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Black High School Students' Critical Racial Awareness, School-Based Racial Socialization, and Academic Resilience

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Abstract

This research focuses on how Black high school students' perceptions of their school-based racial socialization and their racial identities impact their attitudes and dispositions toward school. The author examined the intersection of racial identity and school culture by examining how Black students describe their context-based racial identity and the racialized aspects of their schools' cultures. The purpose of this research is to help educators who work with Black students understand how to apply a developmental psychology framework that foregrounds the importance of ecology and phenomenology and can be used to leverage the relationship between strong racial identity and academic resilience. PVEST (Spencer, 1997; 2001) provides a psychological framework for educators to both assess the differential identity formation processes of their students and how they can help students navigate the identity formation process.

Keywords: racial identity, school culture, Black students, education, psychology, sociology

Researchers have long examined the role that Black racial identity awareness plays in the academic performance of Black youth. Earlier psychological research suggested that Black students' race and racial identity were deterministic deficits and thus risk factors for school failure (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Rushton & Jensen, 2005). More recent research contradicts these findings by demonstrating how Black youth who display racial identities that acknowledge the existence of current racism and stand in solidarity with other oppressed groups are more likely to display academic and psycho-social resilience (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Carter, 2008; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001). Regardless of whether research identifies the racial identities of Black youth as assets or risk factors, the research has collectively focused on demystifying the relations among racial identity, life experiences, and academic outcomes. Often overlooked in this research is the progression from identity to specific life and academic outcomes.

The current *colorblind era* (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) forms a crucial context that informs the identity formation process and its impact on academic outcomes and dispositions. Bonilla-Silva posits that colorblind racism, or the covert circulation of racist ideas through the extension of abstract liberalism and the naturalization of racial behaviors, characterizes the racial context. In this racial context, Black students receive messages

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from media and schools that the U.S. has transcended the blights of racism and other forms of oppression (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). The notion that racism is a relic of the past can facilitate a sense of *false hope* (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) in Black youth. In this regard, Black youth may develop a sense of future possibility that leaves them unprepared to cope with acts of personal, systematic, and cultural racism that they are likely to encounter. To oppose forms of false hope (e.g., *hokey hope, mythical hope*, and *hope deferred*) grounded in a "middle-class opportunity structure that is inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of working-class, urban youth of color" and that "delegitimizes the pain that urban youth experience as a result of a persistently unequal society" (p. 3), Duncan-Andrade (2009) posits that educators need to nurture a sense of *critical hope* in Black students. This critical hope, which helps people see opportunities for individual and collective socioeconomic mobility in the face of racist structures and practices, empowers individuals who might otherwise see struggles against oppression as unnecessary or futile.

In this regard, critical race theory (CRT) provides a useful tool for analyzing racialized educational experiences and outcomes in the *colorblind era* (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Critical race theory "recognizes that racism is a pervasive and permanent part of American society... challenges dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and merit... [and] insists on the recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society" (p. 4). In other words, CRT helps illuminate how racism operates in a context where society writ-large has deemed overtly racist practices and ideologies unacceptable. In this regard, employing a CRT lens is useful in helping researchers and teachers understand why students may struggle to reconcile the competing narratives of false hope and critical hope.

While CRT effectively foregrounds the context in which Black students are developing their racial identities, it is limited in its ability to delineate the ways in which racial awareness impacts personal and academic outcomes for Black youth. To examine this phenomenon, I build on research that highlights the relationship between strong racial identity and high academic resilience and achievement (Altschul et al., 2006; Carter, 2008; Sanders 1997; Sellers et al., 1998,) and present findings from an empirical study that explores students' racial identity formations as they relate to school-based practices. Specifically, the study aims to uncover what practices or spaces schools may have in place to enhance Black students' racial identity development and their academic success. Utilizing observation and interview data, I showcase Black students' perceptions of their racialized schooling experiences to shed light on the ways that individuals develop identities in this context. Moreover, given the variance in school cultures and the disparate schooling experiences of Black ethnic groups, I employ Spencer and colleagues' (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) to explore the impact of numerous, overlapping contexts and factors on the Black youth identity development process. In addition to exposing the various contexts and factors, this framework elevates the voices and meaning-making of individual students and delineates a process by which broad risk or resilience factors lead to specific outcomes for individuals in their respective contexts. In this regard, this study addresses the following questions:

- How do Black high school students describe their sense(s) of racial identity?
- How do Black high school students characterize their school-based racial socialization?
- How do Black high school students' perceptions of their school-based racial socialization and their racial identities impact their attitudes and dispositions toward school and academic challenges?

Literature Review

Racial Identity & Academic Achievement

Despite a social context that subverts the role of race and racism in the everyday workings of U.S. society, researchers have continued to examine how Black racial identity development enables Black youth to academically excel and successfully navigate this "post-racial" context. There is a growing body of research highlighting the relationship between strong racial identity and resilience among Black youth. Sanders (1997) found that students with "a high awareness of racial discrimination respond to this discrimination in ways that are conducive rather than detrimental to academic success" (p. 83). In her sample of 28 students, Sanders found that six of the 10 students who exhibited an acute awareness of racial discrimination were high achievers. In one particular instance, a student who had exhibited an acute awareness of racial discrimination stated, "I want to come to school so that I can get an education, and make the White man know that just because he says that Black people are not going to succeed, doesn't make it so. I want to show him different" (Sanders, 1997, p. 90). Another student expressed, "I know that there will be people to hold me back, there will be people to tell me that I cannot succeed, that I am Black and I am a woman, but I am willing to strive in order to reach my goals" (p. 90).

More recently, Carter (2008) examined the adaptive behaviors among a group of high-achieving Black students and argued that they employed a *critical racial achievement ideology* (CRAI). Carter defined CRAI as "a critical understanding of the role race plays in one's educational experiences and life outcomes and facilitates a psychological resistance to racism as a potential barrier to success" (p. 477). Some of the components of CRAI exhibited by the high-achieving students in the study were "a critical consciousness about racism and the challenges it presents to the present and future opportunities,... achievement as a human character trait that can define membership in their racial group, [and the] develop[ment of] adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept" (p. 492).

Sellers and colleagues (1998) developed a Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) that "does not assume that race is the defining characteristic for all African Americans or that there is an optimal African American identity" (p. 12). Building upon previous research on racial identity development (Cross, 1971, 1991; Parham & Helms, 1985; Plummer, 1996), MMRI makes a distinction between *race centrality* (how much one identifies with Black culture) and *race ideology* (an individual's perception of the attitudes and behaviors that one associates with Black culture). Sellers et al. (1998) found

that race centrality and minority race ideology[2] were positively correlated with academic achievement. They also demonstrated that there is variability in the centrality of race in Black Americans' self-concepts, the race ideologies to which they subscribe, and the relations among race centrality, ideology, and academic performance.

African American Racial Socialization

In addition to the relationship between racial awareness and academic achievement, researchers have attended to the concept of racial socialization. In the aforementioned study, Sanders (1997) found that parents were the primary actors in socializing the race-conscious students in the study. She asserted "[P]arents and other significant adults are instrumental insofar as they pass on to children their personal attitudes about and responses to racism [and] racial barriers" (p. 91). While highlighting the specific role of parents, Sanders also suggests that racial socialization is not solely their responsibility. Other scholars have demonstrated how school-based adults help students make meaning of their racialized contexts and experiences. For example, school-based adults mediate racial socialization in their decisions regarding curricula, their engagement in processes that impact school demographics, and their interactions with students (Lee, 1992). This notion begs the question: What, if anything, can schools do to help Black students build a critical racial consciousness that enhances academic resilience?

Though many researchers have suggested the manner in which schools can foster critical racial awareness for African American students, few researchers thoroughly describe the ways in which school practices can contribute to this process. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) proposed that schools foster African American students' positive academic and social development by utilizing the values embedded in the African American educational tradition. Because this tradition was developed in the context of slavery and its denial of basic human rights for Blacks, building critical consciousness was an integral part of this tradition:

> [A] child's belief in the power and importance of schooling and intellectual work can be interrupted by teachers and others who explicitly or subtly convey a disbelief in the child's ability for high academic achievement, and the child having a rightful place in the larger society—unless a counternarrative about the child's identity as an intellectual being is intentionally passed on to him or her. (Perry et al., 2003, p.79)

Educators immersed in this tradition made this counternarrative explicit to students during slavery through the *Brown vs. Board* decision.

While recognizing the symbolic strides made with court-mandated desegregation, Perry and her colleagues argued that the persistence of material and symbolic obstacles for Blacks necessitates that strategies of the African American educational tradition continue to be employed as a means to produce academic excellence in the face of these race-based disparities. They advance this argument by offering a theory for the high achievement of African Americans:

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[2] Sellers et al. (1998) argued "minority ideology emphasized the similarities between the oppression that African Americans face and the oppression of other groups" (p. 13).

In order for African Americans to achieve in school they have to be able to negotiate three distinct social identities: their identity as members of a castelike group, their identity as members of mainstream society, and their identity as members of cultural group in opposition to which whiteness historically and contemporarily continues to be defined. (p. 104)

Because White cultural norms remain the standard by which goodness, normality, and competence are defined, the negotiation of Black identity in opposition to the construction of whiteness remains critical. In this regard, Perry and her colleagues argued that African American students need to be keenly aware that Blackness has been defined by a lack of intellectual capacity in the context of the U.S. The authors argued that this awareness may, in turn, help them to avoid internalizing this belief. Black students' ability to negotiate their identities as members of a castelike group prepares them for the challenges that they will likely face as they navigate the symbolic and material realities of their particular racial group. Perry and colleagues (2003) also stated that Black students need to negotiate their identities as members of mainstream society so that they do not overlook the few yet authentic opportunities to achieve socioeconomic mobility. In negotiating these social realms, African Americans can better endure harsh realities and persist in the face of acts of discrimination.

In this vein, Perry and colleagues stated, "Institutions that are culturally responsive and that systematically affirm, draw on, and use cultural formations of African Americans will produce exceptional academic results from African American students" (p. 107). In other words, schools and school-based adults have an active role in the racial socialization of their students. The success of Black students is contingent upon the extent to which schools and school-based adults socialize students to acknowledge, value, and build upon the knowledge and practices that are consistent with their racial and ethnic experiences and histories.

Other researchers have argued for the increased presence of schools employing African-centered pedagogy and philosophy. Lee (1992) argued that mainstream schools are implicated in contributing to Black students' low self-esteem with regard to racial group concept. Specifically, she noted the extent to which mainstream schools fail to acknowledge the histories, structures, systems, and constructions that have led to relative disempowerment of Black communities. Instead, Lee argued in favor of Independent Black Institutions (IBI[3]), stating that IBIs have "strived to educate and socialize African American children to assume their future roles as political, intellectual, spiritual, and economic leaders in their communities" (p. 161). In advocating for the proliferation of IBIs, Lee, Lotomey, and Shujaa (1990) described the specific philosophical foundations underpinning schools employing African-centered pedagogy. These philosophies include "positively exploit[ing] and scaffold[ing] productive community and cultural practices... [s]upport[ing] cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness... [and] [p]romot[ing] the vision of individuals and communities as producers rather than as simply consumers" (p. 50). IBIs place an explicit focus on helping Black students develop and maintain a positive sense of racial identity in the face of (c)overt racist

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[3] IBIs are independent schools meant to meet the specific psycho-social and academic needs of Black students by employing African-centered pedagogy.

structures and practices. In other words, unlike traditional public schools, IBIs openly embrace their active role in Black students' racialization.

Other researchers have described the ways in which African American immersion schools support Black youth. Leake and Leake (1992) explained that these schools "help students acquire competence in social skills, communications, problem-solving, critical thinking, effective citizenship, and... identity development" by providing African American students with "culture-intensive" environments (p. 27). Merry and New (2008) argued that by building on the values of "self-respect, cultural pride, and communal responsibility," the use of African-centered pedagogy "foster[s] the ethos of institutional caring that is requisite for constructing a positive self-concept, working well with others, and succeeding in academic endeavors" (p. 42). Moreover, without a clear set of culturally relevant values and practices imbued throughout a school, Black students may inevitably become "socially-detached, lacking emotional stability as well as any conviction or commitment to ideals requisite to a vigorous, coherent self" (p. 49). Taken together, these researchers argue that situating Black students within a context of culturally responsive practices and values may serve to build positive racial and academic self-concepts for African American students.

The review of the aforementioned literature shows the ways in which immediate and overarching contexts impact the identity development process. While instructive in delineating the impact of context on identity progression, other research indicates that the identity development process is complex and thus requires more than analyses of direct links between broad risk and resilience factors, such as race, and life-stage specific outcomes, such as school engagement or academic achievement (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 1997). Much of the aforementioned research was limited in that it examined relationships between identity and achievement (Sanders, 1997; Sellers et al., 1998; Carter, 2008) or assumed that a school's intentionality around racial socialization would produce specific psycho-social and achievement outcomes. But as Spencer et al. (1997) posits, Black students make meaning of their racialized contexts in unique ways, which may lead to the development of distinct racialized identities and subsequently influence their school-related dispositions and behaviors. In this regard, this research does not provide a sense of *how* Black students' unique senses of racial identity and their school-based racialization experiences produce the dispositions and behaviors that lead to specific psycho-social and achievement outcomes. The goal of this paper is to elucidate how Black students' perceptions of their racial socialization in schools and their emergent racial identities inform their disposition towards school and overall academic achievement.

Theoretical Framework

Spencer (2006) argues that critical race theory (CRT) is instructive in its ability to contextualize the identity development of Black students. She states, "CRT... provides lenses for articulating the influence of racism and stigma as a presence and potential impact on normative developmental tasks pursued by youth," while also "specif[ying] the differential character of race-based practices as experienced by marginalized youth" (p. 875). In an era where race-based inequities are seemingly inconsistent with a context that claims to have overcome the blights of overt racist practices and structures, Spencer

argues that CRT sheds light on the unique and sometimes obfuscated experiences of stress that Black students face.

The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) framework illuminates how dispositional, behavioral, and empirical outcomes result from the intersection of individuals' racial identity and their respective school-based racial socialization (Spencer et al., 1997). Building from Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model of development, this framework includes a phenomenological approach (i.e., how an individual makes meaning of experiences) to examine the complex intersections between stable, long-standing aspects of an individual's life and the more immediate and potentially variant characteristics. PVEST considers the bi-directional interactions among a given individual's risk contributors (e.g., race, SES), intermediate experiences of stress (e.g., social supports, neighborhood dangers), reactive coping methods (e.g., school engagement, social withdrawal), stable coping methods exhibiting themselves as emergent identities (e.g., identity, self efficacy), and behavioral and health-relevant outcomes (e.g., school completion). Thus, while much of the traditional research on risk and resilience merely show a correlation between risk factors and behavioral and academic outcomes, PVEST provides a more nuanced explanation of the process by which risk and resilience factors lead to specific outcomes. It does so by highlighting the emergent personal traits and tendencies that help explain how risk and resilience factors may result in disparate academic outcomes for Black youth.

Specifically, this framework attends to the experiences of relative stress and the resulting immediate reactions and emerging long-standing coping methods that ultimately lead to specific behavioral outcomes. The ecological and phenomenological premises of PVEST allow scholars to explore the ways individuals uniquely make meaning in a range of contexts, leading to a variety of possible outcomes. Whereas traditional research on risk and resilience may lead researchers to make over-generalized claims about how risk factors (see Box A in Figure 1) result in behavioral or academic outcomes (see Box E in Figure 1), the PVEST model urges researchers to look at *net stress* experiences (See Box B in Figure 1) to ascertain if they are experienced as relative sources of challenge or support (Spencer et al., 1997). Net stress experiences are distinct occurrences or opportunities for individuals to experience the tangible effects of broader risk and resilience factors. For example, these can be specific instances where students encounter racist practices or experiences in educational spaces wherein students and teachers disrupt common notions of race. Spencer et al. (1997) further explained that these experiences "may be physically experienced or symbolically assessed and their significance inferred (e.g., assumptions about privilege, expected and supports available, or perceptions about test or confrontations to be weathered)" (p. 848). Put another way, the net stress level is characterized by a balance of the "actual phenomenological experiences of risk and protection in context" (p. 849) as opposed to the conception of risk and protection being deterministically rooted in demographics or descriptors. After considering net stress level, the PVEST model attends to immediate and long-standing individual responses to these experiences. Specifically, it highlights reactive coping methods ("c" in Figure 1), or the "in-the-moment" responses to specific experiences. To the extent that these in-the-moment coping strategies are used repeatedly to achieve their desired results, the strategies then become more stable coping patterns. Spencer and her

colleagues, who conceptualize these stable coping patterns as "emergent identities" (p. 850), define the process as "how individuals view themselves in and between contexts" (p .850). As emergent identities impact perceptions and decision making, specific outcomes emerge ("e" in Figure 1).
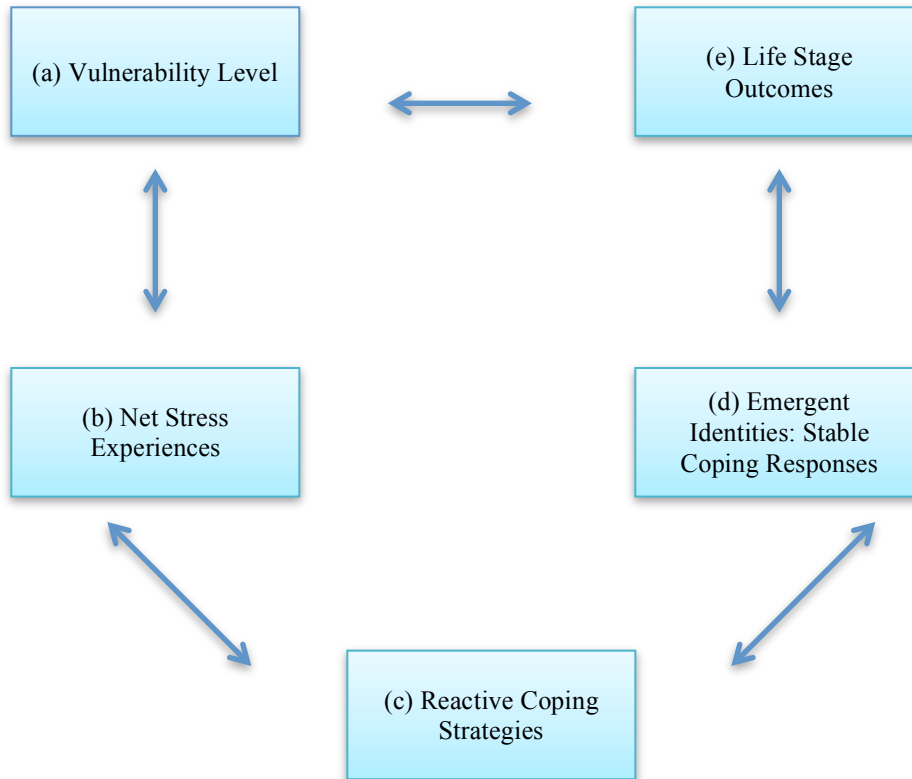
Figure 1. Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) Model

Overall, Spencer (2006) argues that one cannot fully understand the identity development of any person if the "broad structural, physical, historical, and social contexts as well as inherited conditions are overlooked" (p. 834). The contextual factors highlighted in the PVEST framework shed light on the relative level of vulnerability youth may face (e.g., intermediate experiences of stress) and their subsequent reactive processes (e.g., school engagement) and stable coping outcomes (e.g., racial identity). In this study, the PVEST framework is used to examine Black students' reflections on their school-based net stress level experiences which, in turn, provide insight into their reactive coping methods and their emergent identities. The emergent identity category of the PVEST model is described as *critical racial awareness*. Critical racial awareness captures how individual students view their racial/ethnic self-concept in schools that are inherently embedded in a larger societal context. In the vein of Spencer et al. (1997) PVEST framework, I conceive of students' reflections of their racial/ethnic self-concepts as reactive coping methods that represent the development of racialized identities. Rather

than seeing identity as something that can be measured or innate, I consider how individuals make meaning of their self-concept in response to specific material or symbolic contexts as a way to understand identity and its development.

By asking students to reflect on their unique school contexts, experiences of relative stress, and personal coping methods, the application of PVEST can expose how students within the same racial/ethnic communities develop unique and distinct senses of identity depending on their contexts and individual meaning making. Moreover, it can highlight how specific contexts, racial identities, and individual meaning making processes result in variable academic performances.

Methods

Sampling

Data for this study was collected as part of a broader project aiming to understand how various high school reforms (e.g., small learning communities, career academies, integrated curricula, standard-based assessment, etc.) affect student achievement and social development. The broader study included data on 126 tenth grade students from 10 high schools in a city in the Northeastern part of the U.S. Each school identified a minimum of 20 students who together reflected a representative sample of the student population with regard to race/ethnicity, gender, language, and academic performance.[4]

For the purposes of this study, I focused on a subset of four focal students who had been identified as "Black." It is important to note that when given the opportunity to self-identify, several students used ethnic terms representative of various constituencies in the African Diaspora. That being said, many students throughout the course of interviews used both racial (e.g., Black) and ethnic (e.g., Jamaican) terms to describe themselves or their community. While race and ethnicity are distinct concepts, research shows that among Black Americans, one's ethnic identification can simultaneously signify a connection to the broader racial group (Waters, 1999). Given that students in this sample were both identified and/or self-identified in racial and ethnic terms, I use the term *racial/ethnic identity* to represent the encompassing yet distinctive nature of their racial and ethnic identities. This concept of *racial/ethnic identity* fits nicely within the PVEST framework as it both foregrounds individuals' meaning-making about their identities as well as exposes how context can inform the diversity of experiences and ways of identifying among any community or population. This highlights the very nature of identity development—the notion of identity development being both a process of self-identification and ascription.

These students also represented a variety of achievement levels and experiences in various schools in the city. Looking at a student from a variety of achievement levels and school contexts is necessary because the PVEST framework assumes that context mediates an individual's development. Including students from multiple schools and achievement levels enables an examination of the manner in which students both within and across school contexts can display different psycho-social and academic outcomes.

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[4] Schools based their decisions about academic performance on a number of different assessment measures. Students were broadly categorized as high, middle, and low achievers by each school.

Data Collection

In the broader study, each participating tenth grader was paired with a research assistant. Research assistants conducted a 30-45 minute interview with the student and one of his/her teachers. The student interview questions aimed to elicit students' perceptions about their school, themselves as students, their family and background, and their lives away from school. For the purposes of this study, I focused on a subset of questions from the student interview protocol that explore issues of racial identity and racialized aspects of students' school experiences. These questions asked students to reflect on how they perceived their identities in the contexts of school and society-at-large. This line of questioning enabled an examination of how students view the "broad structural, physical, historical, and social contexts as well as inherited conditions" (Spencer, 2006, p. 834) that undergird the net stress level experiences to which students respond. In addition, students were asked to describe net stress level experiences (e.g., opportunities to explore their racial/ethnic identity in their respective schools) as they related to their racial socialization. These reflections shed light on the reactive coping methods that emerge in these context-specific net stress level experiences and thus provide a window into the development of emerging identities.

Transcripts were transferred into a computer-based qualitative analysis system (ATLAS.ti) that allowed codes to be attributed to specific excerpts of the interview transcript. In reading the transcripts, I first identified places in the interview transcripts where students talked about how broad and specific contexts informed the development of emergent racial/ethnic identities (e.g., How do they feel society views their racial/ethnic community or identity?; How do they feel their racial/ethnic community is viewed by peers or adults in their schools?). These analytical units were identified as insights into the context-specific nature of the racial identity development process (Noguera, 2002; Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer et al., 2001). Next, I utilized a thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach when coding the transcripts by applying codes relating to the components of strong racial identities outlined in the aforementioned research (Carter, 2008; Sanders, 1997; Sellers et al., 1998). In addition, I used an inductive qualitative analysis, allowing unanticipated themes to emerge from a close reading of individual participants' narrative answers.

From there, running code lists were developed that allowed for the identification of salient themes emerging from the participants' responses. I considered the generated codes to be components that illuminated the process for the development of emergent identities described in the PVEST framework (Spencer et al., 1997). The framework provides a theoretical roadmap for conceiving of a process by which racial socialization influences the identity development process and subsequently mediates specific life-stage outcomes. Specifically, the identity development process occurs in a larger societal context that informs students' self-concepts. Furthermore, the framework conceptualizes this process as comprised of a more stable set of coping strategies that emerge from the accumulation of reactive coping methods in response to immediate and over-arching contextual experiences. In this regard, the codes that resulted from the analysis were conceptualized as a) students reflecting on their racial/ethnic self-concepts in light of larger societal contexts and b) students characterizing the ways in which their school-based experiences contributed to their racial socialization. The former, in the language of

PVEST, reflects the formation of emergent identities, whereas the latter reflects the participants' reflections on net stress level experiences (in the form of school-based experiences) setting the context for the specific life and academic outcomes.

To address issues of validity, I explicitly sought to minimize threats to descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity (Maxwell, 1996). All the student interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The presentation of the transcribed interview quotations with references to the transcript page numbers served as the check for descriptive validity. With regard to interpretive validity, I shared interview transcripts with interpretive communities, who helped minimize the imposition of my personal assumptions when analyzing participants' words and observations of the participants in context. Triangulation of data, or the correspondence between multiple data collection sources and the existing research, also helped with threats to interpretive validity. Finally, to address threats to theoretical validity, my interpretative community and I noted discrepant data and considered alternative explanations to understand context-mediated racial identity performances.

Results

Students and their Perceptions of Their Schools: Vulnerability Level Experiences

As previously stated, net stress level is characterized by a balance of the "actual phenomenological experiences of risk and protection in context" (Spencer, 2006, p. 849). To illuminate this construct, the following section includes students' descriptions and attitudes towards their respective schooling contexts. Students' reflections on their schooling contexts give a narrow window to their respective understanding of the broader structural, historical, and social context in which their lives as students and beyond are embedded.

Vanessa.[5] Vanessa attends Port Charles Academy, which is a small, innovative public high school the city. Vanessa, who maintained a 3.7 GPA while earning average standardized test scores, stated:

> The school sounded good through the pamphlet and orientation, so I chose it based on how it sounded—it sounded nice... At times, like I get the basic curriculum that I'm supposed to get my college requirements, you know... I'm getting everything as far as academics but extracurriculars I haven't gotten... like internships I haven't gotten one because I don't know much about them. It's kind of one of those things you have to try to kind of search through the information.

Despite some of her misgivings, Vanessa liked the small size of the school. She described it as "a community—it's almost like a family." She also noted that she has a close relationship with a small number of teachers at Port Charles:

> One of the teachers is involved with church so, I go to church and sometimes his church would visit mine, and we have chorus (at HCA), and he is the chorus instructor so I talk to him there when we're like singing. Other teachers I can just

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[5] The names of all the students have been replaced with pseudonyms.

talk to, it's comfortable because most of them are minorities so you can relate to them more, so I can relate to most of my teachers.

Overall, Vanessa described an environment where she feels nurtured in the small tight-knit environment.

Jermaine. Jermaine attends Arsenal High, a large and historic high school in the city. Jermaine's GPA hovered around a 2.7, and his performance was average on the state standardized tests. With this profile, Jermaine was identified by his high school administrators as one of the high achievers in the school. In describing his school, he stated:

We have over 1,200 students at Arsenal and that is a lot of students but now it seems small to me because I know everyone here. But it is a big school to an outsider and compared to other schools.

The school is one of the oldest in the city and has seen many students from different racial and ethnic communities pass through its halls over the decades. Now, the school is predominately comprised of Latino and Black students. Jermaine noted:

The diversity here is what makes the school unique. It is the most positive thing that comes to mind and that is why I came to school here. I mean, at first when I walked through the door I was overwhelmed by it but then I got to interact with different people and learned about places I want to go one day.

Lastly, Jermaine admitted that he feels quite at home in this large and diverse school setting and feels that his teachers form a strong support network for him:

All my teachers know me. I had a teacher for three years, and she knows me like the back of [her] hand. She knows all my experience in my high school years and she knows everything because what happens at home might have an effect on what happens at schools basically she knows everything like this past year my mother passed away. She knows everything and that is cool because that means she knows where I am coming from and where you are supposed to be so she would not want you to think less of yourself and she always told me to be stronger. She is my honors Algebra II teacher, Mrs. Y. She is strict in class and we get a lot of work done.

Jermaine, who was in the midst of coping with the loss of his mother in the past year, described how he found support and desired to learn more at Arsenal High.

Chris. Chris attends Kobe High, a large, selective, public high school that requires students to pass an admissions test. Demographically, the school is comprised of a mix of Black, Latino, and Asian students. Chris had a 3.3 GPA with above average English Language Arts and average math standardized test scores. At Kobe High, Chris was considered an average achiever with this academic profile. He stated:

Well, school is just basically school. Before you go to high school, if you watch TV, you see things like "Family Matters" and stuff. I grew up on that. So if you

watch the high school experience there, that's what you expect when you get here and it's basically not. It's really not the way you see it on TV... I don't really like this school because it's sort of... it's just this feeling when I get here. It's not very fun. [Interviewer: Why do you come to school?] Because I have to come to school or I'm basically screwed. There's not really much you can do without a high school—without a college education really.

In noting that his TV-created expectations for high school were not being satisfied, Chris's words seem to indicate a frustration with his experience at Kobe High. This frustration was substantiated as he explained:

School's too big for this building. If you look at Sandler[6], Sandler has more kids but they have more space. We have this small space and a lot of kids. Some teachers don't really have rooms, they have to keep rotating. [Interviewer: How about individual classes... what is the size like?] Class size is ok. As far as my learning is concerned, I would rather have smaller classes because I think it's easier to learn when you don't have to deal with so many students.

Based on Chris's statements, he seems particularly dissatisfied with the physical ecology of his school and the impact it was having on teaching and learning.

Chris described a sense of dissonance around his experience at school in this particular year:

Last year was a bit easier. I got a lot of A's and stuff. I got 3 academic excellence awards and a most improved award in different subjects and stuff. Maybe I was applying myself more. Now this year is so different, my brain doesn't seem to be in it. Because, it's like... my French class. I got a C+ and I'm thinking I could get a B- but I don't know. [Interviewer: Why? Have you talked to the teacher?] I didn't talk to her, there's nothing to talk about with her. She's crazy, she scares me.

Overall, Chris's statements seem to indicate that he feels unsatisfied with his high school experience and confused about what, if anything, he can do to change his situation.

Carmelle. Carmelle attends the Marcos School, a small public charter school in the city. The school serves a predominately Black and Latino student population. While GPA data was not obtained from the school, Carmelle scored average on her standardized test scores and was identified as an average achiever at Marcos. In explaining her schooling experience, Carmelle stated:

I've been at this school for a very long time, since the beginning, so I'm definitely used to the rules and regulations and just the changes it's been through. At times it has been a little hectic and so frustrating and sometimes overbearing. You just can't deal with all the work and all the drama in the school. It's like any typical school but this is a different high school, it's a charter school and it has

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[6] Sandler is a large school that shares educational complex space with Kobe.

different rules and schedule. It was really hard to start at first but now I'm getting used to it.

Carmelle described the changes present at many relatively new schools and how she had adjusted to the logistics and expectations associated with start-up schools.

Despite these challenges, Carmelle seems satisfied with her academic experience:

I think that I get a great academic experience here. More than I think I would at any other school... like [CITY] public or schools like that. Sometimes I compare myself to my cousins who go to [CITY] Public Schools and I'm so advanced and it's kinda weird. I am just getting more education than most people and that's the benefit.

By juxtaposing her education against the education received by her public school counterparts, Carmelle expressed a sense of satisfaction with her academic experience. She also described the strong relationships she maintains with teachers at her school. Carmelle said, "I'm getting to know a couple teachers this year. I think about four or five teachers know me more than the others. We talk about my family, my problems sometimes, academics of course, friends, what I do, how idiotic my family can be." Overall, Carmelle seems to describe a scenario where she was falling into her academic stride in a rigorous school that was beginning to create a more stable school culture.

These students' reflections on their schools help us understand how they are interpreting the challenges and opportunities presented by their respective school environments. Jermaine, who attends a very large and old high school, feels well supported by school adults and appreciates the opportunities that can come from a diverse student body. Chris, who attends a competitive selective high school, seems dissatisfied with the physical space while also seemingly lacking the academic support to transition to higher levels of academic work. Seeing the 'large old public high school' or the 'competitive selective exam school' from the students' perspectives helps to uncover the relative level of vulnerability youth may face in their respective schooling contexts that could be obscured if the 'large old public high school' or the 'competitive selective exam school' were taken at face value.

Students' Reflections on Their Racial/Ethnic Identity in Context of Society-at-Large: Critical Racial Awareness as Emergent Identity

I define *critical racial awareness* as an emergent identity whereby individuals characterize or perceive of their racial/ethnic identity in the context of a larger society that contemporarily constructs material and/or symbolic obstacles by virtue of race. The term *critical racial awareness* is informed by CRT which "recognizes that racism is a pervasive and permanent part of American society... challenges dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and merit... [and] insists on the recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 4). Students demonstrate a critical racial awareness by speaking to the race-based material or symbolic challenges they currently have to navigate or overcome. In other words, like the high-achieving students in Sanders' (1997) study and the prominent African Americans in Perry et al.'s (2003) research, students displaying

critical racial awareness are keenly aware of the challenges and barriers to success that they will face or have faced by virtue of being identified or identifying as Black in the United States.

One's sense of identity is tied to one's sense of how they feel others see them. By employing the PVEST framework, this study helps us understand how Black students in the sample perceived that society-at-large viewed ascribed racial/ethnic identity or communities. Given the developmental and context-driven nature of racial identity, one should not assume that Black 10th grade students from schools across a city will be similarly aware of or will similarly articulate their sense of how society-at-large views their racial/ethnic identity or communities. This is evident as we attend to the ways that the students reflected on how they feel society-at-large viewed their racial/ethnic identity.

Carmelle, the student from Marcos Academy, described how society views her:

> Society views me as Black or if I tell them my ethnicity, Haitian American. It doesn't affect me very much except maybe the stereotypes that I face, but I guess a lot of people face that everyday... I have the Haitian culture that is very much part of my life. So, therefore, it becomes a mixture of both American culture and the raised-with Haitian culture from my parents.

Carmelle exemplifies the *racial/ethnic identity* concept by indicating that while society-at-large ascribes her a racial identity of Black, she asserts, "If I tell them my ethnicity, Haitian American." Schools often categorized students in broad racial terms, while the students often identified themselves by or saw utility in delineating their ethnic background**.** Furthermore, for youth who experience a context similar to that of Carmelle, the identity development process can lead to the development of new or hybrid racialized identities. Carmelle exemplifies this by stating that her life "becomes a mixture of both American culture[7] and the raised-with Haitian culture from my parents." Another key feature of Carmelle's answer was her seeming ambivalence around whether society could view her identity through her self-defined lens as opposed to the ascribed one ("Society views me as Black or if I tell them my ethnicity, Haitian American"). I will discuss this seeming ambivalence in the sections below.

Like Carmelle, other participants indicated a variety of ways that society had a negative view of their racial/ethnic identity which, in turn, could impact the material and concrete opportunities they would have (or not) as citizens and as students. Some students talked about negative stereotypes that they perceived are perpetuated by society. Jermaine, the student from Arsenal High, was affected by the problematic framing of Blacks as criminal or deviant in the media:

> Well you have to wonder, because on TV, Black people are always dying first or doing drugs or shooting people and drive-bys so society views my race like the ones always doing the crime. If not doing the crime then doing the time. No positive energy from the media. I don't watch TV anymore because I don't believe anything that happens on TV. It affects me because I always feel upset

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[7] In the context of our interview, I interpreted "American culture" to be conflated with "Black American" (i.e., not from a circumstance of recent immigration).

when I see things like that. I don't understand why always the same story over and over, it is stupid.

Jermaine was so "upset" by the lack of "positive energy from the media" towards Blacks that he didn't "watch TV anymore" because he found this representation inauthentic. Furthermore, he states the he does not trust "the media" anymore ("I don't believe anything that happens on TV") as a result of its portrayals of Black people.

Vanessa, a student at Port Charles Academy, expressed her sense that Black folks are currently looked down up or underestimated and that these perceptions lead to less opportunities and harder work:

> I could go on and on! It's harder to be Black because most people look at you like you know, you don't really want to do anything with your life, so it's harder you have to try to prove yourself more, you have to prove that you're smart, you have to prove that you want to do something with your life because if you don't you're just going to be taken for granted or just pushed off so, it's definitely harder, there are less opportunities I feel, that are just given to you, you have to try to work for them, you can't be given anything, you have to work... as far as education, we don't get the best education, most, unless you go off into a neighborhood where there is a good education, but mostly you have to settle for like big schools where most students aren't learning information where other students somewhere else are learning so, we really don't get as much as most other kids, so it's definitely harder being black than some other races, I'm not going to say any other because there are some in the same category as us.

Vanessa's words, "so it's definitely harder being black than some other races, I'm not going to say any other because there are some in the same category as us," seem to indicate her sense that the plights she and other Blacks endure may not be unique to Blacks. Vanessa's words suggest an awareness that she and/or Black folks have other racial/ethnic communities who can relate to dealing with racism. Lastly, of note is Vanessa's sense that she and other Black people have to work harder than others to prove their worth in school and beyond. I will revisit this feature of her answer later in the discussion.

Not all Black students in this sample perceive how society views them or their communities in the same way—that is, not all Black students perceived society-at-large as viewing their racial/ethnic identity or community negatively. Chris, a student at Kobe High, described his understanding of how society-at-large viewed Blacks:

> I think just like another race in the country. I know before it wasn't like that—a lot of people were treated differently. I think now that everyone's cultures is sort of blending and mixing people just see black people, black people—white people, white people. [Interviewer: How does that affect you?] It doesn't really have an effect on me... the reason why I don't want to go to a black college is because I don't really believe that whole segregation thing... Me being black doesn't really affect me or anything. I know in the 50s and 60s there was a lot of racism, and even know some people will say they've gone into a store and

security guards will follow them around because they're black, like that happened to me once when I went to Walgreens. I think that person is missing out—that they don't really see how deep stuff goes.

Chris's answer deserves much attention because of the apparent contradictions in the answer. On the one hand, he said that he feels Blacks are treated "just like another race in the country," while later saying that folks "don't really see how deep stuff goes" when it comes to issues of race. He also stated that he knew that "the 50s and 60s there was a lot of racism" and then recounted an instance of him being racially profiled in a store. Unlike the more unequivocal answers that Vanessa and Jermaine gave, Chris's words seem to indicate relatively less certainty around whether racism currently exists or impacts his life. While Chris's seeming ambivalence is stark, I will later argue that this ambivalence is normal and should be expected when we think of identity through a developmental lens.

Overall, the responses outlined above represent the variety of ways that Black students perceive they are viewed by society-at-large. Their sense of critical racial awareness takes on different forms based on the different ways that the students have been making meaning of their racialized lived experiences, vicarious or otherwise.

Students' Reflections on Aspects of Their School-based Racial Socialization: A Window to Net Stress Experiences and Reactive Coping Processes

The PVEST framework and the racial socialization research (Leake & Leake, 1992; Lee, 1992; Merry & New, 2008; Perry et al., 2003) suggest that it is useful to think about the potential relationship between racial identity development and academic resilience while also considering the racialized contexts of schools and the (in)formal practices embedded within them. Because students' perceptions help garner this insight into the context of and processes in schools, an analysis of how students in this sample characterized their respective school-based racial socialization follows. The students' descriptions of distinct school-based racial socialization represent net stress experiences in the PVEST framework. How students make sense or meaning of these school-based racial socialization opportunities gives us a window into the reactive coping processes (e.g., immediate responses) to these net stress experiences.

The analysis of the data revealed that students in the larger sample perceived four different types of representation of their racial/ethnic identity within their respective schools. These student-derived types were coded as *classroom-pedagogical, student collective-group*, and *iconic representation* of their culture in their school. A small group of students expressed that there was *no representation* of their culture in their school. While the profiles of schools' demographics, policies, or practices may suggest a monolithic experience for students of similar racial/ethnic backgrounds, the perceptions of individual students suggest a more variable and dynamic context.

While students identified similar forms of representation within and across schools, Black students within the same schools had differing perceptions of the type of cultural representation. Also, throughout the course of an interview about multiple aspects of school-based experiences, individual students identified formal and informal practices that were coded under different categories.

Classroom-pedagogical representation. Many students in the larger sample talked about how their racial/ethnic identity was represented in their daily classroom discussions and assignments as well as through participation in race-based student organizations sanctioned by their respective schools. Both these types of examples gave students ongoing opportunities to engage issues of racial/ethnic identity through interactions with fellow students and their teachers or administrators. For the purposes of this paper, these types of examples are called classroom-pedagogical representation of students' racial/ethnic identity.

One of the ways that students' race was integrated into the classroom activities was by teachers affirming the racial realities of students. Vanessa described such an activity:

> Now we're doing this debate and we got broken into teams... one team is for a certain issue and the other team is against and it's fun because we get to debate, the teacher's like the judge so he says like "Stop!" It's good, it's fun. [Interviewer: What are you debating?] Post-traumatic slavery disorder on African Americans... and it's fun, I love that class. [Interviewer: So what are the two sides?] Some people are for it, saying it does exist, and the other side is like, it does not exist. [Interviewer: What side are you on?] For it, for it.

Vanessa described the class she "loves" by describing how "fun" it was to discuss and debate. This particular classroom activity was about how post-traumatic slavery disorder conceptually situated the challenges of African Americans as rooted in history with contemporary effects or iterations. In this regard, this teacher, whether intentionally or not, seemed to have given students the opportunity to look at racism in a historical perspective and apply it to current circumstances.

Students also discussed racial/ethnic representation through authentic opportunities to explore one's own racial/ethnic background in the classroom. In this context, authentic opportunities are on-going opportunities, usually facilitated through a class or formal school structure. Carmelle described her exploration:

> When I came here (to Marcos), everyone identified themselves with their own nationality. I learned about my heritage. In 7th grade, we had a project to do and I thought, this is a great time to learn about my history, so I did a whole project on Haiti. It's been a great influence on me (being here). Before I got to this school, I never thought of myself as Haitian American. I thought of myself as Black. I knew I was Haitian but I didn't identify myself like that.

In this case, this self-described Haitian-American student was given the opportunity in her history class to study the history of Haiti. The opportunity to learn about her native culture in her school transformed the way she identified racially/ethnically. Before she went to Marcos, she identified as "Black" and has since identified as "Haitian American." Given her statement, "I knew I was Haitian but I didn't identify myself like that," the opportunity to directly engage and learn about her racial/ethnic identity transformed her racial/ethnic identity from one that was based strictly on race to one that incorporated a sense of ethnicity.

However, the variable and developmental nature of racial identity development may cause Black students to react differently to similar types of pedagogical or instructional strategies that foreground issues of race or racism. Chris, the student who seemed ambivalent about the existence of contemporary racism, described his perception of a teacher who was intentional about discussing issues of race in her class:

> When I had my world history teacher, Ms. X, she sort of made it a point to say that Asian students you should be smart or you're Black, you need to get ahead in the society because the white man is always keeping us down. She made it a point to point out that we were all different, when we are all really just students.

Unlike Carmelle or Vanessa, who seemed to appreciate opportunities related to exploring issues of race and identity in their classes, Chris's words, "She made it a point to point out that *we were all different, when we are all really just students* (emphasis added)," indicate a sense of ambivalence around his teacher's strategy of naming the differences and challenges associated with race. To be clear, Chris was indicating that the teacher was focusing on the differences, while his sense was that they should be seen as just students. What is not as clear is whether the approach for which he is advocating is a function of where he is in his racial identity development or a function of his resistance to a teacher potentially reifying racist stereotypes in class. Either way, this teacher's particular attempt to integrate issues of race in her teaching did not seem to resonate with Chris.

Collective-group representation. In the larger sample, some students who talked about classroom-pedagogical representations of race focused on the role of teachers and school sanctioned race-based student groups in creating opportunities for their race to be represented in their respective schools. However, many of the students, instead, spoke of cultural representation occurring through the presence or even prevalence of students who shared their race or ethnicity. This type of representation was identified as collective-group representation.

The ways in which students talked about collective-group representation shed light on different circumstances in which students' school-based racial socialization occurred. Some participants talked about collective-group representation in the context of students forming solidarity in response to racialized situations within their school. Jermaine described how his culture was represented in his school:

> Well my ninth grade year everyone was separated in the cafeteria, even Jamaicans had their own crew and Spanish people and Somalians and I did not know where to go. I had to mingle and I talk to everyone, but in my school we are represented because we have a lot of Jamaican people here and we have the flags in the lobby.

Jermaine highlighted the importance of establishing a clear racial/ethnic identity as a way to find a social niche within the school. More specifically, in this particular school, had he not attached himself to his ethnic group, he perceived that he may not have found a

safe psychological (or perhaps physical) space in the cafeteria[8]. Moreover, Jermaine perceived the representation of his racial/ethnic experiences and identity not in the form of classroom-pedagogical representation but as being represented or constructed in the cafeteria by choosing with whom one sits. Furthermore, this collective presence, in Jermaine's opinion, might have served as a form of physical or psychological safety from conflict with (ironically) other Black students.

Jermaine's quotation highlights an important quality of being in a relatively racially and ethnically diverse school. In the way that Dutton, Singer, and Devin (1998) might predict, Jermaine's "Jaimaican[ess]" increased in significance in his school as it stood in contrast to other significantly sized ethnic groups from the African Diaspora in his school. In the aforementioned quotation, Jermaine defined his racial/ethnic group in contrast to other racial/ethnic groups ("Spanish"[9] and "Somalis"). While both of these groups are representative of Black culture and the African Diaspora, they are very distinct groups within the school.

Other students talked about collective-group representation as a way of being more comfortable in the school environment through a critical mass of same race/ethnicity students in their school. For example, Carmelle stated, "There are many Haitian people in my school and this makes me feel that I'm part of something." Chris's sense of how his racial/ethnic community and identity were represented in his school shows that a critical mass of students may be perceived differently, especially if the school fails to recognize that specific racial/ethnic community:

> I know there's like a West Indian community at my school but it's not really representing. They have an Asian culture club, a Haitian culture club, but I haven't seen for the West Indian people. [Interviewer: Are there a lot of West Indians besides Haitians present at your school?] Yeah.

Chris explained that he is not satisfied with the label "African American" when asked how he identifies himself:

> Black American. I never really bought into the whole African American thing. I mean, I know black people came from Africa but as far as I can trace back my ancestors were Jamaican. It's all this 'I'm African American, I'm African American' but we don't call white people 'European American'.

Chris seems to indicate that he would like to be seen either through a purely racial lens ("Black American") or through a more specific ethnic lens ("Jamaican... we don't call white people 'European American.'"). Chris illuminates that both society-at-large and his school fail to recognize or speak to the unique ethnic background that represents his self-defined racial/ethnic identity.

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[8] While Arsenal High is a large comprehensive high school, comprised mostly of Black and Latino students, the data from the broader study indicated that many students from the sample identified conflict between "Black" students and "Somali" students. In this case, given the conflict between Somali students and other Black students occurring at that time, it may have been very important for his physical safety to align himself with the non-Somali Black students.

[9] In this case, and based on my knowledge of the school, I interpreted his use of the term "Spanish" to mean folks that are often categorized "Latino" or "Hispanic" in the U.S. context.

Here, Chris shows the depth of analysis consistent with critical racial awareness. On the one hand, he speaks to the notion that folks who came from Africa or Jamaica are still considered part of the same racial group, hence his original answer of wanting to be considered "Black American." On the other hand, he recognizes the ways that geography (e.g., "Africa") is related to but not equivalent with racial and ethnic categories. Chris's sense that the adults at the school fail to recognize the critical mass of "West Indian" students ("but I haven't seen [a club] for the West Indian people) speaks to the ways that schools can leverage, exacerbate, or impact Chris's or other students' sense of collective groups in a school and affect solidarity with said group(s).

Overall, these students' words shed light on the multiple and various ways that schools, in processes that happen inside and outside of classrooms, can participate in the racial socialization of their students. Furthermore, we begin to see how students with different perceptions of racial identity may perceive the usefulness or importance of these school-based racial socialization processes. In the next section, I employ the PVEST framework to illuminate how these students' disposition toward school can be explained by examining their unique expressions of racial identity and school-based racial socialization practices.

Discussion

In this discussion, I employ Spencer's PVEST framework to show *how* context-mediated identity formation can explain specific academic outcomes or dispositions[10]. Schools must embrace the opportunity to help students develop identities that facilitate resiliency in the face of academic and psycho-social challenges. Not doing so may have profoundly negative effects on students' personal and academic development (Perry et al., 2003; Spencer, 2006). As stated above, a growing body of research shows that Black students who develop identities that foreground the current existence of racism are more likely to demonstrate resiliency in academics or other contexts (Altschul et al., 2006; Carter, 2008; Sanders, 1997; Sellers et al., 1998).

Currently, the identity development process for Black students is situated in a narrative that celebrates the end of formal and informal mechanisms of racial discrimination juxtaposed by an implicit colorblind framing of Blacks as deviant and intellectually inferior (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Given the competing narratives about the role of race in structuring opportunities that inform both false hope and critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) among Black youth, critical race theory (CRT) provides a discerning lens that can help researchers, students, teachers, and other stakeholders conceptualize the racialized contexts that Black youth navigate today. According to Spencer's (2006) PVEST theory which examines identity development as embedded within specific contexts, CRT helps contextualize the short-term reactive coping processes and long-term stable coping strategies (i.e., emergent identity development) individuals employ in response to a multiplicity of context-specific experiences. In other words, CRT helps scholars explore the ways that colorblind racism sets the context for

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[10] It cannot be overstated that this study was not intended to determine any statistically significant causal relationships between any variable (i.e., racial identity) and an academic outcome.

the vulnerability levels and net stress experiences that Black students face in schools as they develop a sense of racial identity. PVEST urges us to consider both the colorblind societal context and the ways that schools (among other contexts) inform students' racial socialization. Understanding students' racial socialization can help to contextualize their development of critical racial awareness and how this awareness may relate to positive academic outcomes. The aforementioned racial socialization literature (Leake & Leake, 1992; Lee, 1992; Merry & New, 2008; Perry et al., 2003) posits that schools need to implement practices and values that build cultural continuity across students' homes, communities, and schools. The project of building cultural continuity will help Black students develop identities that facilitate resilience in the face of racialized challenges. Moreover, given that mainstream U.S. schools, unreflectively or perhaps even intentionally, serve to obfuscate the racial realities of students of color, the authors argue that the project of building cultural continuity needs to be done explicitly.

The findings of this study confirm previous research findings that point to racial identity and school-based racial socialization as key factors related to the academic resilience of Black students. More importantly, utilizing an *identity-focused ecological perspective* (Spencer, 2006, p. 829) like PVEST can help conceptualize how identity development processes and specific racialized contexts for students in this sample (and beyond) may shape academic outcomes. The PVEST framework illuminates the fact that while the vulnerability levels (i.e., the overarching racially-mediated material and symbolic contexts) of Black students in this sample are similar, the more immediate racialized contexts (e.g., their respective schools, the representation of their racial/ethnic communities/histories/contemporary circumstances in the schools) and how students navigate and make sense of both overarching and specific contexts are likely different.

While all the students in the sample were identified or self-identified as Black, only some perceived material and symbolic challenges as a consequence of their identification. This is important to consider given that Perry et al. (2003) and others (Lee, 1992; Merry & New, 2008) posit that the extent to which Black students do not acknowledge or are not prepared for the challenges that CRT foregrounds may cause these students to misinterpret the complex causes for their relative success in school and beyond. After considering the overarching contexts (e.g., societal views of specific racial/ethnic groups, connections between race/ethnicity and school funding) that may place Black students in relative risk, the PVEST framework urges us to look at specific experiences (i.e., net stress experiences) to which students respond with both reactive and long-term coping methods. This study shows that students have different ways of perceiving how their respective school contexts give them (or not) opportunities to explore and affirm their racial/ethnic identities. Some students identified ways in which formalized classroom practices and the prevalence of peers from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds allowed them to co-construct school contexts for their racial/ethnic identities to be represented in more meaningful ways.

Understanding the different ways in which students in this sample characterized the racial socialization processes they experienced in their respective schools sheds light on the specific and varying racialized contexts to which students responded. For example, we saw this in Carmelle's story where her identity transformed ("Before I got to this school, I never thought of myself as Haitian American. I thought of myself as Black. I

knew I was Haitian but I didn't identify myself like that"). We saw in Jermaine's story that his racial/ethnic identity impacted where he felt comfortable sitting or with whom he felt comfortable consorting ("Well my ninth grade year everyone was separated in the cafeteria, even Jamaicans had their own crew and Spanish people and Somalians and I did not know where to go"). Depending on the contexts and how they made meaning of them, students in this sample alluded to navigating different types of pedagogical practices and peer-based social dynamics.

Students' responses to the various contexts illuminated a variety of immediate reactive coping strategies employed in response to net stress experiences. For example, some students chose to learn about their racial/ethnic histories and contemporary circumstances when given the opportunity to do so in a class. Other students, responding to the formal or informal racial/ethnic-based social groups formed in their schools, debated where to sit and which social circles to associate with. According to PVEST, longer-term stable coping strategies emerge based on the extent to which the individual sees these immediate reactive coping processes as successful or useful. That Carmelle developed a new way of identifying herself in racial/ethnic terms lends support to this theory.

Carmelle conceptualized her identity at the intersection of her ascribed racial identity ("Black") and her self-defined ethnicity ("Haitian"). We got a sense of her school-based reactive coping methods by how she talks about her school-based net stress experiences, the distinct occurrences or opportunities for Carmelle to experience some of the tangible outcomes of broader risk and resilience factors (Spencer et al., 1997). The net stress experience was Carmelle's opportunity to learn about Haitian culture in her class. She employed a reactive coping method to enjoy the experience while transforming her sense of identity. According to Spencer and colleagues (1997), if Carmelle continues to enjoy, be satisfied by, or find success with these types of classroom-pedagogical experiences, her reactive coping methods become the stable coping behavioral and dispositional strategies that constitute her identity. If practitioners are interested in aiding the development of a stable academic identity that will keep Carmelle, and students like her, engaged and excited in school, then we must continue to provide the types of activities that Carmelle describes.

While having the opportunity to learn more about their racial/ethnic community and challenges they face may benefit some Black students, Spencer et al. (1997) and the PVEST framework anticipate that this approach might not work for all Black students. This difference may be due to the unique ways that an individual makes meaning of their context-mediated identity. Chris seemed ambivalent about having to navigate contemporary racism. When Chris's ambivalence (or any other individual's lack thereof) is examined through the PVEST framework, it reflects a developmental snapshot of Chris's sense of racial identity in a dynamic state. The PVEST framework posits that one's sense of identity is mediated by the multiple contexts of development as well as how the individual makes sense of and navigates these contexts. Chris' context and meaning-making is changing. Chris described feeling a sense of dissatisfaction with his school context ("I don't really like this school because it's sort of... it's just this feeling when I get here. It's not very fun... We have this small space and a lot of kids. Some teachers don't really have rooms, they have to keep rotating") and a sense that the

academic strategies that he used previously were no longer working ("Last year was a bit easier. I got a lot of A's and stuff. I got 3 academic excellence awards and a most improved award in different subjects and stuff. Maybe I was applying myself more. Now this year is so different, my brain doesn't seem to be in it"). His reactive coping methods to net stress experiences are likely in flux as he figures out which coping methods will be successful for him. Spencer et al. (1997) argue that we should expect this context-mediated experimentation with reactive coping methods throughout the life cycle.

Chris also conceptualized his identity at the intersection of his ascribed racial identity ("Black") and his self-defined ethnicity ("Jamaican/West Indian"). In his case, a net stress experiences came as an opportunity to discuss issues of race with his teacher. His reactive coping response seemed to indicate that he felt uneasy with this teaching strategy. As a result, this would not be an effective teaching strategy to help Chris build an academic identity and to keep him engaged in school. For Chris, an alternative teaching strategy may be identified through the context of another set of net stress experiences where he perceives his school and society-at-large as downplaying his West Indian identity. Given that he feels that West Indian culture is not recognized, he may react more positively to the opportunity to study his West Indian identity and culture, like Carmelle, rather than participating in broader discussions about race and racism. However, researchers like Bonilla-Silva (2003) argue that teaching pedagogies that ignore or subvert issues of racism are no better than pedagogies that merely acknowledge and explore different ethnic or national cultures.

The findings of this study suggest that a one-size-fits-all solution for students of color, where practitioners teach about race and racism, may not be effective for all students. Again, for teachers, the distinction is crucial. Chris may not be engaged by issues of race and racism but may be engaged by opportunities to affirm his West Indian identity with other peers inside and outside the classroom. Perhaps after Chris has the opportunity to learn more about his racial/ethnic community, he may become more interested in or engaged by issues of race and racism as his own sense of identity takes on a different context with the new learning. What should not be lost in this discussion is that practitioners need to create and be attentive to opportunities to explore each of their students' sense of racial identity. This deeper and individualized insight into students' sense of identity development will allow practitioners to create greater opportunities for students to further positively develop a sense of identity.

The last step of the PVEST framework conceptualizes that context-specific emergent identities in the form of stable coping strategies lead to life-stage specific outcomes. Vanessa seems to have developed an emergent racial identity (i.e., critical racial awareness) that speaks directly to how being identified as Black contextualizes the amount of effort she would need to exert in order to achieve in specific contexts:

> It's harder to be Black... you have to prove that you want to do something with your life because if you don't you're just going to be taken for granted or just pushed off... as far as education, we don't get the best education... so it's definitely harder being black than some other races.

Vanessa makes a direct connection between schooling success and the particular material and symbolic challenges Blacks have to overcome. Furthermore, this self-identified

African American student also indicated that her school offered classes that allowed her, as an African American student, to explore her history and the current iterations or outcomes of racism.

The expression of her sense of racial identity, reflecting large overarching contexts (e.g., "It's harder to be Black... you have to prove that you want to do something with your life because if you don't you're just going to be taken for granted or just pushed off), specific contexts (e.g., "as far as education, we don't get the best education"), and her perceptions of her school-based racialization sheds light on why this academically resilient student might have developed the will to excel in this school context. Vanessa recognizes the challenges and opportunities she will face as a Black woman (i.e., emergent identity) and sees hard work in school as a way to navigate these challenges and opportunities. Her school, as she describes, offers her opportunities to explore issues related to her racial/ethnic realities (i.e., net stress experiences), and she enjoys them (i.e., reactive coping process). In this regard, if school is a place that affirms Vanessa's racial/ethnic realities by giving her opportunities to explore them, one could see how Vanessa would develop the desire, motivation, and disposition to succeed in school. In the language of PVEST, Vanessa's school provided net stress experiences to which she could employ reactive coping processes that were consistent with or further developed her emergent identity (i.e., critical racial awareness).

In sum, conceiving of racial identity development as a process that is both context-specific and mediated by how Black students make meaning of these contexts allows researchers and educators to better understand how they and their students co-construct contexts that lead to different expressions of academic resilience. Furthermore, educators need to pay close attention to Black students' sense(s) of racial identity and to their reactive coping methods for school-based racial socialization to develop specific strategies to help individual students develop stable and successful academic identities.

Limitations

The findings of this research are tempered by a few important facts. As stated earlier, this line of research (by design) cannot claim causal links among racial identity and school-based racialization, academic achievement, or resilience. Furthermore, because the study sample draws from schools that employ a variety of assessment tools, there is no uniform achievement outcome to which the study could speak. The sample size for this paper is also quite small. However, the goal of this study was not to produce generalizable results. Rather, it provided an opportunity to apply the PVEST framework to better understand the process by which context-mediated identity development can produce specific outcomes. In this regard, it was useful to examine the experiences and perceptions of a small sample of students to illustrate the process of context-mediated identity development. Finally, it is not clear if high-achieving students came to school with critical racial awareness, whether the meaningful opportunities to explore their racial/ethnic identities in their school spawned or increased their critical racial awareness, or whether the high achievers in this sample represent both of these scenarios. If students came to school with a critical racial awareness, where and how this awareness developed must be considered. One possible answer is that parents or other family members instilled this critical racial awareness. While parents and other family members likely have a

significant influence on students' sense of identity and academic performance, other research projects focus specifically on the role of parents. Black students spend many hours in schools with influential peers and adults who are very important in shaping the experiences that play a role in the development of identity. Given that schooling is compulsory for Black students, it is essential that we examine the ways that schools contribute to the identity formation process, especially given the evidence for the relationship between identity and academic outcomes.

Implications

Teachers and administrators play important roles in helping to shape the racial identities of their students. High school students spend a very large number of hours within the walls of their respective schools and, along with learning specific academic subjects, they learn about themselves as they grow into adulthood. The developmental nature of racial identity (Cross, 1971; Phinney, 1989; Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer et al., 2001) suggests that high school students' sense of racial identity is likely in a state of flux and could benefit from further development. Consequently, it is essential that high school teachers receive thorough training in adolescent racial identity development. For example, high school teachers can benefit from research that shows the ways school experiences affect adolescents' racial identity development. Overall, teachers, administrators, researchers, and policy-makers must recognize that Black students' sense of racial identities, and the school environment that help shape them, are important factors that can influence their academic achievement. Therefore, the pursuit of quality instruction for Black high school students must include attention to the developmental and influential nature of Black students' racial identity. As such, key stakeholders who construct the school cultures that serve Black students, must both listen to students and aim to understand how school cultures inform Black students' sense of racial identity and how this identity might impact their attitudes and dispositions toward schooling.

Author Biography

Daren Graves *is currently an Associate Professor of Education at Simmons College. His research interest looks at the intersection of critical race theory, racial identity, and teacher education. As a teacher educator, he is committed to preparing educators to serve themselves and their students by directly engaging issues of race and to bring the racialized realities of their students into their educational contexts. In addition to his teaching duties, Dr. Graves serves as the liaison between Simmons College and the Boston Teachers Union Pilot School where he coordinates professional development opportunities for the Union School staff, coordinates the placement of Simmons interns and student volunteers, works directly with Union School students and teachers inside and outside the classroom, and currently serves as Governing Board Chair. Dr. Graves earned his doctoral degree in Human Development and Psychology at Harvard Graduate School of Education and his B.A. in Behavioral Neuroscience from Yale University.*

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