

## Chapter 4. Race and education: How inequality matters for learning

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*This chapter highlights the importance of considering and addressing issues of race and inequality if one is concerned with improving learning and learning outcomes. I argue that the learning sciences creates a unique opening for theorising the ways that race and inequality impact learning, given its attention to the social context of learning. I then introduce the idea of racialised learning pathways, a construct that elucidates how processes of learning and processes of racialisation are intertwined. I examine possible points of disruption to racialised inequality, highlighting several points of intervention in the negative cycle between racialisation and learning. Finally, I consider policy implications.*

Inequality in learning outcomes between students from privileged social groups and students from marginalised groups in society is a key issue in education. When education systems globally take up the explicit challenge of reducing inequalities, more learning occurs for more students, and societies are strengthened (Darling-Hammond, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). Thus, there is no greater policy challenge than that of creating and leveraging policies and practices in the service of greater equity in learning outcomes. Policies at the national, state and local levels can be effectively targeted to produce greater equity and to disrupt disparities by race and social class.

The learning sciences, as an interdisciplinary field, has opened up new possibilities for taking up complex problems of learning and education, and has provided rich conceptual terrain for bringing new lenses to key issues in education. Perhaps no problem of education has been as intractable in the United States as the problem of educational inequality (Carter and Welner, 2013<sup>[2]</sup>). Traditionally, the field of education has treated educational inequality as a problem of access; that is, viewing educational inequality as being primarily about the way that we fail, in nations across the world, to provide equal access to high-quality teaching to children and adolescents from marginalised social groups. This is certainly true, but the problem may be even more complex than that when we consider what high-quality teaching actually is. Recent developments in the learning sciences, building on conceptual approaches to understanding the intertwining of identity and learning (see Meltzoff and Cvencek, this volume), have highlighted the multiple ways that race, inequality and systems of privilege matter for learning (Esmonde, 2011<sup>[3]</sup>; Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003<sup>[4]</sup>; Hand, Penuel and Gutiérrez, 2012<sup>[5]</sup>; Langer-Osuna, 2011<sup>[6]</sup>; Lee, 2007<sup>[7]</sup>), and how processes of identity are key in mediating who has access to learning, and who learns (Mahiri, 2017<sup>[8]</sup>). Scholars have used the term racialised learning pathways (Nasir and Vakil, 2017<sup>[9]</sup>) to articulate how race impacts access to learning and infuses the learning process. In this chapter, I centre the concept of racialised learning pathways, explain how these pathways play out in schools, and describe some of the mechanisms that can contribute to or disrupt troubling patterns of inequity. As I do so, I highlight implications both for teaching and for the design of learning environments.

In order to understand why issues of race are so pervasive in learning, it is critical to contextualise our analysis within the long and pervasive history of race and inequality in the United States and indeed internationally. The United States has long been identified as a society that is highly stratified by race, and despite the publicly held perception that the civil rights movement of the 1960's solved the racial inequities in policy and public systems, the United States is a vastly unequal society, on just about every measurable dimension of social life, including housing, criminal justice, income, wealth, health outcomes and education (Carter, 2012<sup>[10]</sup>; Nasir, 2016<sup>[11]</sup>; Omi and Winant, 2014<sup>[12]</sup>). As one example, the inequities in policing practices and criminal justice outcomes have been hotly debated in recent years, and people have taken to the streets in protest, calling out specifically race-based discrimination against African Americans (Hill, 2016<sup>[13]</sup>). Schools are another site where inequities continue to persist. From the very beginning of the system of public schooling (Anderson, 1988<sup>[14]</sup>), to recent analyses of teacher quality and school funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010<sup>[15]</sup>), schools and schooling outcomes continue to be stratified by race.

These stratified outcomes are not limited to the United States. A recent report by OECD cites the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study and asserts that “socio-economically disadvantaged students in OECD countries are almost three times more likely than advantaged students to perform below the baseline (Level 2) proficiency

in science” (OECD, 2017<sub>[16]</sub>). Thus, social class and race predict educational outcomes in ways that are disconcerting.

### Racial inequality in schools

I have argued that racial inequality in schools can be conceptualised as involving two key processes: 1) access to high-quality teaching, which has direct access on learning through providing unequal exposure to content, critical thinking skills and the opportunity to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2010<sub>[15]</sub>); and 2) access to identities as learners, which captures how racial stereotypes, processes of positioning in classrooms, and assumptions about which students can be strong learners have important impacts on the learning process (Nasir, 2011<sub>[17]</sub>; Nasir, 2012<sub>[18]</sub>; Nasir, 2016<sub>[11]</sub>). Both of these mechanisms comprise racialised learning pathways.

#### *Defining racialised learning pathways*

Building on the tradition of understanding learning as a social and cultural process (Rogoff, 1990<sub>[19]</sub>; Vygotskiĭ and Cole, 1978<sub>[20]</sub>), the notion of racialised learning pathways conceptualises learning as occurring along culturally organised pathways of learning and participation. These are constituted by learning activities that move (or do not move) one towards greater engagement and social recognition as competent in learning domains and situations (Nasir et al., 2015<sub>[21]</sub>). This framework draws attention to the specific resources that learners have access to over time, the ways that learners are positioned within learning the settings in which they participate, and the roles that identity and race play in learning. It also calls out the need for explicit attention to the institutional and societal level influences that provide or constrain access to particular learning environments in ways that marginalise, or push some learners off of pathways. Learning pathways, as a frame, can “deepen our analyses of learning to attend to the ways that learning is fundamentally shaped by issues of culture and by structures that can empower or marginalise” (Nasir and Vakil, 2017<sub>[9]</sub>).

The notion of learning pathways ties moment-to-moment instructional analyses to the broader set of social, political and socio-economic framings of experiences in classrooms. In other words, it allows us to jointly analyse the opportunities for learning and identity on a micro-genetic time scale in classroom interactions (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003<sub>[4]</sub>; Saxe, 1999<sub>[22]</sub>), with the way that these micro-environments are part and parcel of socio-political, social, and political trends and patterns (Nasir et al., 2016<sub>[23]</sub>). While the concept of learning pathways captures the deeply contextual, interpersonal and even cultural aspects of learning pathways, it also attends to the specific issues of racialisation within and between learning pathways. Thus, we use the term racialised learning pathways to highlight how race frames access to learning pathways and defines interactions within them.

We view race, drawing on Omi and Winant (2014<sub>[12]</sub>), as “a concept which signifies and symbolises social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies”. Thus, race refers not only to membership in racial groups, but also to a tradition that uses racial categorisation to justify stratification and unequal distribution of societal resources. Racialised learning pathways highlights how learning pathways are profoundly connected to the racial stratification and sense-making about that stratification that pervades our society. To attend to racialised learning pathways is to attend to several interconnected aspects of learning environments, including a concern for the identities students do and do not have the opportunity to develop in a learning setting, the ways that power, privilege and marginalisation play out in relation to race in learning settings, how students are

positioned through micro-interactions in learning settings, and how access to learning settings is structured and enacted.

One way that race operates as a discourse in development and learning is through racial ‘storylines,’ or stereotypical artefacts (e.g. “Asians are good at maths”) that mediate how individuals make sense of themselves and how they position one another through their actions and interactions (Nasir, 2012<sub>[18]</sub>). Storylines are often pervasive, unspoken and unconscious ways of thinking that are assumed to be deterministic of individuals’ or groups’ abilities and ways of knowing. Racial storylines have distinct implications for students’ perceptions of themselves as individuals and as learners, especially in domains like mathematics where race stereotypes are especially pronounced and long-standing (Nasir and Shah, 2011<sub>[24]</sub>). While some storylines are explicit, often racial storylines are implicit, rarely spoken beliefs and values that constitute our social imagination. As such, racial storylines are an undeniable aspect of life in schools and serve to racially and academically socialise students in ways that make available or close down certain identities that may be critical for engagement in learning settings, and ultimately for learning.

### An example from research

To better understand the nature of racialised learning pathways, and their connection to learning, an example is in order. In a recent paper a colleague and I describe the racialised learning pathways at a high school that we studied (Nasir and Vakil, 2017<sub>[9]</sub>). The high school, Bay View High, was one of the highest performing high schools in a city that is highly stratified by race and social class, in the context of a district that has been plagued with frequent leadership changes and financial challenges. The neighbourhood in which Bay View High was set had historically been a high-poverty African American neighbourhood, but in recent years has been increasingly gentrified, whereby young white and multi-ethnic families purchased homes, the nearby restaurant and business district was revitalised, and several high-process high-rise condominium and apartment buildings were constructed nearby. In an effort to recapture a more diverse student population, Bay View started several learning academy programmes, geared towards the humanities and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) learning, creating rigorous programmes of study, recruiting highly qualified teachers and conducting a separate admissions process for the academies, which start in the 10th grade year. Other learning pathways and a “general population” also existed at Bay View. These included an academy focused on health, one focused on fashion and a green academy. When we entered the school as researchers, it was immediately apparent that these academies were vastly unequal, serving very different student populations. For instance, while the school as a whole is 37% African American, 18% Latino 23% white and 20% Asian and Pacific Islander, the highly prestigious Mathematical Sciences Academy enrolls 5% African American, 5% Latino, 28% Asian and Pacific Islander and 38% white. Clearly, the demographics of this rigorous learning academy is not representative of the school. And because the academies determine the exposure to content, high-quality teaching and rigor, these learning academies and pathways are themselves racialised learning pathways.

Importantly, these are not simply different academic tracks. Each of these racialised learning pathways constitutes a ‘default’ pathway by virtue of race and social class. They are not entirely determined by race or social class, however, the identity processes that take place in the different learning academies further reify notions of who ‘belongs’ in these academic spaces. In fact, teachers and students that we interviewed were very clear with us that the academies were racially stratified. For instance, consider this quote by a teacher:

*But this is important, that's why there's the big division. People say, "well Bay Prep is really two different schools", but you know the reality is, it is two different schools. There's kids who are prepared for high school, there are kids who are not prepared for high school. That's the big problem with what you see the demographics of this programme...I know [that] might be a question.*

However, while teachers made sense of this stratification by arguing that students were not “prepared” for the rigors of the work, and that preparation differences accounted for the under-representation of Black and Latino students in the rigorous academies, students pointed to the identity issues and the challenges with being in culturally white learning spaces. One African American student reported:

*Last year was stressful 'cause I did not know how to relate to others. It wasn't the same as if there were, you know, if was talking to a Black person, I feel like they can relate to me more 'cause they have the same experiences. I would really relate easier. Yeah. So I felt kind of ostracised when I was in [the Academy]. Like it was just, yeah...I guess it was the simple things like talking, not everyone laughs at the same jokes, not everyone knew about the same stuff, when I talked about movies or music.*

This student comment highlights the significant identity challenges that this student faced within the academy whereby they felt disconnected culturally and socially, which resulted in the student deciding to leave the academy the following year. This example illustrates how students can be placed on pathways where they have greater or lesser access to learning content, but also importance of not only access to the physical learning space, but the important of access to the identity space as well. Learning pathways then are constructed in both real ways and in symbolic ways.

### **Mechanisms that contribute to and disrupt unequal racialised learning pathways**

I have described the nature of racialised learning pathways, and provided an empirical example of how these played out in one high school. These pathways are actively maintained through several key mechanisms at multiple levels that operate to keep these structures in place. However, it is also possible to disrupt these racialised learning pathways; that is, they are not set in stone, and the possibility for equity does exist. In this section I highlight both the mechanisms that keep these pathways in place, and those that disrupt them in the service of greater equity.

#### ***Mechanisms that contribute***

Unequal learning pathways, as is illustrated in the case presented, are connected to the broader contexts within which schools are set. This includes norms of neighbourhood segregation, which then get reflected in segregation both within and between schools. Segregation allows for inequity to persist (Orfield, 2001<sup>[25]</sup>), which was one of the reasons the civil rights movement focused so fervently on school integration as a mechanism for societal change. Neighbourhood segregation then, and the ways it gets reproduced within and between schools is a mechanism that contributes to the presence of unequal learning pathways.

Pervasive racial stereotypes about learners also contribute to the perpetuation of unequal learning pathways (Nasir, 2012<sup>[18]</sup>). This occurs both because stereotypes contribute to the negative self-perceptions of students from marginalised groups, and because stereotypes (operating through implicit bias) frame how students are positioned and treated as learners

in learning spaces. These stereotypes often inform how unequal access is perceived and responded to, making it seem “natural” that students of colour would not be in the most prestigious schools or academies within schools, thus making it difficult for such norms to be challenged.

### *Mechanisms that disrupt*

As I have noted, while these default racialised learning pathways are powerful, they are not impervious to change. In this section, I draw on lessons gleaned from studying classrooms where unequal racialised learning pathways have been disrupted. I highlight two approaches to creating more expansive and equitable learning pathways; one where identity work was from and centre in supporting students in countering long-standing racial stereotypes, and another where students were positioned in powerful ways in relation to the content (in this case mathematics) thus providing access to a rigorous maths learning pathway.

One important mechanism to disrupt unequal learning pathways is to consciously address the identity issues related to racial stereotypes that hinder learners from marginalised groups. This often takes the form of explicitly addressing racial stereotypes and their implications as a part of classroom life. In one series of studies, I, along with my colleagues, examined the learning processes and social environment in classrooms that were targeted towards supporting the achievement and engagement of African American male students through a district-wide Manhood Development programme. One key finding was that instructors in these classes, targeted towards African American male middle and high school students, were intentional about disrupting the pervasive negative stereotypes about African American males. They utilised classroom discourse, fieldtrips, guest lectures and implicit and explicit modelling to both critique prevailing stereotypes of Black males as anti-intellectual, unemotional and unproductive and to provide counter-examples to model for young people the range of possibility for their identities that moved beyond negative racial-academic stereotypes (Givens et al., 2016<sup>[26]</sup>). This explicit treatment of harmful racial stereotypes provided a space where young people could redefine their identities, learn to challenge prevailing stereotypes, and connect more deeply with school. This then allowed them to expand their own learning pathways, and access a wider range of academic opportunities at the school.

Another key mechanism is to create pathways of access to important intellectual content and to position learners from marginalised groups in powerful ways in relation to that content. While the Manhood Development programme took up issues of students identity explicitly, in a study of a successful equity pedagogy in an urban high school, teachers created expanded learning pathways by positioning students as capable learners of mathematics, and creating learning experiences in the classroom that allowed them to master difficult mathematical content successfully (Nasir, 2014<sup>[27]</sup>). Key in this effort was the use of challenging group tasks that provided students with the opportunity to work on difficult maths problems together, and a course-taking structure which valued heterogenous classrooms (and did not engage in tracking by ability). These classes provided students the opportunity to become powerful mathematical thinkers, and supported them in achievement in mathematics and in persisting in taking high-level mathematics courses.

Importantly, both of the mechanisms described above – making identities available and positioning students in relation to intellectual content – need to occur as an intentional effort on the part of the institution, be it a school, classroom or school district. In other words, these efforts are strongest when not executed as isolated strategies, but when designed as

aspects of a holistic system with clear and shared equity goals. It is then that new kinds of learning pathways can be created, and expanded opportunities for learning can begin to blossom.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the multiple ways that access to education and to learning are racialised, and have articulated a way of understanding the connection between race and learning. I have also described some key mechanisms that perpetuate or disrupt current racialised learning pathways. This thinking, in many ways, is a part of a new turn in learning sciences research. Learning science is increasingly taking up concerns with conceptualising the relation between power, privilege and learning, and is viewing race as a key aspect of systems of power (Esmonde, 2017<sup>[28]</sup>; Hand, Penuel and Gutiérrez, 2012<sup>[5]</sup>; Langer-Osuna, 2011<sup>[6]</sup>). In doing so, a deeper understanding of how race, power, and privilege operate in learning settings is taking shape.

## Policy implications

- Inequality in schooling outcomes is deeply tied to unequal access to high-quality teaching; creating greater equity and access should be a key goal for education systems and school districts globally.
- Inequality is perpetuated at both the school and classroom levels; policy solutions should attend to both.
- At the school and district level, state and local policy-makers and school district leaders should discontinue tracking practices in all forms and attend to creating access to rich curriculum and deep learning for all students, especially those from marginalised groups that tend to have less robust access to such learning environments.
- At the classroom level, teachers need to provide opportunities to explicitly support students in building strong academic identities by challenging students with rich curriculum and high expectations.
- Teachers should also explicitly attend to supporting students from marginalised groups in resisting racial stereotypes and storylines and should create classrooms and learning environments that disrupt such storylines.

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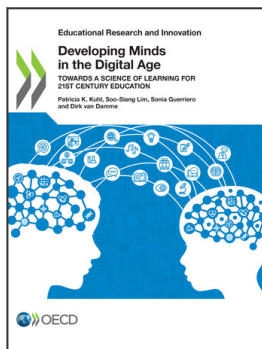
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