Achievement as Resistance: 
The Development of a Critical 
Race Achievement Ideology among 
Black Achievers

DORINDA J. CARTER 
Michigan State University

In this article, Dorinda Carter examines the embodiment of a critical race achievement ideology in high-achieving black students. She conducted a yearlong qualitative investigation of the adaptive behaviors that nine high-achieving black students developed and employed to navigate the process of schooling at an upper-class, predominantly white, suburban public high school while maintaining school success and a positive racial self-definition. Based on an analysis of interview data, participant observations, and field notes, Carter argues that these students' conceptions of race and how race operates in their daily lives informs their constructions of achievement beliefs, attitudes, and self-definitions and informs their racialization and deracialization of the task of achieving at various times in the school context. Findings from this study indicate that students with strong racial and achievement identities may develop a critical race achievement ideology and enact resilient, adaptive behaviors in racially challenging contexts.

Introduction

Many individuals hold deeply to the idea that the United States is "the land of opportunity," where people can go as far as their own merit takes them. In other words, one's social and economic mobility are achieved primarily through individual effort and hard work; regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, or other social identity, individuals can claim a piece of the American Dream by "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps." This idea that individual agency is the primary determinant of social and economic mobility and success is commonly known as the myth of meritocracy.¹ Not only do many
individuals think that the system of obtaining upward mobility should operate based on individual merit, they also believe that this is how the system actually does operate in the United States (MacLeod, 1987). In this ideology, structural conditions (e.g., joblessness, poverty, racism, classism, sexism, etc.) do not prohibit or even constrain individuals from achieving their personal goals.

This myth of meritocracy can also apply to schooling, suggesting that people who demonstrate high performance through hard work and individual effort in formal education can achieve positive future outcomes. Students who espouse this mainstream achievement ideology (MacLeod, 1987) about schooling typically believe that "if I work really hard and always put forth maximal effort in school, I can achieve my current and future goals." Like the larger myth within U.S. society, this ideology is typically associated with the beliefs and attitudes that white and/or middle-class students hold about the value of schooling (O’Connor, 1997). The mainstream achievement ideology requires individuals to take ownership of their successes and failures, and it fails to account for structural conditions that might constrain or even impede students’ abilities to achieve their maximum potentials in school and life. To extend the bootstraps metaphor, the fact that some individuals come to school with no laces for their boots—or no boots at all—is seldom considered. Similarly, that many students are afforded or denied access to opportunities based on the perceived value of their boots is also often an afterthought or simply never considered.

In this article, I investigate a conceptual gap in the current literature on race and achievement ideology by applying the lens of critical race theory to consider the achievement ideologies of nine high-achieving African American students attending a predominantly white public high school. I first provide an overview of the current discourse regarding the relationship between race, achievement ideology, and school behaviors of African American students. I then discuss critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) as an analytical framework to challenge the boundaries of mainstream achievement ideology and provide a lens for understanding how race and racism can inform one’s attitudes and beliefs about schooling. I then propose six tenets of a critical race achievement ideology (CRAI), which emerges both from my research participants’ descriptions of their experiences and from other empirical work. Ultimately, CRAI provides a new concept of successful African American students’ approaches to school achievement.

African Americans, Achievement Ideology, and School Behaviors

Do African American students believe schooling is a vehicle for their upward social and economic mobility? If so, do their school behaviors promote school success? What roles do race and racism play in shaping black students’ schooling dispositions and academic performance? Decades of research related to these questions have yielded varied answers, indicating that African Americans
cannot be examined as a monolithic group, especially regarding their beliefs about the utility of schooling and their subsequent school behaviors. What we have learned from this research is that black students’ perceptions of schooling as a racialized and classed process inform the way they adjust to the learning environment, and their behaviors can play out as either adaptive or maladaptive for school success. What is missing from the literature is an explicit examination of how racial and achievement self-perceptions interact to shape students’ achievement ideologies and school behaviors, particularly adaptive behaviors. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature.

The ethnographic research of John Ogbu (1978, 1987, 1991, 2003) is widely cited in characterizing the achievement ideology of black students and their resultant school behavior. His work, both alone (1991, 2003) and in partnership with Herbert Simons (1998), uses a cultural-ecological framework to suggest that many black students hold negative beliefs about the link between schooling and opportunity. Specifically, they do not view schooling as an avenue for achieving positive life outcomes because they perceive race-based labor market discrimination as a relatively permanent barrier that cannot be overcome through the educational system. Both a shared history of discrimination and the perception that schools are primarily controlled by whites lead black students to actively resist activities and behaviors associated with academic success, since these activities are equated with assimilation into the white middle class and thus viewed as compromising a black social identity and group solidarity. Ogbu asserts that the collective and oppositional ideology of many black students leads to maladaptive behavioral strategies for school and subsequent relatively poor academic success. Where the cultural-ecological analysis falls short is in considering how individuals’ self-perceptions inform their ideological constructions and resulting school behaviors. This process is inherently cultural and, in part, shaped by individual perceptions of societal structures.

Other research linking the achievement ideology and school behaviors of black students describes these students as embodying incongruent attitudes and behaviors. Described as an attitude-achievement paradox, research posits that some black students believe in the mainstream achievement ideology but do not exhibit school behaviors that support high academic performance (Ford, 1991; Mickelson, 1990). These adolescents value education in the abstract, believing that hard work and individual effort result in a high return on investment. However, their concrete attitudes are informed by their perceptions of the American opportunity structure, perceptions that differ based on the ways in which race, ethnicity, and social class shape individuals’ and groups’ experiences within this opportunity structure (Mickelson, 1990). Similar to Ogbu’s work, this argument recognizes how the interaction between structural conditions and individual agency can affect academic achievement. However, it does not closely consider the connections between how black students’ thoughts about the significance of race to their lives and the signifi-
cance of achievement to their self-definition inform the embodiment of mal-adaptive school behaviors and subsequent academic underperformance.

A growing body of psychological and sociological literature highlights the significance of understanding racial identity and its relationship to achievement ideologies and school behaviors. Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) posit that an individual's beliefs about the significance of race will influence his or her behavior during specific events in a specific context. For example, in the school context, heightened racial salience (or the extent to which one's race is a relevant part of one's self-concept at a particular moment or in a particular situation) might moderate the extent to which one's racial beliefs influence his or her interpretation of a specific event in school and subsequent behavior in response to this event. A black student who has strong racial pride and heightened sensitivity to negative intellectual stereotypes about his or her racial group may take on a prove-them-wrong attitude in the classroom where those stereotypes exist (D. Carter, 2005). This type of higher racial salience is related to higher academic achievement (Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1988). The psychological work of Robert Sellers and his colleagues is a move in the right direction toward examining the significance that some black students attribute to "blackness" as being part of their self-definition and how this informs their achievement ideology, school behaviors, and academic performance. However, Sellers et al. do not focus on the interrelatedness of racial and achievement self-conceptions and the resulting achievement ideologies.

In addition to the work of Robert Sellers and his colleagues (Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), other educational scholars who use sociological frameworks suggest that some students of color can successfully negotiate primary and dominant cultural codes in school in order to acquire academic success while also affirming and maintaining strong pride in their racial and ethnic heritages within the school context. Gibson (1988) calls this "accommodation without assimilation." Some students of color, who believe education can be a vehicle for upward mobility, strive to do well in school by acquiring the cultural codes required for school success while also recognizing the value of their own cultures, navigating effectively between their primary cultures and the dominant culture. Prudence Carter (2005) calls these types of students "cultural straddlers" and describes them as "having" bicultural perspectives; they are strategic movers across the cultural spheres" (p. 30). She characterizes these students as those who "play the game" of schooling (i.e., "do school"), embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community, or verbally critique the mainstream culture of schooling while simultaneously performing well academically.

Other sociological research has described these cultural straddlers in similar but unique ways, emphasizing that these students' knowledge of a limited opportunity structure does not constrain their academic and life pursuits. These scholars note that structural barriers such as racism and other forms
of discrimination do not discourage these students from achieving their goals (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Flores-González, 2002; Floyd, 1996; Hemmings, 1996; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; O'Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997). What differentiates these black achievers from other black students who develop strategies for maintaining academic success is that they do not view school success as white property; therefore, they do not contend with the burden of "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or feel the need to demonstrate "racelessness" (Fordham, 1988) in order to achieve in school. These students resist and defy these ideas by embracing the notion that school achievement is a raceless human trait that can be pursued by individuals of any racial or ethnic group. These and other researchers find that some black students maintain academic success by developing an acute understanding that, although racism might block their success, they will develop adaptive strategies for navigating this barrier in school; thus, maintaining a positive racial self-conception facilitates this process. This type of achievement ideology includes more nuanced constructions of how race might operate as a structural barrier to constrain one's success.

While the work of these scholars contributes to our understanding of how black achievers navigate the process of schooling in culturally affirming ways, absent from the literature is a focus on understanding the implications of embodying such an ideology in a predominantly white public school setting. Additionally, the complicated nature of how some black students situationally racialize and/or deracialize the task of achieving academic success also has not been explicitly studied. This study attempts to address gaps in the existing discourse on African Americans, achievement ideology, and school behaviors by focusing on the interrelatedness of students' racial and achievement conceptions, their achievement ideology, and their resultant adaptive school behaviors in a predominantly white learning environment. This work combines the psychological and sociological discourses to arrive at a new understanding of how race and achievement ideologies inform black students' school success.

Critical Race Theory and Achievement Ideology: A New Lens

One way to examine and better understand black students' racial constructions as they relate to their thoughts about schooling is through a critical race theory (CRT) framework. CRT began as a legal movement by activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Today, many educational scholars use CRT to analyze racial injustice in schools as it is enacted through educational issues, policies, and ideology (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This approach challenges the mainstream achievement ideology, which dismisses any presence of social inequality in the United States and any structural conditions that might interact with people's exertion of individ-
ual agency to achieve upward mobility. CRT acknowledges the significant role of various forms of discrimination that impede the achievement of black students and other members of subordinate racial and ethnic groups. The basic tenets of CRT focus on:

1. racism as normal in American society and strategies for exposing it in its various forms;
2. the significance of experiential knowledge and the use of 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. challenges to 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. an examination of race and racism across disciplinary fields (e.g., psychology and education).

According to Roithmayr (1999), "Critical race theory can be used to 'deconstruct' the meaning of 'educational achievement'" (p. 5). As an analytical framework, it furthers our understanding of how race and racism inform black students' achievement ideology and school behaviors, and it counters the hegemonic myth of meritocracy that leads individuals to believe that racism, as a structural barrier, is nonexistent. Therefore, the intersection of critical race theory and the mainstream achievement ideology calls for a different kind of achievement ideology that considers how the structural condition of racism interacts with black students' individual agency in their pursuit of academic success and upward social and economic mobility.

An examination of the data presented in this article reveals an achievement ideology held by these high-achieving black students that counters Ogbu's and Mickelson's theories. These students have an achievement ideology that is collective and resistant in nature rather than collective and oppositional. Instead of embodying romantic tenets of the mainstream achievement ideology (Mehan et al., 1994), these students view achievement as a means to an end, considering what it means to achieve as a black person. By conceptualizing success in the context of being a proud member of the black community, some participants develop an achievement ethos that reflects an understanding of success despite systemic forces that oppress black people in society. Even though studies show that some black students with a high awareness of racial discrimination respond in resilient ways using strategies that are conducive to academic success, seeing race as an important aspect of one's self-definition and being aware of the effects of racism on one's life is not enough to sustain academic achievement and school success (Oyserman, Gant, & Áger, 1995). According to Oyserman, Gant, and Áger (1995), a third dimension of an African American identity is needed to maintain school persistence and
high levels of performance. These and other scholars posit that black youth must conceptualize achievement as occurring within, rather than separate from, the context of being African American in order to sustain high levels of school success (Azibo, 1991; Oyserman et al., 1995; Perry, 2003). In other words, being academically successful and being black cannot be perceived as dichotomous, nor can academic success be viewed as a white character trait.

By conceptualizing achievement as embedded within one's sense of self as an African American, youths will not experience contradiction and tension between achievement and their African American identity (Oyserman et al., 1995). Thus, school success is dependent on (1) seeing oneself as a member of the racial group (i.e., connectedness); (2) being aware of stereotypes and limitations to one's present and future social and economic outcomes (i.e., awareness of racism); and (3) developing a perspective of self as succeeding as a racial group member (i.e., achievement as an African American) (Oyserman et al., 1995). Oyserman's work is theoretical in nature and does not include empirical data that highlights the voices of black students. The present study extends these theoretical constructions by illuminating explicit instances where black students' ideas and behaviors confirm Oyserman's conceptualization.

Research Questions

This study investigates an important gap in the current literature on race and achievement by asking if the lens of critical race theory can illuminate ways that successful African American students in a highly racialized context may use resistant or adaptive approaches to support their school success. This article explores how successful African American students shift from the mainstream achievement ideology through an examination of the schooling attitudes and beliefs of nine high-achieving black students attending a predominantly white, suburban public high school. Research questions guiding this investigation include:

1. How do high-achieving African American students describe and understand the behaviors they employ in classroom, social, and extracurricular domains in a predominantly white high school?
2. How do these students' perceptions of values, behavioral norms, and expectations in these domains inform the behaviors they employ in these different domains within the school context?
3. How, if at all, do these students view these domains as fundamentally different along racial lines?

By using CRT to examine students' responses related to these questions, race and racism become central to deconstructing black students' schooling experiences in a predominantly white learning environment. Their lived experiences become counternarratives about the role of race in shaping some black students' achievement ideologies and school behaviors.
Achievement as Resistance

DORINDA J. CARTER

My study adds to the literature by exploring the unique achievement ideology of my participants: They are able to undertake the complicated work of viewing achievement as a human, raceless trait while simultaneously viewing the task of achieving as racialized. As a theoretical concept, my study attempts to shift the paradigm of current thinking about how one's attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling couple with adaptive behavioral strategies for school success by highlighting the continued presence of racism as a structural barrier to this success. While there are other forms of discrimination that might also impede students' achievement (e.g., sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc.), in this study race emerges as a salient factor as these high-achieving black students navigate their predominantly white high school context and develop adaptive behavioral strategies to maintain school success and a positive racial self-conception.

Here I want to clarify how the key terminology of achievement and success are being used in this article. I use the term school success to characterize both academic and social success. I believe that school success should not simply be measured by an individual's academic performance but also by achievement in the extracurricular activities in which he or she participates and by an individual's ability to maintain acceptance by the social groups of which he or she desires to be a part; thus, school success is a holistic outcome of positive child development. More broadly defined, success is the achievement of a desired outcome related to an individual's quality of life, such as completing high school, entering college, or owning a business. In this study, the students' measures of school success included getting good grades, feeling good about themselves, having a strong social support network, and being goal oriented (D. Carter, 2005). They considered success beyond high school to be going to college, obtaining financial stability, and achieving specific career aspirations, among other things (D. Carter, 2005). In this article, my use of the term achievement indicates a student's accomplishment of specific tasks or goals. I refer to both academic success and academic achievement as a student's ability to maintain high performance in academic courses at the school.

Methodology

Research Site

I collected this interview and observational data between September 2003 and May 2004 at Independence High School, a predominantly white, upper-class, suburban, four-year comprehensive public high school in eastern Massachusetts. Of the 2,181 students enrolled during the 2003–2004 school year, approximately 80.7 percent were white, 9.5 percent Asian, 5.6 percent black, 4 percent Hispanic, and 0.18 percent American Indian (D. Carter, 2005, p. 64). Of the 121 students identified as black, only eighteen were enrolled in an honors or AP course at the time of this study. Only fifteen African American students in the school had a B (3.0) or higher cumulative grade point average,
approximately 12 percent of the black student population at Independence High—a very bleak statistic. These numbers represented concrete evidence for the principal’s concern over black student underperformance that had existed for several years at Independence High. I believed that examining how race was operating in this learning environment might reveal some information regarding black students’ achievement patterns at Independence. That is, among those black students who were performing at high levels in this type of learning environment, a degree of resiliency to the structural barriers perpetuated by racism might be a factor in their success.

Study Participants

I recruited African American students in tenth through twelfth grade who were identified as high achievers based on enrollment in at least one college prep or honors/AP course, participation in at least one extracurricular activity, and also one or more of the following criteria: a GPA of 2.8 or higher, consistent honor roll status, and/or teacher recommendation. After conducting a screening interview with all students who volunteered to participate, I purposively selected (Maxwell, 1996) nine students (four females and five males) to participate in the study. I was interested in studying students who self-identified as black/African American and were considered high achievers. Some students participated in the local busing program, which allowed African American students from the inner city to attend school in the suburbs. Participants ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen and came from single-parent families, two-parent families, and families with an extended family member (e.g., aunt, uncle, grandmother) as the primary guardian. Table 1 summarizes demographic data for the study sample.

Although each participant self-identified as black or African American, they varied in ethnic identity. Some were born to two African American parents, others had two parents of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, or some had two parents of Caribbean descent. This variation provided an interesting examination of how race and ethnicity impacted these students’ schooling experiences and achievement ideologies. For example, those students born to West Indian parents were considered second-generation immigrants and most closely resembled Mary Waters’s (1999) classification of West Indian students identified as “American” and “Ethnic” in the way that they described their affiliation with African American culture and its significance to their self-definition. For this group, their ethnic heritage was the most salient part of their “racial” identity. For participants with mixed heritages, they described “blackness” as the most salient cultural aspect of their racial identity.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Using the Three-Interview Series method (Seidman, 1998), I conducted three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant. Although each interview followed a protocol, I also explored topics that the participants
TABLE 1 Demographic Data for Study Sample (N = 9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Self-Reported Racial Identification</th>
<th>GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rodney</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>African American and Puerto Rican</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mainly African American and also recognizes Cape Verdean and Haitian roots</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Biracial (Black/White)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Black or West Indian</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimmy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Black/African American and also recognizes West Indian roots</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>African American and also recognizes Jamaican roots</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>African American and also recognizes Haitian roots</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

introduced. I asked students to provide examples of and rationales for their behavioral choices in school. I also asked them to provide examples of how they perceived race as impacting their schooling experiences, if at all. This deeper probing served as an entry into these students’ lives and allowed me to help them make sense of their experiences as well as help me understand how they related these lived experiences from their particular racial/ethnic background to their school experiences and behaviors. All interviews were conducted at the school site, audiotaped, and later transcribed verbatim by an external transcriber. Primary interview questions focused on students’ definitions of success, the construction of their academic and racial self-concepts, and their motivation(s) to succeed. I also asked students whether or not they perceived race to be a factor in their schooling and who and/or what sources of support contributed to their success.

In addition, I shadowed each participant for two consecutive school days and observed his or her behaviors in classroom and nonclassroom settings in the school. After writing several analytic memos about each participant, I observed some participants for an extra school day in order to clarify some of my initial assumptions. After completing the third interview with each participant, I conducted a sixty-minute focus group interview with five of the participants (although all participants were invited, not all could be present). The focus group provided participants with an opportunity to interact with and debate one another as they responded and reacted to each other’s comments regarding questions I used in the individual interviews.
To understand both my participants' attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling in achieving life outcomes and how their perceptions of race and racism factored into behavioral strategies for school success, I used a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through this approach, I inductively developed an analytic framework through constant interaction across the study's data; essentially, the theoretical findings are grounded in the actual data collected (Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, while concepts from the existing literature were considered in my initial analysis of the data (e.g., racism, achievement ideology, racial identity), I used both open and focused coding to analyze my data and allowed codes and larger themes to emerge from the data regarding the interrelatedness of race, racial identity, achievement ideology, and school behaviors (such as critical race consciousness, struggle, burden to succeed, and achievement as a human characteristic). I also employed thematic analysis and narrative analysis and created participant profiles to further examine my data. The narrative summaries and participant profiles were helpful in building cross-case matrices to compare participants' experiences based on emerging themes. This analytic strategy helped me develop the concept of a critical race achievement ideology by pulling together salient themes related to race, achievement ideology, and racism.

Role of the Researcher: Insider Status—Asset and Liability

I believe that my role as a young (twenty-something) African American researcher with both experience as a high school teacher and a schooling background similar to those of the participants proved advantageous for establishing trusting relationships with the students. In an initial informational meeting, I told participants that I had been a high-achieving student who attended predominantly white schools in the South. I described why this study was important to me personally and professionally. Thus, before engaging in any interviews with me, participants learned about me as a researcher and individual and understood what it was that I hoped to learn from them—that is, how they were experiencing their school and what behaviors they employed in the school context. I tried to be as transparent as possible with participants with the hope of establishing a foundational trust. As a result, the students seemed very willing to share stories about their experiences at Independence High with me.

I also believe that my race contributed to the building of these trusting relationships. Many of the participants indicated that they felt more at ease discussing sensitive topics such as race and racism with a person who shared their racial group affiliation. My age was also an asset. Many of the participants stated that I reminded them of an older sister with whom they could share some of the intimacies of their experiences in this predominantly white learning environment. Participants' awareness that I was a former high school math teacher led them to believe that I had firsthand knowledge of the challenges of classroom activity, both from a student perspective and a teacher perspec-
tive. Thus, I was able to develop a rapport of trust with participants because I allowed them to see who I was beyond the role of researcher.

While my identity as a black woman was advantageous to the study, I also believe it posed some challenges. The biggest challenge involved the interview process. Participants had a difficult time describing their identities and analyzing their school experiences through a racial lens. I faced challenges managing my expectations for students’ abilities to answer race questions with their expectations that I would understand what they meant by their limited responses to my interview questions related to race and racism. I assumed that participants would talk openly about race with me because I was black; however, their responses to race questions were shallow in some instances, because they assumed that I could extrapolate meaning from their short answers. Participants would continuously say, “You know what I mean?” because they perceived that our shared racial group heritage meant that I understood their limited responses to race-related questions. I learned that I had to probe further to extrapolate deeper meaning from participants’ limited race talk. In many cases, I had to ask participants to provide concrete examples or stories to clarify their point.

Findings

Overall, my analysis of the data from this study suggests that the achievement ideology of these students incorporates a critical consciousness about the role race plays as a potential structural barrier constraining their school and life success. Rather than espousing beliefs about schooling that lead to maladaptive behaviors and subsequent underachievement, these students have schooling dispositions that facilitate their enactment of resilient adaptive behaviors to navigate what they perceive to be a racially hostile school context (see D. Carter, 2005). My use of the descriptor “resilient” is very intentional, indicating that these students’ stories illuminate their commitment to surmount the negative racialization of the task of achieving in their predominantly white school. In the process of “doing school” in an environment in which academic success is defined in mainstream, hegemonic ways, these students are able to maintain high academic performance and a positive racial self-conception. These students embody a critical race achievement ideology that allows them to both view themselves as achieving within the context of being black and also overcome perceived racism in their school environment.

CRAI emerged from careful analysis of participants’ voices and behaviors in a yearlong qualitative investigation. It is a construct that arises from black achievers’ attitudes and beliefs about the utility of schooling for obtaining positive life outcomes and their understanding of their resilient and adaptive school behaviors for success in a predominantly white learning environment. This achievement ideology has, at its core, 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. Their achievement ideology operates as a strategy to achieve traditional definitions of mainstream success while simultaneously aiding them in redefining success. Although these students attempt to deracialize achievement (i.e., view achievement as a general human trait) in describing their school experiences, they still perceive the task of achievement as racialized based on their experiences with racism in their predominantly white high school.

The remainder of this article focuses on describing the components of CRAI, revealing how this type of ideological disposition represents an acute awareness of and resistance to the mythical bootstraps theory. Throughout this article, I will not detail the ways in which these students' school behaviors represent resilient adaptation to schooling; however, I will provide a few examples so the reader can gain some insight into how a critical race achievement ideology facilitates school success for these nine students and allows them to maintain a strong racial self-concept.

The Development of a Critical Race Achievement Ideology

In my study, the interrelatedness of race and achievement as primary components of these students' identities facilitates the development of the critical race achievement ideology (see Figure 1). These students view themselves as achieving in the context of being black, and, for them, the task of achieving is racialized, given their experiences in a racially biased school context. Although achievement is a part of their self-definition, they construe it as a human characteristic rather than a black or white characteristic (see D. Carter, 2005). Nonetheless, their attitudes and beliefs about achievement are not constructed in a vacuum. I argue that their understandings of how race operates in their daily lives inform their constructions of achievement beliefs, attitudes, and self-definitions and influence their racialization and deracialization of the task of achieving at various times in the school context. Thus, their achievement ideology integrates a sense of individual agency with an awareness and understanding of racism as a structural condition designed to impede upward mobility.

In brief, a critical race achievement ideology is both a psychological and a behavioral framework that considers the act of performing at high levels in school an act of resistance against the mainstream achievement ideology and notions of school success as a white character trait and act. It reflects aspects of Ward's (2000) concept of resistance in that it forms when African American students internalize messages from family members and other adults in their lives that build a strong racial self-concept—resistance born from "love and purpose, racial pride, and connection" (p. 55). It is a resistance for survival in that these black students' psyches are constantly under attack in a learning environment in which their racial group membership is often associated with anti-intellectualism and/or intellectual inferiority.
CRAI primarily originates in students' views of themselves as successful members of their racial group and their school successes as individual and collective racial group accomplishments. These two self-views emanate from strong racial and achievement self-conceptions; participants in this study espouse an achievement ideology that draws on their self-conceptions as racially and academically competent individuals. The positive meaning of race in their everyday lives, as well as the significance of achieving as a member of a subdominant racial group in the United States, informs how these students think about the importance of education and schooling to their future. It also informs the adaptive behaviors and strategies that they enact in order to achieve within a racist environment. In the Independence environment, these black achievers are surmounting what they perceive to be a culturally oppressive learning environment and redefining achievement through the embodiment of a critical race achievement ideology. Using participants' words, I describe the six dimensions of the ideology below.

— Students believe in themselves and feel that individual effort and self-accountability lead to school success.

Possessing a sense of self as an achiever and internalizing the concept of hard work and individual effort are two character traits necessary to sustain school success. Participants in this study possess a belief in self that facilitates their achievement motivation and subsequent enactment of achievement-oriented behaviors in school. For example, Kimmy and Aaron talk about themselves as
good students and describe the roles that hard work and ownership of learning and academic performance play in school success:

A good student is a student that puts forth 100 percent effort at all times... does as much as they can to improve themselves in any particular subject. ... Just gives 100 percent effort and don't slack off. [DC: Do you see yourself as a good student?] I would say so. I would say I'm a good student. ... I know what I wanna get out of life, so you know, I'm just trying to work toward the goals I've set for myself. In order to reach those goals, I know I have to work hard, try the best I can. (Aaron, senior)

[DC: What does it mean to be a good student?] To pretty much work hard. Try your best at whatever you do. Try to achieve. [DC: Do you see yourself as a good student?] Yes. I work hard in school, try to get good grades. ... Like if I'm struggling or not understanding something in class, I always go to my teacher and ask can they explain it, or I ask right after class, or I'll come after school and they'll show me and give me examples of how to do different things. Like I went to my math teacher a lot this year, just cuz I was struggling more than usual. (Kimmy, sophomore)

Kimmy and Aaron both value effort as part of their self-conceptions as being good, successful students. In turn, in large part they hold themselves accountable for their academic successes and failures. Kimmy, for example, explains that she seeks additional help from teachers when she does not clearly understand a concept discussed in class. In their comments, Kimmy and Aaron do affirm the dominant narrative of how one “makes it” in the United States. They believe in the importance of hard work and individual effort for upward social and economic mobility, and they value a strong work ethic because they perceive that the return on investment is quite beneficial. Kimmy and Aaron believe that high school is preparing them “for the outside world of adulthood and independence” and to “go to college.” Steele (1997) posits that this kind of identification with school—such that it is part of one’s self-definition—is necessary to sustain school success. For such an identification to form and persist, one must perceive that one has the skills and resources to prosper in the domain: These students identify with schooling as a domain in which they are accountable to themselves for their outcomes.

Participants in this study tend to attribute their successes to academic competence and hard work and their less-than-satisfactory performance to lack of effort, misguided priorities, and inconsistent focus. They sometimes attribute limitations in their overall ability to succeed to racism experienced in the school context. These students claim ownership for their performance and strive to use their personal strengths to improve their weaknesses. Samantha (a junior) underscores this when articulating that she tries to work on her weak points in school in order to improve her overall self. “If I see that I have a weak point in something, I’m gonna try to work on it, and if I have a strong point in something, then I’m gonna continue to do that.” Kimmy talks about
seeking the help and guidance of teachers after school when she is struggling
with concepts from class. These students believe that their locus of control is
internal rather than external (Weiner, 1986); their academic behaviors and
outcomes are guided by their personal decisions and efforts rather than fate,
luck, or other external factors. (They do, however, also perceive that limita-
tions to their overall success can sometimes be attributed to structural barriers
such as racism, which is characteristic of an external locus of control.)

Students also demonstrate their confidence in self and individual effort in
the goals they set. They believe that their goals are realizable, and their per-
formance in school is consistent with their expectations. For example, Aaron
wants to become a medical doctor or lawyer. He achieved a perfect score on
the SAT, has maintained a high GPA, involves himself in extracurricular activi-
ties, and maintains enrollment in honors and AP courses. He believes he is
taking the necessary steps to acquire the skills that will aid him in meeting
his career goals. His motivation, optimism about his future, and academic
achievement are enhanced by his belief in his abilities and the value of hard
work and his self-accountability for his school success. When asked how impor-
tant he thought his performance in high school is to his future success, Aaron
stated, “I think it’s been very important, cuz if I didn’t do as well as I did, I
don’t think I could have gotten into some of those places [referring to col-
lege acceptances].” Similarly, Rodney (junior) aspires to open his own auto-
body shop after college, and he is taking the necessary business electives in his
senior year to gain the skills that he perceives will be beneficial to operating
a business. It is clear that these students expect to realize their middle- and
upper-class ambitions by maintaining high academic performance in school.
They believe in their personal competence and have strong achievement self-
concepts.

Other research corroborates the link between these beliefs and high aca-
demic performance. O’Connor (1997) found these personal character traits
(i.e., belief in personal competence and strong achievement self-concepts) in
the resilient black students in her study. Similarly, in a study of twenty low-in-
come African American high school seniors, Floyd (1996) found that students
expressed a belief in persistence and optimism as critical resources for being
successful in school. What differentiates my study is the ability of my partici-
ants to articulate their racial salience and centrality and to embody and enact
achievement-oriented behaviors that derive from these articulations.

Belief in one’s abilities and an ethic of hard work, combined with a com-
mitment to hold oneself responsible for achievement outcomes, are neces-
sary ingredients for school success, and study participants utilize this self-confi-
dence to resist experiences with racism in the school context. However, this
character trait alone is not enough to sustain high academic achievement, a
positive racial identity, or a positive future outlook. In fact, O’Connor (1997)
found this to be true with some of her study participants. They did not possess
strategies for overcoming constraints to their social and economic mobility;
they also did not have examples of black role models who overcame barriers to success in their own lives. O'Connor suggests that these students need models and people who can convey to them how to personally negotiate these structural constraints. This finding suggests that other dimensions of a critical race achievement ideology are necessary in order to maintain school success and a strong racial self-concept.

— Students view achievement as a human, raceless character trait embedded in their sense of self as a racial being.

In order to maintain school success without rejecting one's racial identity, the student must develop a perspective of self as a succeeding racial group member. This is a very important component of CRAI. School and life success should not come at the expense of one's racial identity. By conceptualizing achievement as embedded within one's sense of self as a black person, it is unlikely that adolescents will experience contradiction and tension between being an achiever and being black. Rachel (a senior) believes that she is black and smart and emphasizes how her father has instilled this belief in her.

When I was little he used to, like, tell me all the time that I'm black and I'm different from people and for me, I dunno, just I have to work hard because you know white people don't think highly of black people, you know? Stuff like that. . . . It's kinda good cuz in a way I'm really, like, aware of the fact that I'm black. . . . My dad has taught me a lot about my background. So I still know about my history and what it is—what it actually means to be black. And I'm secure in my sense of self. I'm secure in my race and how smart I am.

In feeling secure about her intellect, Rachel views achievement as a human characteristic that can be obtained by anyone, regardless of race; however, the task of achieving is racialized for her because she feels that she has to work harder than other students given her racial identification. Her father has racially socialized her to the world around her, and being an achiever is a character trait embedded in Rachel's self-definition as a black person.

Kimmy also expresses her belief in herself as a succeeding black person: "Well, it's known for black people to struggle and stuff, like, [in] school and everything. And to me, I just feel as though I'm gonna be one of those black people that's gonna make it and prove a lotta people wrong that black people can achieve and do good in school." Kimmy is motivated to prove wrong a negative racial stereotype that she perceives others hold: that African Americans are anti-intellectual and underperform in school. Instead of responding in maladaptive ways, she demonstrates achievement-oriented behaviors in school that allow her to convey to her peers that black students are as intelligent as any other students. Both Rachel and Kimmy do not operate from a deficit mentality about black intellectual capacity; instead, they see achievement as intrinsic to who they are as racial beings. Several scholars and empirical studies suggest that conceptualizing achievement as occurring within the context
of being black sustains high levels of school success (Oyserman et al., 1995; Azibo, 1991; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Thus, my participants do not possess an attitude achievement paradox (Mickelson, 1990; Ogboy & Simons, 1998); their achievement attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are aligned so as to facilitate high academic performance in the school context. This component of CRAI serves to challenge dominant discourses regarding black anti-intellectualism by illustrating how some black students deconstruct normalized conceptions of achievement in order to maintain their own school success.

The alignment of achievement beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors is nurtured in several ways. Many of these students possess strong racial and ethnic self-concepts, which, through positive racial socialization (as seen through the words of Rachel’s father), help them view themselves as successful. As Rodney states, “I like being what I am. I think that my race is very strong, and I like associating myself with that.” This high racial centrality and positive racial regard is nurtured by a counternarrative conveyed by parents who emphasize pride and self-respect as members of the racial group (Perry, 2003; Ward, 2000). This racial socialization also includes messages about expectations for academic achievement. These students’ race-conscious parents are explicit in expressing the importance of high levels of achievement as a member of a subdominant racial group in America. Rachel’s father, for example, encourages her to work twice as hard for her achievement because she is black and “white people don’t think highly of black people.”

School success, then, becomes both an individual goal and a collective goal as a result of receiving these racialized achievement messages. Like Rachel’s father, black parents and other adults in this study are teaching the concepts of collectivism, black familialism, and the value of kin networks. These students develop a collective identity that includes achievement (Bowman & Howard, 1985); it is not oppositional, as Ogboy suggests. As expressed in Kimmy’s earlier remark, students show an awareness of a historic collective struggle within the black community for educational equity and access as a means to upward mobility. Thus, the notion of collective struggle, the salience of group identity, and theories of “making it” produce adaptive instead of maladaptive educational outcomes. O’Connor (1997) also found this to be the case in her research, as students’ knowledge of black struggle did not discourage them from achieving; rather, this knowledge fueled the belief that achievement was possible, since members of the race had already overcome perceived insurmountable barriers such as racism, propelling some students to work harder.

Similarly, students in my study were compelled to achieve based on their knowledge of “black struggle.” Rodney expresses his support for the collective struggle when describing his success as an obligation to members of his racial group: “I’m not sayin’ that I’m trying to move all black people out of the ghettos, but, definitely, I wanna make a difference . . . I wanna succeed.” This view of success as an individual and collective group accomplishment helps students internalize success as a member of a racial group and maintain success
and a strong racial self-definition. This awareness of the black struggle is also indicative of these students' critical race consciousness, another component of the critical race achievement ideology.

— Students possess a critical consciousness about racism and the challenges it poses to their present and future opportunities as well as those of other members of their racial group.

In addition to believing in individual effort and seeing oneself as a succeeding member of the racial group, an individual must possess a critical consciousness about how race informs present and future opportunities in order to resist racism in ways that are adaptive for school success and the maintenance of a strong racial self. Several students demonstrate a critical awareness of the asymmetrical power relationships that exist between blacks and whites in America, and they express high ambitions while simultaneously registering high degrees of critical consciousness. For example, Derek (a senior) describes his perception of the effects of white privilege in his schooling and the larger society: "I think going to school out here, you see it's the white kids who can get bad grades and not do well on SATs and go to Penn State and go to the University of Virginia and go to UMass, but once they meet their quota for us—maybe one or two you gotta accept—and that's it. So that's part of the power." Derek sees racism as operating in both real and potentially imagined ways in his own life. His perception that colleges use quotas to racially diversify their student body is real to him but inaccurate in the larger society; however, he alludes to a critical awareness that white students are advantaged by the color of their skin when college admissions decisions are being made. He acknowledges what he perceives to be a racial hierarchy in U.S. society and describes how it might systemically disadvantage blacks. His awareness of the role race plays in potentially determining his future informs his behavioral responses in order to overcome the obstacle of racism (see D. Carter, 2005). For Derek, the existence of societal racism as a potential barrier to his success motivates him to persist in a school that he perceives as racially hostile. His attitude at Independence is "I'm here to do what I have to do so that when I have a family they won't want for nothing."

Rodney describes his critical awareness of racial differences in educational equity and access when expressing thoughts on civil rights.

There was this white kid who said he didn't believe in civil action. Like if a white kid and a black kid get the same score on a test, and they're trying to get into college, it usually goes to the black kid, right? That's civil rights. Civil action is like the action of civil rights. He said he didn't believe that. He said he shouldn't have to pay for what happened if he wasn't directly connected to that problem [particularly referencing slavery]. . . . I know all the white kids here have tutors. If I get the same grades as a white kid who had, like, two tutors—of course I should get more respect! I did that by myself, you know? I got parents who didn't
even finish high school and they’re trying to help me with my math homework. I do it myself. I stay after till five or six o’clock and get help from teachers!

Rodney perceives that he has to work harder than his white counterparts for the same educational benefits (i.e., admissions to college) simply because of the color of his skin. He acknowledges that several of his white peers have private tutors, something that his family cannot afford for him; thus, these students are advantaged in terms of their academic preparation. For Rodney, achieving is racially loaded. He also alludes to his views on white privilege and black disadvantage when comparing educational opportunity. Both Derek and Rodney possess a critical awareness of racial (and economic) inequities that exist in society and in their school. However, they do not allow these inequities to impede their school success and future ambitions; rather, they persist in school by developing behavioral strategies for overcoming the institutional and structural racism that they see as barriers to their success. The racism is a motivator to prove wrong negative societal stereotypes that might exist about them as African Americans and African American males. A critical consciousness about the effects of racism on one’s current and future opportunities can serve to academically motivate black students. A student in the O’Connor (1997) study who possessed a high degree of racial consciousness and affirmed her affiliation with the black community believed that, in the absence of struggle, blacks had no hope of “breaking the hold that Whites had on them” (p. 595). Students in my study express similar sentiments. They embrace the struggle and express a sense of power through the belief that blacks can improve their social and economic opportunities via consistently high educational achievement. Thus, a critical race consciousness fosters academic motivation and facilitates the development of a critical race achievement ideology in many of the participants.

Similarly, in her study of twenty-eight urban African American eighth graders, Sanders (1997) found that the high achievers in the sample had a heightened awareness of racial barriers to their success and were therefore compelled to demonstrate increased academic effort in the face of this obstacle. Some of the high achievers viewed racism as a challenge and saw their school success as an opportunity to counter societal stereotypes that depict black students as anti-intellectual and academically disengaged. My study builds on this work by connecting black achievers’ views on racism to their achievement ideology. Several participants in my study embody similar beliefs. For example, Samantha strives to prove herself and “change that stereotype about black people when [she does] well in [her] classes.” In one of her interviews, Rachel suggests that black students new to Independence High should counter racial stereotypes by “work[ing] extra hard to be better than them [white students], and, like, don’t accept their mentality.” Realizing that the process of attaining school success requires different strategies than those used by their white counterparts, these students demonstrate their critical awareness of the racial
inequities that exist in school but they don’t allow those inequities to deter them from achieving their school and life goals. Although their strategies for school success construct the task of achieving as racially loaded, their ideas about who can be successful (i.e., themselves) are race neutral; thus, achievement is again viewed as a human characteristic.

— Students possess a pragmatic attitude about the value of schooling for their future.

Students view education as a vehicle for social and economic mobility. Understanding the value of an education for future success is necessary for developing positive achievement beliefs and maintaining school success. Students in this study view schooling as instrumental to future life outcomes and conceptualize education as highly significant. This is explicitly illustrated in their descriptions of the purpose of school. Participants believe school helps you “get a good education so you can go to college” (Kimmy), “provides a mental and educational background for the future” (Derek), and prepares you for adulthood and life (Rodney). Kelis (a senior) clearly understands the utility of an education:

Like, if you don’t have a high school diploma, the job that you have is not gonna pay great, which is not gonna put you on a good economic status in society and then you’re not gonna live in a good neighborhood or you’re not gonna be able to provide for your family—if you have one—the best way you can, so it all stems from, like, at least graduating from high school.

For these students, high school success sets them on the path for a positive future that includes college completion and a stable professional career. For example, Leslie (a sophomore) wants a financial position better than that of her mother: “I know that [doing well is] definitely gonna help me. I really want to go to college, and be successful. I just wanna be... well-off, I guess. So I guess that’s my motivation. I don’t wanna struggle to afford things, cuz my mom has gone through a lot, and I just feel like that’s what I strive for.” Having self-identified her family as lower-middle-class, Leslie desires to use her education as a medium for becoming financially stable as an adult.

Aaron also understands schooling as a means of opening doors to enhanced future opportunities: “The better you do in school, the more opportunities you give yourself later on.” Rachel describes similar sentiments in wanting to achieve more than members of her family have: “Well, for me it’s important, but I dunno if I think that for everyone it’s important to do well in school. I wanna be better than most of my family, and I actually, like, wanna graduate and, like, make something of myself... For me, I just have a lot of ambitions, and I just wanna make sure that I have the background to achieve those.” She has goals that she is determined to achieve. Wanting to make something of herself is a primary ambition and one that she knows requires additional schooling. She speaks of wanting to explore a number of careers, including
law, physical therapy, and foreign language interpreting. Although she is entertaining a range of career ideas, she does not think that any of these are beyond her reach. Her high academic marks at Independence High support her belief that she is on the right path to future success and highlight her strong self-definition as an achiever. Where research has reserved this kind of thinking for immigrant students and voluntary minorities (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), the students in this study defy the myth that black students do not believe economic mobility is achievable through school persistence.

Performing well in school is very important for the students in this study. They internalize the belief that “the better you do in school, the more opportunities you give yourself later on” (Aaron). These students have specific career aspirations that they believe are contingent on high academic performance and postsecondary education. They aspire to become middle- and upper-class individuals in society. Thus, their academic motivation stems from believing in schooling as a means to a specific end: upward social and economic mobility. This pragmatic attitude about the value of schooling both buffers these students from negative environmental influences that might impede their school success and facilitates their academic motivation and persistence in school.

— Students value multicultural competence as a skill for success.
Black students must be committed to acquiring the cultural capital that is often viewed as oppositional to African American cultural formations (Perry, 2003). For example, the individual must value the acquisition of mainstream speech, behaviors, and interaction patterns because they are required for full participation in mainstream society. Thus, students must understand the utility of acquiring various social and cultural codes for navigating the school context and then know when to situationally apply specific sets of codes. Many of the students in this study develop behavioral strategies akin to those of “border crossers” (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991) or cultural straddlers (P. Carter, 2005), allowing them to move within and between various subcultures in the school and to understand the utility of acquiring the cultural capital of various cultural formations (including those for success). By attending school in a racially integrated environment, the students in this study learn how to exist in a predominantly white context where white cultural styles and interaction patterns are dominant. They learn to navigate black cultural styles, white cultural styles, cultural styles required for school success, and other cultural styles in their daily school lives. Similar to the cultural straddlers in Prudence Carter’s (2005) work, my participants are socially successful among their African American peers and also possess multiple cultural tool kits that allow them to interact with peers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Several participants in this study express the value of exposure to diverse experiences that comes from interactions with students from various racial and ethnic groups at Independence High School. Specifically, students talk about belonging to both racially homogenous and diverse peer groups. In
describing the value in having a diverse group of friends, Rachel says, "I also have white friends too, because it's important to have a variety [of friends]. In the real world outside of school, you have to interact with people of different races regardless of what you do. You have to come in contact with Chinese people, Philippine people, and if you start younger having relations with people like that, it makes it easier to continue doing it. Like, I think it's good to get a perspective from everyone, so I try as best as I can to have a variety of friends." Kimmy also believes that having racially diverse peer groups is essential for long-term success, remarking, "I think it's important to just be able to communicate with other people that are not like you, cuz eventually you're gonna have to when you go out for jobs and things like that."

Even though participants might sometimes find it hard to interact with racially and ethnically diverse peers, they value the social and cultural capital that can be acquired through relationships with students from diverse backgrounds, both racially and economically. In one of his interviews, Derek speaks explicitly about his conscious decision to interact with more white students as he approaches his senior year. He believes that he can learn the skills of economic mobility from students that he perceives already hold such knowledge. Rachel, Kimmy, and Derek express their desire to acquire the skills they think are necessary for school and future success by proactively learning the norms, habits, and interaction patterns of diverse students. In this manner, they value the ability to negotiate various cultural styles and tastes; thus, they become multicultural by code switching. Like high-achieving Chicano/a students in Gandara's (1995) research, the students in this study find ways to affirm their cultural identities in school while simultaneously working hard to enhance future opportunities. These students can "keep it real" (P. Carter, 2005) with their same-race peers while simultaneously negotiating cultural codes of school and their nonblack peers. They do more than succeed in a nonblack context; they also incorporate key cultural tools for achievement from their same-race peers and mainstream learning environment to enact their achievement ideology. They are cultural negotiators, able to integrate multiple sets of cultural codes into their schooling schema.

Cross, Strauss, and Phagen-Smith (1999) suggest that some black students utilize a bridging function to move between black and white cultures. For these students, race is highly central to their self-definition, and they are comfortable with what makes them black and what makes them American. They might also value what can be learned from interacting with people who share a range of cultural backgrounds and experiences. The bridging function refers to those competencies, attitudes, and behaviors that make it possible for a black person to immerse himself or herself in another group’s experience, absent any need to suppress one’s sense of blackness. The individual is able to move back and forth between his or her conception of black culture and the ways of knowing, acting, thinking, and feeling that constitute a nonblack worldview (in this case, a white worldview). Some of my participants demon-
strate bridging behavior as a form of code switching in the school context. For example, through participant observations I learned that Rachel was savvy in using the classroom domain as a space to learn achievement-oriented behaviors of her white peers without suppressing her sense of racial identity. In her upper-level courses, Rachel initiated conversations with white peers regarding strategies for completing classroom assignments and homework material. She was attentive to her peers’ scheduling of study times and offered to join them when possible. However, she was adamant in stating, “I don’t change who I am in the classroom just because I’m the only black student. I know who I am, and I’m secure in my race and how smart I am.”

Other individuals engage in code-switching behaviors by temporarily accommodating to the norms and regulations of a group or a specific domain within the school context. According to Cross et al. (1999), code switching differs from bridging in that code-switching interactions avoid sharing racial and cultural interests and differences. Code switching allows black students to act, think, dress, and express themselves in ways that maximize the comfort level of the person, group, or organization with whom they are communicating. Participants also code-switched when situationally accommodating domain norms, particularly in the classroom. When describing her shift in language between the classroom and social domain, Kimmy revealed, “Outside of class, I speak a lot of slang.” She describes the difference in her behavior between these two domains: “In class I’m focused. I don’t let anybody distract me. Outside of class I’m usually wild and whatever.” Kimmy shifts her behavior between these domains to accommodate the behavioral norms of each social context. She perceives that it is not an appropriate academic behavior for her to act “wild” in the classroom; thus, she reserves this behavior for when she is with friends in a nonacademic setting.

Whether their behavior is termed bridging or code switching, what is important is that high-achieving black students who value achievement and their constructed sense of blackness learn to shift cultural and social codes in their school context without culturally assimilating (Gibson, 1988). These students are able to speak, act, think, and interact in ways that are situationally appropriate for domains within the school. In this manner, they acquire the necessary skills and behaviors for academic achievement and school success and maintain the construction of blackness central to their self-definition. Thus, the ability to enact various cultural styles for various cultural contexts—multicultural competence—enables these students to maintain success within the context of also being black.

— Students develop adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and strong racial/ethnic self-definitions.

Black students must develop adaptive strategies for school adjustment and success that reflect positive achievement attitudes and beliefs and a desire to over-
come racism as a potential barrier to success. It is not enough to believe in one's self and be aware of racism and other structural inequities as barriers to success; the individual must also decide how she or he will deal with such challenges. These strategies can encompass resistance to racism, and they must aid students in maintaining high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept. According to Ward (2000), healthy resistance strategies teach black teenagers

1. to be aware of the sociopolitical context of race in America and the role that racism plays in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors of Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds;
2. to develop the ability to accurately assess the threat of racism to themselves and other members of the black community and then determine the most appropriate course of action;
3. to take a stand for beliefs, practices, and ideologies that promote positive self-validation and racial group affirmation;
4. to seek solutions that empower them through a positive sense of self and the strengthening of kin networks in the larger black community;
5. to develop effective and self-affirming offensive and defensive strategies that have positive long-term implications for their lives; and
6. to identify and reject unhealthy resistance when they see it in themselves or others.

In this study, students develop strategies for dealing with racism in classroom and nonclassroom domains that reflect varying degrees of resistance (see D. Carter, 2005). Sometimes the strategies are survival tactics designed to maintain both cultural integrity and emotional and psychological stability. These strategies are positive forms of resistance in that they do not hinder students' academic progress. These behaviors do not represent opposition to schooling; rather, they represent strategies to counter racism as normative in these students' lives. Although the confines of this article prevent me from detailing all of the strategies that students employ, a few examples illustrate the resistant and adaptive behaviors that can result from a critical race achievement ideology. For instance, when feeling that she is being positioned as a racial spokesperson in the classroom, Kimmy responds by remaining silent.

For most of my classes, I'm the only black person in the room, and it feels like there's a lot of pressure or attention on me and... if there were more black people in my classes, I guess it would just take a lot of pressure off me. Like when we talk about, uh... racial issues, and like, talk about blacks and whites, like I'm expected to know, like, everything. ...I guess they assume just cuz we're black that we know everything about Africa, what went on in Africa.

The perceived pressure to be a black history expert causes her to be less vocal in race-related classroom discussions. Silencing oneself might seem like
an avoidance strategy, but it could also be a survival strategy that allows Kimmy simultaneously to resist this perceived racism and protect her emotional and mental health in the classroom environment. In other cases, students challenge their white peers and teachers to own and reconceptualize their racist assumptions and behaviors. For example, when Rodney perceives that a teacher does not value his ideas in a history classroom because of his race, he does not sit quietly: 'I'll be like, 'What up? How come you don't want my stuff written on the board?'' I'll be like, 'Write mine on the board.' [DC: You'll say that to the teacher?] Yeah. They'll be like 'Okay, fine.' It does make a difference, you know? Even that little thing proves something to me, you know?" Whether the teacher's behavior is intentional or not, Rodney feels that the teacher deems him unworthy of adding anything valuable to the class discussion because he is black. Given this perception, the teacher's inaction results in Rodney being positioned as invisible in the classroom. Rodney responds by self-initiating visibility as he verbally confronts the teacher in front of other class members. These and other adaptive resistance strategies allow these students to reject external conceptions of who they should be as racial and academic beings and rely on their own conceptions of self as proud black achievers. Additionally, with these adaptive resistant behaviors, these students counter the racism in schools as a normal condition and racial inequality in education as a given.

Although some studies find that black students develop maladaptive strategies such as oppositional school attitudes or academic disengagement because they cannot see the usefulness in fighting forces that are designed to oppress them (Michelson, 1990; Ogbu, 2003), other studies indicate that many black students develop resistant adaptive strategies that allow them to achieve and maintain a strong racial self-definition (O'Connor, 1997; Sanders, 1997). The participants in my study have also developed such resistant adaptive behavioral responses to schooling. Thus, a necessary component and result of a critical race achievement ideology is the development of adaptive strategies that resist racism and promote positive adjustment, allowing students to effectively navigate within and across multiple school domains (i.e., classroom, social, and extracurricular). As stated earlier, this work differs from that of O'Connor and Sanders in that black achievers' behaviors are examined in relation to their racial and achievement self-conceptions and achievement ideologies.

Discussion

Based on these findings, I posit six components of a critical race achievement ideology that reflect an ideology of resistance, resilience, and a redefinition of achievement.

1. Students believe in themselves and feel that individual effort and self-accountability lead to school success.
2. Students view achievement as a human character trait that can define membership in their racial group.
3. Students possess a critical consciousness about racism and the challenges it presents to their present and future opportunities as well as those of other members of their racial group.
4. Students possess a pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling for their future as members of a subdominant racial group.
5. Students value multicultural competence as a skill for success.
6. Students develop adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept.

Embodying any one, or only a small subset, of the components of the critical race achievement ideology is not sufficient for maintaining school success and a strong affiliation with one's racial group. I believe that the individual must possess beliefs and attitudes about schooling that are aligned with all of these components, because they build on one another and address different dimensions of this conceptualization of success. By internalizing these dimensions, black students can be black in whatever ways they construct blackness and can also maintain academic success.

So how is a critical race achievement ideology manifested in the everyday life of a high-achieving black student attending a predominantly white high school? The following profile of Rachel, compiled from her interviews, illustrates her conception of this achievement ideology and shows how it facilitates her enactment of resilient adaptive strategies in school.

The purpose of school is to get educated so you can make something of yourself and be an important part of the world. I want to explore careers like being a lawyer, physical therapist, or foreign language interpreter. For me it's important [to do well] in school. I wanna be better than most of my family, and I actually, like, wanna graduate and, like, make something of myself. . . . For me, I just have a lot of ambitions, and I just wanna make sure that I have the background to achieve those. It's good to know where you come from, and especially when—cuz society treats black people different, or minorities in general different. So it's important to know where you come from. It's important to know those things, because it affects your everyday life depending on your skin color. It really does. It's important to me to identify with my race and have that knowledge. When I was little [my dad] used to, like, tell me all the time that I'm black and I'm different from people and for me, I dunno, just, I have to work hard because you know white people don't think highly of black people, you know? My dad has taught me a lot about my background. So I still know about my history and what it is—what it actually means to be black—and I'm secure in my sense of self. I'm secure in my race and how smart I am. So if it happens that I'm stuck in an all-white school and all my friends are white, I'm still secure enough in my sense of self and in my background that I can still have all my friends and not lose myself. I've seen probably more racism in one setting [at Independence] than I've seen.
in my entire life. So that in itself has taught me a lot cuz I've learned how to deal with it more and not accept it, but how to handle that situation. It's difficult, but I mean, sometimes it is—I just speak my mind, you know. If someone's views I don't like, I'll tell them and I'll be like, "Hey you know what? Your view sucks!" I have white friends too, because it's important to have a variety. Because in the real world outside of school, you have to interact with people of different races regardless of what you do. If you start younger having relations with people like that, it makes it easier to continue doing it.

Rachel's profile highlights all six components of the critical race achievement ideology. She believes in her academic abilities, possesses a critical race consciousness, and has developed strategies for overcoming racism in her school context. She also understands the pragmatic value of an education and has acquired the multicultural skills that will aid in current and future successful relationships and networks. She views herself as a succeeding member of her racial group and is proud of her racial heritage; she does not feel pressure to reject her racial identity in order to succeed. Possessing this type of achievement ideology equips Rachel and the other participants with the necessary armor for overcoming racism and enacting resistant adaptive strategies that lead to school success and maintenance of a positive racial identity.

Conclusions
This research expands our understanding of how some black students' racial and achievement self-conceptions inform their achievement ideologies and resulting adaptive behaviors for school success. This work has the potential to help educators better understand the nuanced relationships among race, achievement ideology, and school behaviors and see what can be done to help students develop healthy strategies for maintaining school success and a positive racial identity, particularly in learning environments that are perceived as racially hostile. I am not suggesting that simply embodying a critical race achievement ideology will lead to students' sustained school success; however, I do believe that the development and maintenance of this type of ideology in black students—particularly those who are being educated in predominantly white school contexts—can foster positive attitudes and beliefs about schooling and adaptive behaviors for success. I do not believe that this is the only achievement ethos for black student success. In fact, research shows that some black students perform at high levels in school by rejecting their racial heritage, essentially becoming raceless (Fordham, 1988) and conforming completely to mainstream cultural patterns (i.e., cultural assimilation) (Gibson, 1988). A critical race achievement ideology, however, assumes that a student believes in achievement as a characteristic of his or her racial group and values both achievement and racial group affiliation as a part of his or her self-definition. It also enables a student to enact resilient behaviors within and across domains in the school environment, given a high level of racial critical con-
sciousness about structural inequities that she or he might face. The resulting adaptive behaviors for schooling do not come at the expense of rejecting or downplaying one’s racial and ethnic identity. Thus, achievement is internalized by the student and represents an individual and collective accomplishment.

Findings from this research cannot be generalized across black achiever populations in predominantly white high schools. These nine achievers only represent a subgroup of black students at Independence High School. Because I did not study average- or underperforming black students, it is not clear whether they espouse any components of a critical race achievement ideology and, if so, what other factors may contribute to their level of academic performance and school success. This sample of nine students has a variety of cultural backgrounds, including diverse parental upbringing, socioeconomic status, and ethnic group traits, each of which may also inform students’ beliefs about the utility of schooling for future success. Also, given the specific learning context of this research, one cannot draw conclusions about the presence or absence of this type of achievement ideology in other high school contexts with very different racial demographics. A larger study comparing the achievement attitudes of black students across high schools with a variety of racial compositions can shed more insight on whether black students’ racial and achievement self-concepts illuminate a critical race achievement ideology or some other kind of ideology. If CRAI is present, it may look different across settings.

Despite the fact that this achievement ideology was found in a small sample of nine students in one predominantly white high school, it has implications for classroom practice. Facilitating the development of a critical race achievement ideology in black students is a tall order for educators and institutions of learning, but it is a necessary one. These nine achievers convey that schools and educators need to be counterhegemonic in their practices, challenging traditional dominant discourses and paradigms about what it means to be successful and who is successful. Instead of constructing achievement as a quality of particular subgroups, schools must create a culture of achievement that can include any individual, regardless of racial or ethnic identification (Perry, 2003). Additionally, educators must become more aware of the lived experiences of African American students in predominantly white schools, particularly in those learning environments where susceptibility to racism and negative racial stereotyping is high. Understanding how African American students in predominantly white schools perceive their learning context and then respond to these perceptions can allow educators to access the students’ brilliance, a trait that is often suppressed in the face of racist barriers to success. By helping these students to understand the educational persistence of their ancestors despite racism as a potential obstacle to their success and to view achievement as a human, raceless trait, we can begin to eliminate underachievement among black students.
Notes

1. Throughout this article, my use of “success” refers to the mainstream definition characterized by high social status and material wealth achieved through upward social and economic mobility. This is not how the students define success, as is discussed later in the article.

2. I use the terms “black” and “African American” interchangeably to refer to people of African descent through U.S. slavery and those of Caribbean descent who live in the United States.

3. The school and students’ names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

4. At the time of this study, there were only nine students who had a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher. I found out that some of these students were biracial (black/white), and although the school identified them as black, their parents did not want them to participate in the study. Thus, I had to expand my GPA criterion to include black students with a C+ or higher GPA in order to have enough students for a screening sample.

5. I define “high achieving” as maintaining academic and social success in the school context.

6. The constraints of this article do not allow me to present how the students discuss their racial and achievement self-conceptions. For more detailed information on this, see D. Carter (2005).

7. The confines of this paper do not allow me to go into detail regarding the behavioral strategies that participants in this study employed for school success. For a detailed explanation of this, see D. Carter (2005).

8. Prudence Carter (2005) uses the term “cultural straddlers,” indicating that these type of students “juggle” multiple cultural tools kits. I prefer to think of their behaviors as cultural negotiation. For me, straddling implies indecisiveness regarding the embodiment of certain cultural codes. Negotiation implies an integration of multiple sets of cultural codes. I believe that my study participants are cultural negotiators. While Carter’s students share some similarities in their racial and achievement ideologies with my participants, our terminology differs.

References


