one limited definition of what is scientifically valid further marginalizes students. When multiple definitions of valid academic knowledge are employed, traditionally marginalized students can be empowered in conventional learning settings. Schools can serve to disrupt the racialized processes that ostracize some students through finding ways to engage the intellectual resources nondominant students bring with them to school. Scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of positioning nondominant students as entering the classroom with valid knowledge. Cultural modeling [Lee, 2007], for example, has utilized students' everyday knowledge to support academic subject matter learning by drawing on African American English speakers' understanding of 'signifying' to teach literary reasoning. Similarly, Warren and Rosebery [2004] studied teachers who engaged students in exploring the meanings of language in the science classroom. By focusing on language as an object of inquiry, students were able to understand their own language practices as scientific and as resources for analyzing academic material [Nasir, Warren, Rosebery, & Lee, 2006]. The repositioning of students as the holders of academic knowledge was a critical component of the successful learning outcomes in the classroom. In this way, research on culture and learning makes salient the possibilities for enriching learning opportunities through recrafting whose knowledge counts as valid in the classroom, thus countering typical racial storylines and restructuring the way traditionally marginalized students are positioned as learners.

Research on Stereotype Threat. In earlier sections, we emphasized the impact of racial storylines on students' material opportunities to learn. Research on stereotype threat represents another approach to conceptualizing the relationship between racial storylines and learning [Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995]. Stereotype threat is a psychological process by which people in groups that are negatively stereotyped in a particular domain show decreased performance when the negative stereotype is triggered. For example, studies have shown that when African Americans are told that a task will test their intellectual capacity, the implicit threat of potentially confirming the negative stereotype that 'Blacks are not smart' is enough to depress test performance. Overall, these findings suggest that racial storylines related to academic ability may present an additional barrier to certain students' capacity or willingness to engage in classrooms where the threat of confirming negative stereotypes might be looming.

Contemporary research on stereotype threat has sought to understand the causal mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. Drawing on techniques from neuroscience, studies show that stereotype threat creates stress that triggers an emotional response, which taxes neural functioning and diminishes the cognitive resources (e.g., working memory) available for academic performance [Krendl, Richeson, Kelley, & Heatherton, 2008; Rydell, Shiffrin, Boucher, Van Loo, & Rydell, 2010]. Re-

searchers have also explored the ways in which stereotype threat can reduce individuals' ability to learn new information, as well as to recall information already learned [Mangels, Good, Whiteman, Maniscalco, & Dweck, 2011; Osborne, 1997; Rydell et al., 2010; Taylor & Walton, 2011]. Additionally, vulnerability to stereotype threat can impair students' accurate self-knowledge, which in turn fosters unstable academic efficacy that can translate into poor academic performance [Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004].

Earlier in this article we included comments from two students, Bradford and Arthur, in which both boys believed that racial storylines affected their teachers' perceptions and expectations of them. Bradford indicated that he was initially denied the opportunity to take an Advanced Placement course because of a teacher's perception of him as a low-potential, African American male student. Similarly, Arthur described classroom interactions in which he perceived his teacher routinely calling on and offering support to the White and Asian students but not the African American students. In both cases, racial storylines about African Americans mediated the learning opportunities that students are afforded. Research on stereotype threat, though, adds another dimension to our understanding of the learning process.

Not only can racial storylines limit students' access to academic opportunities, but they can also produce cognitive impediments to learning that facilitate disengagement. Students like Bradford and Arthur can describe what they see and feel in their classroom experiences, but what they cannot describe are the biological effects of the ongoing anxiety and stress produced by having to deal with the threat of negative racial storylines. Indeed, opportunities to learn and stereotype threat are intertwined. Racial storylines that curtail students' opportunities to learn can perpetuate performance-hampering stereotype threat situations, which trigger emotional and cognitive responses in students that can lead them to disengage. Poor academic performance then reinforces preexisting ability stereotypes, thereby creating a cycle that can continue throughout students' academic trajectories.

Concluding Thoughts

We have illustrated that schools provide a rich context within which racial storylines and narratives take up life. As such, these storylines shape students' identities and socialize them to think about race and school in particular ways. Further, they constrain access to learning identities, as well as potentially interfere with the natural learning process. Many students like Arthur, Bradford, and Terell are subject to racial storylines in their schools that constrain the racial identities available to them. Some students are able to resist racial hailing, whereas the majority of students from historically marginalized groups may not have the necessary tools to exercise this agency. For these students, having access to alternative spaces or *counter-spaces* may help combat the negative impact of traditional, dominant racial storylines. For example, the works of Lee [2007] and Warren and Rosebery [2004] document the rich learning that occurs when students' existing knowledge bases are valued and utilized.

Counter-spaces can take varying forms; what is important is that they can provide students with resources to create counter-narratives and positive racial identities. One controversial version of a counter-space is all-Black male schools (or programs or spaces within schools). Historically, such efforts have either centered ex-

plicitly on developing a positive cultural identity through Afrocentrism, or they explicitly decentralized culture and focused on teaching Black males how to successfully navigate the dominant culture through academic enrichment or 'life skills' such as preparing for the work force. Scholars have noted that students' participation in positive all-Black spaces provided them with the necessary tools to construct productive counter-narratives, affirmed Black students' intelligence, and motivated students to learn [Anderson, 1988; Siddle-Walker, 1996]. Research has also demonstrated that such spaces can have a positive effect on identity formation [Lee, 2009; Nasir, 2012a, b; Woodland, Martin, Hill, & Worrell, 2009].

In the absence of available resources within mainstream classrooms to create constructive racial storylines, counter-spaces can play a crucial role in offsetting dominant racial narratives that are detrimental to the educational success of students who have been marginalized in schools. Schools should consider the creation of alternative settings within a student's regular school setting as a powerful tool to support students of various marginalized backgrounds in challenging dominant racial storylines, developing a sense of agency, and facilitating positive racial and academic identities.

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