

Racialized Identities: Racial Achievement Among African American Youth

Nasir, Na'ilah Suad. (2011). *Racialized Identities: Racial Achievements Among African American Youth*. Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press, 200 pp. ISBN 978-0-8047-6019-5, \$22.95 (Paper).

Reviewed By

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In Racialized Identities: Racial Achievement Among African American Youth Na'ilah Suad Nasir explores how various constructions of identity can influence educational achievement for African American students, both within and outside school. Nasir uses specific case studies of African American students to demonstrate the various factors that influence African American identity. The book investigates the importance of agency, personal sense-making, and social processes. The book highlights two important things: the challenges that social and educational stratification pose for learning in African American Youth, and the possibility for positive learning and identity trajectories (pp. 2).

The book is based on years of research inside and outside of schools and draws on findings from several African American students. Some of these studies focused on out-of-school settings such as basketball, track and field, and even a game of dominoes. Other studies focus on the identity processes that take shape within schools (with a particular focus on urban school settings). Nasir discusses the widespread inequity within the schools in the United States. The book attempts to answer three main questions:

“How can we understand the relationship 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 available to students, and how are certain identities made available and others not?

What role do racialized identities play in engagement in school learning settings for African American student, and how can we conceptualize these racialized identities in ways that are not oversimplified or essentialized?” (pp. 9).

These questions serve as the shell for the majority of *Racialized Identities*. The book is also framed by the Nasir’s desire to “attend 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” (pp. 2). She uses her research to reinforce the idea that racial identity is a fluid process that is affected by many factors.

The first several chapters of *Racialized Identities: Racial Achievement Among African American Youth* lay the basic groundwork and basic assumptions that Nasir follows throughout the book. She describes the connections between learning and identity processes in learning settings outside schools and provides examples for how these environments act as resources for learning identities to African American youth. She follows these initial chapters with three chapters highlighting the perspectives on what it means to be African American. Through specific examples from the schools she conducted research in, she points out the complexities and contradictions of race and identity. She also addresses the pitfalls of stereotypes and how both African Americans and other races perpetuate these stereotypes.

In the next chapters she divides two different identities that Nasir says African American students tend to align with: the school oriented and socially aware individual, and the street savvy individual. She describes how school environments support each of these identities. Nasir links learning to students' developing social identities. She concludes the book with several more case studies showing how agency and various identity resources can affect the outcome of a student's learning experience.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed *Racialized Identities: Race and Achievement Among African American Youth*. I felt as though it took a topic that is widely discussed and provided refreshing and new ideas about it. The book was easy to read, well thought out, and organized in such a way that it left me with a clear sense of understanding. I thought Nasir's research was well documented and greatly contributed to her overall thesis. The one area that left me wanting more was the portion of the book where she discussed the two identities that African American youth fall into. I have seen from

personal experience that many African American students find an adequate balance between these two identity options, or create a different identity all together. I felt that by Nasir only discussing two identity options for African American students, she was contributing to the stereotyping that she was chastising early in the book.

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