Cultivating a Critical Race Consciousness for African American School Success

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Since the institution of slavery, education has represented "the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994) for African Americans in the United States. The educational accomplishments of countless members of the Black community represent a rejection of the dominant societal narrative that African Americans have a history of underperformance in America's public schools.[1] In fact, the counternarrative of Black children's school success serves to motivate many students who might otherwise internalize the myth of Black intellectual inferiority and experience consistent academic underperformance. The educational struggles endured and advancements made by African Americans as a group, since slavery, are a testament to a prevailing collective commitment to developing and maintaining positive racial and achievement-oriented identities in a society where an individual's racial group membership often renders one as less-than, subordinate, and/or invisible. Thus, despite

living in a culture in which being Black is often perceived as being academically disengaged and intellectually inferior by the larger society (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; McWhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 2003), the counternarrative of Black school success highlights a people's continued understanding of the utility of schooling as a viable option for positive life outcomes.

In the field of education, much of the research on Black student achievement focuses on cultural and/or structural explanations for the academic outcomes of these adolescents (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Carter, P. L., 2005; Conchas, 2006; Datnow & Cooper, 1996; Fordham, 1988; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Mickelson, 1990; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). A vast amount of the research on Black student achievement perpetuates a continuous discussion of Black *under*achievement (e.g., Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1992; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1991/1998; Rothstein, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Race continues to remain central across discussions that include psychological, anthropological, and sociological analyses. While this research highlights individual, environmental, institutional, and societal factors that affect Black students' schooling experiences, there is a lack of in-depth examination of how these factors interact with students' individual identities to shape their attitudes and beliefs about schooling and subsequent school behaviors. Due to this shortcoming in the research literature, the main purpose of this article is to present data that attempts to fill such a void in the literature.

The data presented in this article stem from a larger research investigation of the racial and achievement self-conceptions of African American urban adolescents and how their self-conceptions inform their attitudes and beliefs about schooling and subsequent school behaviors. A focus on Black students' racial and achievement self-conceptions may provide insight into why these students enact adaptive or maladaptive behaviors for academic success in school. While understanding the sociocultural contexts in which Black students learn enables us to better meet their academic needs, equally in-depth examinations of how they construct aspects of their identities can serve the same purpose. An increased understanding of Black students' attitudes about race, awareness of racism in society, and understanding of the utility of schooling for social and economic mobility can help educators identify and embody pedagogies and practices that foster not only academic achievement but also healthy, positive identity construction in Black youth.

This article does not focus on the schooling experiences of urban, Black high school students; rather, it illuminates students' attitudes about race and racism, achievement, and the utility of schooling for upward mobility. In the remainder of this article, the author first provides a brief overview of the literature connecting race to Black student *achievement*. This overview incorporates a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis of this research: Oyserman's African American Identity Schema; the significance of racial centrality to academic achievement; and critical race theory. The author describes how connectedness to the Black community and awareness of racial discrimination prove significant to the development of Black students' critical race consciousness and shape their

attitudes about the utility of school. Next, the author examines how study participants discuss a critical race consciousness and how this impacts their attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling. She then illustrates what factors contribute to a critical race consciousness developing in these youth by drawing on existing literature. Lastly, the author discusses strategies that parents, teachers and schools can employ to facilitate the development of a critical race consciousness in Black youth as a lever for enhancing their commitment to high academic achievement and life success.

Racial Identity and Academic Persistence

Research suggests that Black students' racial identity impacts academic achievement and school behaviors (Cokley, 2003; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Having a sense of self as a member of an African American community represents one protective factor or buffer that facilitates Black youth's development of positive achievement beliefs and subsequent academic adjustment (Oyersman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Perry, 2003; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Ward, 2000). According to Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995), a positive African American Identity Schema encompasses three aspects: (a) seeing oneself as a member of the racial group (i.e. connectedness); (b) being aware of stereotypes and limitations to one's present and future social and economic outcomes (i.e. awareness of racism); and (c) developing a perspective of self as succeeding as a racial group member (i.e., achievement as an African American). Under this framework, the aforementioned aspects provide what is necessary to acquire school success. Building upon this framework, Oyserman et al. suggest that racial centrality (the degree to which an individual values race as a core part of his/her self-concept) is related to higher academic achievement (Ford & Harris, 1997; Sellers et al., 1998). Racial centrality is similar to Oyserman et al.'s (1995) notion of connectedness, in which Black adolescents describe a sense of self as part of Black familialism and kin networks. A sense of connectedness to the Black community provides a sense of meaning and purpose and ties the self to strategies for school achievement (Oyserman et al., 1995).

Awareness of Racism and Academic Persistence

The specific role that race plays in Black students' schooling experiences is complicated at best. Black students' awareness of racism as a potential limitation to their school and life success is critical to these students developing a positive racial identity. This awareness has been shown to have negative and positive effects on Black student achievement. For example, Ogbu (1991, 2003) and Ogbu and Simon (1998) suggest that some Black students develop a collective oppositional identity toward schooling and disengage from academic tasks based on their awareness of limited labor market opportunities due to societal racism. However, other research suggests that an awareness of structural barriers to success can motivate many African American youth to take on a 'prove them wrong' attitude about schooling,

using racial discrimination and social inequality as reasons to persist academically in school (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, D. J., 2005; Floyd, 1996; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; O'Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997). In many instances, these Black students take on race-based, class-based, and gender-based perspectives about how schooling affects their future outcomes.

"For African-American students to achieve, they need to be sufficiently grounded in their identity as members of a racial caste group, such that they have a way to interpret and make sense of instances when they experience discrimination, especially in school" (Perry, 2003, p. 106). Furthermore, it is plausible that Black students who have a positive racial identity and a critical awareness of racism as a potential barrier to their success can develop adaptive strategies for schooling that allow them to persist academically. In some of my earlier research, I examined the racial and achievement self-conceptions of high-achieving Black students in a predominantly White high school. I explored how Black students' views of themselves as racial beings and as achievers interacted to shape their achievement ideology and school behaviors. Findings from this study revealed that these students embodied a critical race achievement ideology about schooling (Carter, D. J., 2005). I described how the development and embodiment of this type of achievement ideology facilitated the academic success of these students. One aspect of this ideology which was central to these students embracing schooling as a vehicle for their upward mobility was the presence of a *critical race consciousness*. I define a critical race consciousness as "a critical understanding of the asymmetrical power relationships that exist between Blacks and Whites in America" (Carter, D., J., 2005, p. 102). In this concept, ideas about racism become central to how Black students construct their achievement ideology. When students possess a critical race consciousness, they demonstrate an awareness and understanding of race as a potential barrier to their schooling and life success. They also understand the historical and current impact that racism has in perpetuating social inequality in America, particularly for members of the African American racial group. The awareness of structural constraints on social mobility is said to derive from a strong identification with one's racial group (see Oyserman et al., 1995). Thus, if Black students have a positive racial identity, it is likely that a critical awareness of race as a potential barrier to school success is evident within their thinking.

While a critical race consciousness alone cannot ensure high academic performance for urban Black youth or any youth of color, the presence of such consciousness coupled with a pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling can aid urban Black students in achieving their academic and life goals despite facing structural constraints on social and economic mobility. This consciousness is connected to positive racial group identification and a pride in one's racial group affiliation (see Carter, D. J., 2005).

Critical Race Theory and Consciousness

Since data from this study highlight race and racism as important factors in

Black students' construction of attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling, critical race theory (CRT) is an appropriate framework for analyzing participants' voices. CRT has been used by many educational scholars to analyze the effects of racial injustice in schools on student of color achievement (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The basic tenets of CRT focus on:

> 1. racism as normal in American society and calls for strategies for exposing it in its various forms;

> 2. the significance of experiential knowledge and employing storytelling to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv);

> 3. challenging traditional and dominant discourse and paradigms on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to affect people of color;

> 4. a commitment to social justice; and

> 5. the transdisciplinary perspective.

As an analytical framework for this research, CRT furthers our understanding of how race and racism inform Black students' achievement ideology and school behaviors because it counters the hegemonic condition of the myth of meritocracy that leads individuals to believe that racism—as a structural barrier—is nonexistent (Carter, in press). These students' critical race consciousness is informed by their awareness of racism as a norm that must be deconstructed in their everyday lives.

Methodology

Site and Sample

The student voices highlighted in this article are part of a larger ongoing study which examines the development of racial and achievement self-conceptions among African American adolescents attending nine high schools in a large urban educational K-12 system. Data were collected during the 2005-2006 academic school year. Participants were part of a year-long program designed to introduce them to careers in teaching for social justice, sponsored by faculty members at a large research institution in the Midwest. The program aims to increase the academic readiness of students in this school district who express a commitment to pursuing a teaching career in an urban school. The data focus on students' attitudes and beliefs about race, schooling and success based on interview data collected during their weekend seminars in the program. Criteria for participation in the program include: (a) current enrollment in a high school in the large urban school system; (b) a minimum grade point average of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale; and (c) an interest in pursuing a teaching career in an urban setting. Parental and student consent forms

were mailed to the homes of students in the program. A total of twenty students (e.g., 13 females, 7 males, 3 sophomores, and 17 juniors) volunteered to participate in the study after these forms were returned to the researcher (see Appendix A for demographic data). All of the participants identified themselves as Black/African American, and their ages ranged from 15-17.[2]

Data Collection and Analysis

All participants completed three subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity scale (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, 1998). The subscales included items regarding racial centrality, racial private regard, and racial public regard. This instrument was used because of interest in three broad topical areas: (a) understanding the significance of race to these students' self-definition (racial centrality); (b) the extent to which each student held positive or negative feelings about his membership in the racial group (racial private regard); and (c) students' perceptions of societal beliefs about their racial group (racial public regard). This data informed the construction of an interview protocol that allowed for a qualitative inquiry of how students described and understood these concepts. I believe that understanding how these students view themselves as racial beings and assess their membership in a racial group might shed light on how their racial identity shapes their school behaviors and academic performance.

One semi-structured individual interview was conducted with each participant. All interviews were audiotaped and conducted in private meeting rooms at a community center in the city of the K-12 urban district and lasted between 60-75 minutes. Given my interest in how students' racial and achievement self-conceptions informed their schooling behaviors, interview questions focused on students' perceptions of their school experiences, attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling for future success, motivations and support systems for school persistence, racial identity, and perceptions of the impact of race on their schooling experiences and academic outcomes. The AtlasTi qualitative software program (Lewins & Silver, 2007) was instrumental in helping with the coding and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts.[3]

Findings

The following analysis illustrates how study participants expressed the centrality of race to their self-definition, their embodiment of a critical race consciousness, and how the interrelatedness of a positive racial self-conception and critical race consciousness informed their attitudes and beliefs about the pragmatic value of academic persistence for becoming upwardly mobile. These findings are unique in that these concepts are not only evident among the urban high-achievers (GPA of 3.3-4.0) but also among the average-achievers (GPA of 2.5-3.2) and low-achievers (GPA below 2.5) in the study. For this reason, I stress that the combination of a positive racial identity, critical race consciousness and pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling enables these Black students to *persist* in school. In all

cases, their persistence may not lead to high academic performance. Thus, one might conclude that the combination of these three concepts is necessary—but not entirely sufficient—as a recipe for high academic achievement among Black students. Nonetheless, these ingredients prove helpful for increased academic success for these adolescents.

Evidence of High Racial Centrality

Several participants described race as being central to their self-definition. Many of their reasons stemmed not only from an awareness of the historical struggles of African Americans in the United States, but also from a sense of their ancestors overcoming many of those struggles. When asked about the importance of seeing oneself as Black or African American, some students spoke explicitly about slavery as an experience in which African Americans overcame much adversity. For these students, a sense of connectedness to their racial group's collective past motivated them to continue the pursuit of positive life outcomes. Xionne (age 16, 3.4 GPA) stated: "I love being Black. . . . you know? Since slavery times, we've overcome a lot and a lot of things that we've done in the world [have] changed it." Maria (age 16, 2.8 GPA) made a similar comment in stating, "I think it [being Black] is important, because of the things that happened in the past, like, with slavery and stuff like that." While not specific to slavery, Thomas (age 15, 3.3 GPA) also expressed a connectedness to the Black community based on the group's historical challenges.

> I know what my ancestors went through to, ummm, make it possible for me to just go to school and become successful, and it just makes me proud to be Black because others did so much so I can succeed.

These students are proud to be Black based on an awareness of their ancestors' perseverance in life. A connection with the racial group's history of oppression and overcoming gives these students a sense of meaning and purpose.

For some of the male students in the study, reflecting on being a *Black male* in the U.S. informed their thoughts about the significance of race to their self-definition and future goals. For example, Mike (age 16, 3.9 GPA) stated:

> Being a young Black man is incredibly hard in our society, and not too many of us get the chance to, uh, to do well and succeed and become the man that we would really like to be. . . . I'm proud to be a young black man, because statistics are against me, and I'm very determined and motivated to, uh, get up on those statistics and prove them wrong. So me, I can't forget who I am or the race that I am, you know? That's not an option. . . . I think it's very important [to see himself as Black/African American], because if I don't, if I didn't know and embrace my, uh, my ethnicity, then I wouldn't have known where I come from… I don't think I would get to where I want to go if I don't know where I come from.

Percy (age 16, 2.8 GPA) echoed similar sentiments as Mike.

> It [being Black] gives me a motivation, boost, because things [that are] said about African Americans. It makes me ambitious to reach my goals, because of what's

> said about African Americans, like, Black males in jail. [Interviewer: Are you proud to be African American?] Yes. Because that piece of ambition that I seem to have, what my ancestors have been through, that's the biggest part of me wanting to go to school and wanting to graduate. So that I'll turn the eyes [of others].

Mike and Percy perceived that the interaction of race and gender potentially present more complicated barriers for them to overcome in schooling and life. This realization motivated them to want to "prove wrong" negative societal stereotypes about Black males and serves as a constant reminder of the negative consequences of not utilizing school as a vehicle for avoiding jail as a future outcome. Both boys also connected their motivations to succeed to a pride in the legacy of their ancestors. Mike further elaborated by highlighting the importance of working harder simply because he is a *Black* person. "My race has been a motivating factor for me to want to do well in school, because I know that I have to work for everything I want, based on what I said earlier." It is these boys' understanding that membership in a racially subdominant group does not always come with privileges in the dominant society that gives Mike and Percy motivation to not become a "statistical" Black male.

For other participants, remembering the struggles of their Black ancestors during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s instilled a sense of pride in being connected to the Black community. Naomi (age 16, non-GPA school) expresses, "years ago, people worked hard to put their foot down and not let us be called out of our names, so I'm proud of who I am because I know people worked hard for me." For Corey (age 16, 2.1 GPA), identifying as Black was important, because "Black people overcame a lot of stuff in the past, and me goin[g] to school is just proving how successful they were."

In all of these cases, students described a pride in being connected members of their racial group. Participants expressed the significance of Black familialism and kin networks to their self-definition based on knowledge of ancestral struggles. Mike and Percy exuded confidence in their abilities to 'beat the odds' which they perceived as being stacked against Black males in America. Because of this awareness, the males were more determined to succeed in school. For all of these student participants, African American heritage represented something to be revered and is not shameful. Further, these individuals described high racial centrality as part of their core identity. The salience of race in their lives was one factor that allowed them to persevere academically.

Critical Race Consciousness

In describing the importance of race to their self-definition, many participants alluded to racial inequity in society. These students' conception of their Blackness was informed by an awareness of historical racial oppression in the U.S. It is this type of awareness that scholars suggest helps Black students develop defensive mechanisms for battling discrimination in school and the larger society (Bailey & Moore, 2005; Perry, 2003; Ward, 2000). Many of the adolescents in this study understood their caste-like positioning in society; however, it did not result in them developing a

victim mentality about their status as members of a racially discriminated group; rather, they worked harder and persisted in school, believing that the opportunity structure is open to them. Their attitudes and beliefs highlighted an awareness of asymmetrical power relationships between Blacks and dominant group members in society (in this case, White Americans). For many of the study participants, a critical race consciousness was present in the framing of their attitudes and beliefs about race and its relationship to schooling and upward mobility.

In the study, participants further discussed the reality that racism existed in the larger society, even if they do not perceive that they experience it daily within the walls of their predominantly Black school environments. For example, when asked if there were any disadvantages to being African American, several students alluded to the challenges they and other members of their racial group might face in the job market. For example, Teri (age 16, 2.9 GPA) stated: "You might not get a job that you want, because we still have racism in the world, and some people may look at the color of your skin and still say that you can't have a job." Aligned with this statement, Percy's critical race consciousness was exhibited in his analysis of Whites as holding dominant power positions in certain job-related contexts where Blacks are concerned.

> Just waking up every morning, you know, if you have the interview, what if the boss or the supervisors are white, how are they going to look at you? You dress up to look like you're from a good neighborhood, but still the color of your skin—You can have a masters degree, everything you can think of, good English, nice shape, nice look, and just the color of the skin can just sink the job . . . and that's a big disadvantage because you wonder, you'll beat yourself up about what didn't I do, and the truth is you did everything. You were just born African American and you can't change that.

Percy indicated that he perceived this as racism or prejudice. He integrated his critical understanding of White superiority and Black inferiority as it is constructed in society into his construction of achievement beliefs. His earlier remarks regarding racial centrality—coupled with this critical consciousness about race in society—motivated him to "want to go to school and graduate." Instead of being discouraged by the negative racial realities that he may face in the world, Percy adjusts his attitude to confront them.

Maria also expressed an awareness of power differentials between Blacks and Whites in America through her discussion of affirmative action as a policy that serves to equalize the playing field. When asked if there were any disadvantages to being Black in America, she stated:

> I think there are a lot of disadvantages [to being Black], because in this world that we live in today, most of the white people or Caucasian people think that they are higher than the Black race or they think they can do better or they can make more money than Black people today, and they, not all of them, some of them want to put us down and act like we're lower than them or something like that. So I think those are the disadvantages to being Black. And like with affirmative action how

> they're trying to vote it out. I think that affirmative action is good for our race, because affirmative action is trying to help us get into colleges, and I think that with it being gone, that we might not have a good chance of getting in as we did before because—again—some racists don't want Black people to succeed in life.

Similar to Percy's remarks, Maria recognized racial inequality through race privileging in society. Her critical race consciousness was evidenced in her understanding of socially constructed racial hierarchies that become realities for Blacks in America as members of the racial group attempt to advance through higher education. O'Connor's (1997) research highlighted similar evidence of sentiments by urban Black youth who expressed a critical understanding of racial inequality in America.

Participants' comments underscored their awareness of the asymmetrical power relationships between Blacks and Whites and how White privilege disadvantages many Blacks. Counter to existing research which suggests that the awareness of limited opportunity structures results in Black students resisting academic engagement (Ogbu, 1991, 2003), many of these students persevered and maintained high academic achievement despite racism as a potential obstacle. Even in instances where these students' academic performance is less-than-average, they understood that schooling was a valuable way for them to pursue their life goals (as will be illustrated in the next section); thus, they grappled with ways to turn their mediocre and low performance into higher performance. Similar to findings from previous research, these students evidenced high racial awareness and resist race- and gender-based discrimination through academic persistence (Sanders, 1997). Their critical race consciousness and pride in being members of the Black community were two elements that enabled them to develop strategies for succeeding in the school context and pursuing their future goals.

The Utility of Schooling

Participants' positive attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling for future success stemmed from their positive racial identity and critical race consciousness. Their achievement ideologies support Perry's (2003) notion that African Americans have a long history of viewing education as a vehicle for upward social and economic mobility. All of the participants expressed a desire to continue their education beyond high school. Further, several students aspired to become entrepreneurs, after obtaining four-year degrees. When asked if they looked forward to going to school and what were some of the advantages of doing well in high school, participants' responses reflected an astute understanding that completing high school and immediately entering the workforce is not the best option for pursuing their dreams. In this spirit, several students highlighted the importance of maintaining good grades in high school as a way to build networks for later in life. For example, James (age 16, 3.2 GPA) asserted: "[school] builds up your knowledge from my standpoint, and when you do well in school somebody is bound to notice. And that somebody can help you get into college." Cindy (age 16, 3.2 GPA) also echoed similar sentiments:

20

> One advantage [to doing well in school] is getting to college and understanding what you're doing there. . . You get to interact with other people, which is very important—especially in the job field where you have to interact with people you might not even know.

Both James and Cindy recognized that high school was a stepping stone to positive future opportunities, and performing well at this level will help them develop the necessary skills to succeed at the postsecondary level. Percy also expressed the utility of schooling as central to his ability to provide for the family that he envisioned for himself in the future.

> It's [school] giving me the opportunity to show everybody that African Americans don't just go through high school and then say, 'You know, put that to the side and I'll go the next year,' and then never go and just do plant work or street work. So this is the opportunity for me to go to school and make something of myself so I can look back and have my kids proud of me so they can say my daddy did go to school right after high school.

For Percy, pursuing a college education was important to him being able to be a role model to his future children and provide a financially stable home environment for them. He acknowledged a societal stereotype that many Black students do not pursue education beyond high school and desired to prove it wrong. Percy also recognized that a high school education alone will not allow him to maintain the quality of life that he desires for his future. Mike's thoughts provided a comprehensive explanation for why schooling was a viable option for upward mobility in society.

> Cause there's no way to get ahead. There's no other way to get ahead in a positive way than being credentialed. There's no decent, adequate jobs out here on the job market. . . .Doing well in school can get you a degree, and it can, uh, if you do your networking, it can put you with the, uh, necessary means and people to help you stay on the right track and help you move forward in your career. . . .You don't just take the minimum amount from school. You take everything from it that you can and try to apply it in the world, because you can definitely succeed with a good education.

Mike exhibited a pragmatic attitude about high school and college as necessary steps in his plan to get a "good" job. His critical outlook evidenced a strategic-like approach to school as a place where you "take" as many materials, ideas and strategies that can be beneficial to pursuing future goals. He understands schooling as valuable for building relationships that can be useful throughout one's professional career.

Although not clearly evident in some of their remarks, these students' attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling were informed by their positive racial self-conceptions, belief in their abilities to be successful, and their critical race consciousness. Further, these students' connectedness to the Black community, awareness of racism as a potential barrier to their success, and belief that they can be Black and persist in school shaped their views about schooling as a necessary

process for moving ahead in life (Oyserman et al., 1995). While an understanding of these students' attitudes and beliefs was important to helping them maintain their academic persistence, knowing how to nurture the development of positive racial self-conceptions and a critical race consciousness in these youth was equally important.

Discussion

Findings from the data presented indicate that having positive feelings about one's racial group and having a sense of connectedness to the group can be instrumental in supporting Black student academic achievement. Participants express a pride in being connected to the African American racial group, despite a racial group history of extreme adversity. They all viewed themselves as being able to achieve within the context of being Black; thus, they did not see achievement as an ideal that was separate from who they were as *Black* people. These two aspects were central in Oyserman et al.'s (1995) African American Identity Schema. Most of the high-achieving, many of the average-achieving, and some of the low-achieving students described a critical race consciousness that facilitates their motivation to persist in school and pursue enhanced life trajectories.

Similar to findings from prior research, the data revealed that embodying a critical race consciousness can be helpful to pursuing high academic achievement (Carter, D.J., 2005; Mehan et al., 1994; O'Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997; Ward, 2000). Recognizing that this alone will not ensure academic success, understanding what facilitates the development of this consciousness is helpful to nurturing urban student success. Students in this study were not as explicit in discussing how they gained such an awareness of racial inequality in America. However, previous research sheds light on the factors that contribute to Black students becoming critically race conscious. In prior studies, students have identified positive racial socialization as a primary factor in their development of critical race consciousness. Ward (2000) describes this type of socialization as beginning at home with parents. In many instances, Black parents socialize their children to have a racial identity that is grounded in the historical racism that African Americans have experienced and their own personal experiences with racial discrimination. Further, Ward asserts:

> Black parents have a special, and difficult, responsibility: to orient our black children to a social system in which they are devalued. We must teach our children that they may be victimized by racism, yet we must also be careful not to allow our children to adopt a victim mentality. (p. 35)

In this study, students do not adopt a victim mentality; rather, racial adversity motivates them to counter societal stereotypes about members of their racial groups and persevere in their academic pursuits. In Sanders' (1997) research, students indicated that they gained their critical awareness through observations of and conversations with their parents, who explicitly or implicitly transmitted their racial attitudes and coping strategies to their children. High-achieving, low-income, urban youth in a predominantly White suburban high school also indicated learning about White

privilege and Black disadvantage from their parents and the necessity of using education as a way to counter existing stereotypes about Black intellectual performance (Carter, D. J., 2005). Ward (2000) suggests that students "learn to cultivate healthy psychological resistance in order to withstand and oppose the reality of racial oppression and to take a stand for that which affirms personal self-worth and self-determination" (p. 179).

While Black parents play a critical role in helping their children develop healthy resistance, teachers can also be instrumental in socializing Black adolescents to have positive racial identities that include an awareness of racial discrimination. This is not simply a job for same-race teachers but *all* teachers of Black students. Black high school students have identified Black and White teachers as being very consistent in reiterating the counternarrative of Black achievement that facilitates the development of positive achievement beliefs and subsequent academic adjustment (Carter, D. J., 2005). Having these types of teacher role models proves critical for achievement motivation for African American youth. In many ways, teachers who are willing to be explicit with students of color about the structural barriers that can potentially impede their social and economic mobility practice an ethic of care with their students (Nieto, 2004). Having the support of caring Black and non-Black adults in the school environment has proven to be a major factor in the academic performance of high-achieving Black students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Nieto, 2004). These kinds of teachers and adults in the school are cultural brokers, leaders, and mediators who provide Black adolescents with the skills they need to persist in school and become upwardly mobile. When parents and teachers nurture positive racial socialization for Black students, they help these students become and remain high achievers who have strong racial and achievement self-concepts (Carter, D. J., 2005). Black parents must be race-conscious in their parenting practices (Tatum, 1997; Ward, 2000), and teachers (Black and non-Black) must be committed to social justice education—that is, implementing instructional practices that develop in students a critical consciousness to question and act upon structural inequities in society (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Aside from positive racial socialization, there are steps that urban schools can take to facilitate the development of a critical race consciousness in their Black students. First, these institutions must be committed to being counterhegemonic in their practice (Perry, 2003). Many urban schools serve students who are primarily low-income and students of color. While the clients (i.e., students) are primarily members of oppressed groups, the power structure remains oppressive in its practices and operations. Lowered expectations, inadequate curricula, and lowly-qualified teachers plague many urban schools. While African American students might not perceive these infrastructures as discriminatory, schools that operate in such a manner perpetuate society's negative ideology about Black intellect (Ferguson, 2002; Perry, 2003). Urban schools need to be intentional about socializing Black students to academic-oriented behaviors and teaching strategies for school success. This can be done in a manner that allows Black students to see that being Black includes

achieving at high levels. Additionally, schools need to be explicit in talking about the structural inequities that represent potential obstacles to school success for low-income and racial minority students. This ought to occur at a programmatic level, a curricular level, and a classroom level. In this way, a three-pronged approach is being used to facilitate the development of a critical race consciousness among urban Black youth—a model where parents, teachers, and schools (and systems operating within schools) are working toward a common goal.

Conclusion

> My life goal is to go to college and become something, because I see too many people not doing anything and I don't want to turn out like that. So my motivation is to actually become something and be a role model for someone else so they can grow up and do something with their life. (Marie, age 17, 2.8 GPA)

Many urban youth aspire to do the same things that Marie mentions in the above quote. In many cases these dreams are not actualized, because urban youth are not equipped with the proper academic and social skills necessary for college readiness. Often, these students have objective probabilities for their future, but their subjective realities result in lowered aspirations or dreams deferred. Embodying a critical consciousness about racial inequality in schools and society allows Black students to situate their academic and life goals in realities of social inequity. This type of consciousness does not have to result in students internalizing a victim mentality; rather, it can ignite academic motivation and perseverance.

Nurturing the development of a critical race consciousness in African American adolescents is one way to pass on the counternarrative that Perry (2003) speaks about. Perry posits that these narratives—oral and written—depict the historical significance of education for freedom that has long been central to the identity formation of Blacks as intellectuals. When parents, teachers, schools, and community members embrace the importance of these counternarratives, we begin to understand the role that racial caste-group status has played in the varying levels of academic performance for Black youth. A critical race consciousness is a counternarrative, because it "stands in opposition to the dominant society's notions about the intellectual capacity of African Americans, the role of learning in their lives, the meaning and purpose of school, and the power of their intellect" (Perry, 2003, 49). It is not the end-all, be-all to high academic achievement, but the connectedness to one's racial group, awareness of racial discrimination, and self-perspective as a succeeding member of the racial group can certainly buffer Black students' experiences with structural barriers that they face in achieving their life goals.

Notes

[1] Throughout this article, I use the terms Black and African American interchangeably to refer to people of African descent through North American slavery.

[2] Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this study.

[3] See www.atlasti.com for further explanation of the use of this qualitative data analysis tool.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Demographic Information on Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Grade Level	Cumulative GPA (on a 4.0 scale)
Mesha	Female	17	Junior	3.0
Lisa	Female	16	Sophomore	2.4
James	Male	16	Junior	3.2
Mike	Male	16	Junior	3.9
Teri	Female	16	Junior	2.9
Eric	Male	16	Junior	3.0
Joe	Male	17	Junior	2.7
Chanel	Female	17	Junior	2.9
Christina	Female	16	Junior	2.7
Tiffany	Female	16	Junior	3.5
Courtney	Female	16	Junior	2.3
Maria	Female	16	Junior	2.8
Percy	Male	16	Junior	2.8
Xionne	Female	16	Junior	3.4

Table 1. Demographic Information on Participants (Continued)

Name	Gender	Age	Grade Level	Cumulative GPA (on a 4.0 scale)
Leslie	Female	16	Junior	2.5
Corey	Male	16	Junior	2.1
Thomas	Male	15	Sophomore	3.3
Cindy	Female	16	Junior	3.2
Marie	Female	17	Junior	2.8
Naomi	Female	16	Junior	Non-GPA school