

# “Once You Go to a White School, You Kind of Adapt”: Black Adolescents and the Racial Classification of Schools

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## Abstract

Studies of when youth classify academic achievement in racial terms have focused on the racial classification of behaviors and individuals. However, institutions—including schools—may also be racially classified. Drawing on a comparative interview study, we examine the school contexts that prompt urban black students to classify schools in racial terms. Through Diversify, a busing program, one group of black students attended affluent suburban schools with white-dominated achievement hierarchies ( $n = 38$ ). Diversify students assigned schools to categories of whiteness or blackness that equated whiteness with achievement and blackness with academic deficiency. Students waitlisted for Diversify ( $n = 16$ ) attended urban schools without white-dominated achievement hierarchies. These students did not classify schools as white or black, based on academic quality. We assert that scholars may productively conceive of schools, not just individual students, as sites of potential racial classification. Furthermore, the racial classification of schools reinforces antagonism between black students attending “white” and “black” schools and perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes.

## Keywords

black students, achievement, qualitative methods, black group cohesion, school contexts, racialization

School practices influence the extent to which youth racially categorize academic achievement and high-achieving peers as white. For instance, youth in schools where tracking practices lead to racially unequal learning opportunities often categorize achievement as a white phenomenon, whereas students in other school contexts do not (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Staiger 2006; Tyson 2011; Warikoo and Carter 2009).<sup>1</sup> We examine whether similar processes underpin youth’s racial categorization of schools as collective spaces. In so doing, we bring the literature on race and education, which has examined how youth racialize achievement-related behaviors and high-achieving individuals, into dialogue with scholarship on how

individuals racially categorize spaces such as neighborhoods and workplaces (Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Kefalas 2003; Lacy 2004, 2007; Omi and Winant 1994; Pattillo 2007; Wingfield 2010). Joining these research streams, we analyze

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how different school contexts could affect the extent to which black adolescents racially classify schools and school environments. We also examine the underlying meanings about race in students' discussions of "black" and "white" schools.

We leverage a comparison of black students assigned to dramatically different school contexts. Diversify, a racial integration program, uses a lottery to select ethnic-minority students living in an urban school district to attend public schools in participating suburban communities. In our study, 38 participants received Diversify placement, and 16 did not. Other than attending very different kinds of schools, the Diversify and waitlisted participants had much in common. All were urban black adolescents living in the city of Luton. Both the Diversify and the waitlisted students experienced racial inequality and segregation in the broader society. Yet their suburban and urban schools differed in whether they exposed students to white-dominated achievement hierarchies. Within their schools, Diversify students observed and participated in courses, programs, and services that highlighted whites as academically superior to blacks. The situation for waitlisted students was quite different: Their schools predominantly consisted of students from nondominant groups. Partially due to this demographic homogeneity, waitlisted students did not observe or participate in academic courses or programs where white students dominated the highest-achieving levels. Through a comparison of these two groups of black students' discussions of school academic environment and quality, we moved toward a greater understanding of the schooling contexts under which black adolescents will racially classify high-achieving schools as "white" schools.

## RACIAL CLASSIFICATION, SCHOOLS, AND ACHIEVEMENT

Racialization is the process through which, in each sociohistorical period, individuals and groups acquire racial identities and meanings. Racialization also involves placement of individuals and groups into preexisting race-based social hierarchies (Omi and Winant 1994). Current understandings emphasize racialization as a categorization process that can be applied to practices and people, as well as to institutions (Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Lewis 2003a; Sallaz 2010).

When actors racially classify a practice or institution, they are assigning it to a racial category that exists in a stratified hierarchy and that has already been saturated with meaning. Furthermore, these meanings are consequential on both the material and symbolic levels (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Diamond 2006; Lewis 2003a; Omi and Winant 1994). For instance, the racial classification of institutions has implications for the reproduction of symbolic meanings attached to race and for the distribution of material resources across institutions.

### *The Racialization of Achievement*

In line with theories stressing that practices and people may be racialized, researchers have examined how students come to view academic achievement as a "white" phenomenon. They demonstrate that school organizational practices and demographics are important for students' racialization of achievement (Fryer and Torelli 2010; O'Connor et al. 2011; Warikoo and Carter 2009). Youth in schools that do not track students, or where the student body is mainly black, do not classify academic achievement as white. By contrast, students in schools where the student body is predominantly white, and where school practices such as tracking result in racially unequal learning opportunities, often classify academic achievement as white (Tyson 2011).

Researchers propose at least two additional reasons to explain why students in some educational settings racialize achievement, believing it to be "for whites only." First, in the United States, the symbolic meanings attached to race mask structural and institutional inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Researchers speculate that students turn to racial stereotypes to explain the racial disparities they observe because they lack alternative explanatory frameworks (Bettie 2003; Ferguson 2000; Lewis 2003b; Staiger 2006; Teeger 2013; Tyson 2011). Second, researchers posit that using the "acting white" slur against high-achieving peers soothes race and class wounds—feelings of exclusion, inadequacy, and resentment (Bettie 2003; Tyson 2011).

*Black Group Cohesion.* Researchers also describe the social ostracism and "othering" that high-achieving students from nondominant groups face in school contexts where achievement is

classified as “white.” They theorize that the racialization of achievement is a process that may threaten black group cohesion. For instance, Tyson (2011) warns that observing racial inequality and segregation at school promotes a sense of difference and hostility among blacks. She cautions that attending schools with racialized tracking encourages black and nonblack students to rely on racial stereotypes about blacks as low achieving as they attempt to understand racial disparities in track placement and school success.

Thus far, analyses of whether and how youth racially classify achievement have focused on the extent to which students racially classify behaviors and individuals. Tyson (2011), for example, identified the conditions under which youth may categorize achievement-related behavior as a white phenomenon and disparage high-achieving black and Latino classmates with the smear of “acting white.” We argue for more research on the conditions under which students may racially classify schools, places that—like individuals—produce achievement, albeit on the collective level.

### *The Racialization of Schools and Other Institutions*

When individuals racialize institutions, they are racializing the characteristics they believe prevail within them (Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). For instance, Kefalas (2003) shows that residents of working-class neighborhoods racialize their neighborhoods as “white.” In so doing, they racialize (as white) the characteristic of “respectability” they believe prevails in their white neighborhoods and racialize (as black) the characteristic of disorder they believe prevails in neighborhoods they classify as black.

Several research streams examine how schools become racially classified. The first shows how students racially classify schools that assert and legitimate particular race-class cultures, even when the schools serve diverse student bodies (e.g., Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007). For instance, black girls at an elite, predominantly white private school called their school a “White institution” (Horvat and Antonio 1999:333–34). For these girls, the school’s social world reflected the customary tastes, styles of interaction, and assumptions of a “white” world. Because race relations

involve power and hierarchy, these black students were forced to negotiate their position as outsiders who represented difference from the invisible norm of whiteness. Blacks may not have to bear these burdens in other institutional spaces, such as predominantly black institutions or institutions where actors have deliberately sought to unsettle whiteness as the invisible “norm” (Anderson 1999; Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Jack 2014; Lewis 2003b; Okamoto and Gast 2013; Pittman 2013). Overall, this body of research productively emphasizes the meanings and power relations underlying the racial classifications of institutions and institutional spaces, including schools. However, it has yet to consider how these classifications relate to students’ perceptions of schools as places that promote achievement.

A second, and related, literature describes how actors racially categorize school programs that are seen to serve particular race-class groups (e.g., Lareau and Horvat 1999; Morris 2012; Roda and Wells 2013; Staiger 2006). For example, students and parents may understand interventions designed to boost the achievement of low-income and minority students as “black programs.” The racialization of academic interventions as “black” spaces cements the equation of blackness with academic deficiency and naturalizes ideologies that support racial hierarchy (Staiger 2006). This literature tends to focus on how the racialization of specific programs within a given school reinforces cultural meanings about race and intelligence. By contrast, we focus on how students may racialize schools—places that produce collective achievement.

In summary, research suggests that individuals often assign racial identities to schools. Yet scholars have not identified the conditions under which students will or will not construct schools as racial spaces. One reason might be methodological. A thorough examination of the relationship between different school contexts and the racial classification of schools requires a comparison of students from similar backgrounds attending schools with different features. Differences between school contexts may affect whether and how students racialize their school environments and how students think of peers attending other types of schools. Research on the racialization of achievement describes which school conditions lead students to classify academic achievement as a white phenomenon, but does not clarify which

conditions lead students to racialize school environments. In addition, previous research suggests that the racial classification of achievement as “white” may undermine black group cohesion. However, it has yet to provide insight into how the potential perception of high-achieving schools as “white” schools could affect black group cohesion.

We fill these gaps through a comparative research design that allows us to examine the conditions under which black students racially classify school environments, categorizing high-achieving schools as “white” schools and low-achieving schools as “black” schools. Following research on the racialization of achievement, we consider whether, within their schools, students observed and participated in courses, programs, and services that positioned white students as academically superior to others.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Constructing Comparison Groups: The Diversify Database*

Every year, roughly 900 minority parents in Luton add themselves to a list of more than 2,000 families, hoping their children will receive placement in a suburban school through Diversify. The program serves only a small percentage of these children—about 450 per year. The first author, who gathered all the data, used Diversify’s administrative database to compare admitted students to students on the waiting list, who attended predominantly nonwhite charter and public schools in Luton.<sup>2</sup> While the Diversify students often made up the entire black and Latino school enrollment of their suburban schools, the waitlisted students attended urban schools that were, on average, 80 percent black and Hispanic.

Other than attending very different kinds of schools, the Diversify and waitlisted participants in our study had much in common. All were urban black adolescents living in the city of Luton, a majority-minority city. Participants were not a homogeneous group socioeconomically, but all were from nonwealthy neighborhoods within Luton. The urban areas they lived in had median household incomes ranging from \$27,000 to \$47,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). The percentage of children living in poverty in these neighborhoods ranged from 18 to 42 percent

(U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). The majority (59 percent) of study participants came from single-parent families, with mothers working long hours in relatively low-wage work.

Our research design offers the opportunity to construct reasonable comparison groups. The Diversify and waitlisted samples are matched on five key dimensions: ethnic minority background, residence in Luton, parents/guardians who sought Diversify placement for them, attendance at a school that does not require test scores for entry, and reachability for interviews. At least one factor could not be matched. Some (not all) suburban school districts required parents to attend an information session, school tour, or one-on-one meeting with a Diversify counselor before finalizing a Diversify student’s registration. These events generally required travel as far as 20 miles away from the urban areas where Diversify-eligible students and their parents live.

### *School Contexts*

Diversify is open to black, Asian, and Latino students living within the urban school district’s boundaries, and it busses these students to more than 35 participating suburban school districts. Using U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000) statistics, the first author identified 11 suburbs as affluent. The median family income in these suburbs was over \$100,000, over 60 percent of the adult population held a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the percentage of black residents was less than 2.30 percent of the population. To increase readability, and because we are describing similarities in black students’ experiences across suburban schools, we call all 11 suburban schools districts “Chilton.”

The first author restricted the Diversify sample to black participants for two reasons. First, blacks constitute over 75 percent of those seeking admittance to Diversify. Second, the literature on the racialization of achievement deals largely with negative beliefs about black academic competence. She further restricted the Diversify sample to students attending 1 of the 11 affluent suburban schools described above. This ensured that all Diversify students would be attending schools similar in context to one another.

The 38 Diversify student respondents attended schools that, including the presence of the Diversify students, were, on average, approximately 10 percent black and Hispanic. Furthermore, all

these schools had achievement tracking: Blacks and Hispanics were underrepresented in the highest-achieving tracks, and they were overrepresented in special education programs for students with learning disabilities and behavioral problems.

The 16 waitlisted students were spread across 15 of the urban school district's public schools. Of these 15 schools, 6 were charter schools, 5 were traditional public schools, 3 were pilot schools, and 1 was an alternative school. All of the schools enrolled majority-minority student bodies. During the years when the first author gathered data, waitlisted students' schools enrolled higher percentages of black students, and lower percentages of white students, than the district average. Within the district as a whole, 13.4 percent of students were white; 13 of the 16 waitlisted students attended schools where whites constituted less than 10 percent of the student body. In the district, 71 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; 70 percent of students in waitlisted students' schools were eligible, on average. The waitlisted students' schools were of varying quality, according to standardized test scores and high school graduation rates. To provide readers with a sense of the range of the schools' quality, we offer details about a representative set of waitlisted students' schools in the findings section.

### **Recruitment**

Using the Diversify database, the first author sent letters and called the parents of 325 8th-, 9th-, and 10th-grade children whose parents had enrolled them in Diversify, and 804 parents of 8th-, 9th-, and 10th-grade children who had been waitlisted for Diversify. Of these, because of incorrect or out-of-date addresses and phone numbers, the parents of 182 Diversify students and 100 waitlisted students were contacted by letter or phone. From this group, 38 Diversify and 16 waitlisted students attending nonexam schools participated in the study. The final response rates for the two groups of students were almost identical: 21 percent for Diversify students and 22 percent for waitlisted students. We excluded 6 waitlisted students attending exam schools from this analysis because exam schools require high test scores for admission and are more selective than the schools other students in the sample attended. The excluded students' school contexts may deviate in important

ways from those of the Diversify and waitlisted students.

We designed our sampling strategy to achieve an empathetic and comprehensive understanding of research participants' life-worlds and their schooling contexts. We aimed to unpack the processes through which participants made sense of racial classifications of achievement, especially as these related to their school quality, rather than to make distributional claims about the population of black adolescents more broadly. The sample size and response rate of the samples are not a problem, given these goals (Small 2009).

In addition to the black students the first author interviewed, a set of eighth graders enrolled at one of the affluent suburban schools attended by Diversify students was recruited. Their principal provided an Excel spreadsheet of 30 randomly selected eighth graders not entitled to free/reduced-price lunch and their parents' contact information. Phone calls and letters produced 7 participants. Of these participants, 6 were white, and 1 was Asian. Although the suburban sample was small, it was informative. The students confirmed the Diversify students' perceptions that others saw them as "different" and academically challenged.

Across all three groups, interviews proceeded with the adolescents who returned a signed parental consent form and assented (in writing and verbally) to proceed with the interview after the first author told them about the study's purposes and the ways she would protect their confidentiality. The institutional review board office at the first author's university approved these procedures. The first author gave participants a \$10 gift card at the end of the interview.

### **Procedure**

**Interviews with Students.** The first author interviewed students in their homes and schools, over the phone, and at fast food restaurants, in accordance with participants' preferences. Each interview lasted between one and three hours and followed a semistructured, open-ended format. Interviews were an ideal method for capturing students' interpretations and experiences (Weiss 1994).

This format allowed adolescent participants to put their perceptions of school quality and environment into a coherent frame that included

discussions about school peers, neighborhood dynamics, race, academic achievement, and social mobility. Participants described their schools; their experiences with classmates (friends and nonfriends), teachers, and neighbors; and where they thought they fit in socially. The first author asked if they were happy at school and if, for any reason, they had ever thought about changing schools. Finally, she asked participants to explain the social life at school. Probes elicited interpretations of how and why the school's social organization (e.g., school cliques or lack thereof) had come to exist.

**Field Observations.** Roughly one third of the interviews were conducted in participants' homes. For these interviews, the first author wrote detailed observations about the physical home environment, neighborhood conditions, and interpersonal interactions among family members and neighbors. These observations enhanced the interviews, enabling the interviewer to ask participants questions based on her growing familiarity with their social milieu.

### Data Analysis

Each transcript was coded a minimum of two times by the first and second authors. The second author coded the transcripts first and then shared the coding and memos with the first author. At that point, the first author reviewed the transcript along with the second author's coding and memos. She noted any disagreements about interpretation, adding new codes and interpretations and building on the second author's insights. At each stage, we wrote extensive memos that explained, in narrative form, our reasons for applying certain codes. We also used memos to offer other ideas about these data as they occurred to us (Charmaz 2006). We discussed differences and similarities in how we were thinking about these data, and we logged notes about our discussions. Analysis was iterative with two main stages: initial and focused coding.

**Initial Coding.** In our initial coding and memo writing, we sought to explore several theoretical possibilities (Charmaz 2006). We created provisional codes to capture participants' understandings of their contexts, paying special attention to descriptions of neighborhoods, schools, and peers.

We developed more than 10 categories of codes, with at least five codes in each category.

**Focused Coding.** Later, we refined and narrowed our research focus and questions to the potential relationships between school contexts and the racialization of achievement. During this stage, we created three broader categories of codes and reanalyzed these data. Taken together, these three categories subsumed 31 subcodes. The first broad category, "descriptions and explanations of school quality and environment," included subcodes like "absence of race in description of school environment" and "linking student demographics to school academic quality." The second category, "perceived social location and identity," included subcodes like "being an outsider at school" and "seeing myself as a racial exception." The third category, "perceived personal benefits of attending my school," included subcodes like "benefiting from demographics of my school." During focused coding, we wrote memos that specified possible relationships among these three broad categories. Ultimately, focused coding clarified the conditions under which students racialize school academic quality and environment.

## DIVERSIFY STUDENTS' SCHOOL CONTEXTS

Because we focus on how different school contexts can lead students to racially classify achievement and schools, we begin with a discussion of Diversify students' affluent, predominantly white, suburban schooling contexts.

**Racially Charged Schooling Experiences.** Diversify's programs within suburban schools included counselors who worked only or primarily with Diversify students—overseeing their academic, personal, and career-related decisions—as well as after-school homework help clubs designed to bolster Diversify students' academic achievement. Teachers sent Diversify students who were in trouble to the Diversify counselor's office, instead of to the principal's office, which was the protocol for all other students (field notes from first author). Such policies and programs facilitated negative meanings about race, achievement, and compartment, promoting the notion that

black students needed targeted educational and behavioral interventions to progress adequately in suburban schools.

These negative ideas about black students' academic ability were reflected in interviews with suburban white students as well as by the Diversify students who complained about them. For instance, Joseph, a 14-year-old white suburban freshman, noted that the Diversify kids were always "skipping class" and expressed the idea that Diversify students are chronic underachievers:

I see a lot of kids I know are from Luton are just skipping class. ... I don't know what they [the Diversify programs] do to motivate them. ... I think they do pretty well but I don't know, to do better, they need to somehow motivate them more ... like say you'd give them like a prize if they do well, or something.

Programs and services for Diversify students existed alongside other offerings that enrolled mostly white and Asian students, such as honors classes, gifted programs, and mainstream administrative procedures. Thus, alongside remedial programs where Diversify students were overrepresented, there were other programs marked by a complementary and opposite discourse of academic rigor and normalcy. As a result, Diversify students observed courses, programs, and services that positioned whites (and Asians) as intellectually superior to, and better behaved than, Diversify students, most of whom were black.

Furthermore, black students were disproportionately represented in the lower tracks, preventing them from accessing the most demanding coursework. Many Diversify students were critical of their schools' placement policies, complaining that teachers' and administrators' low expectations for black students were at the root of the problem. For example, Ebo (male, 15), a Diversify freshman, explained his school's tracking procedures in the following way: "They put the black kids in the stupid classes. Like if you're from the city going to there, they put you in the stupidest classes ever. Pre-algebra I?! I can do that stuff; I'm not that stupid!"

Diversify students reported that teachers and peers doubted their ability to excel academically and showed surprise when they did. As Qamar (male, 15) explained, teachers often assumed that

black students needed extra help with assignments and were not as "nice" or "happy with" them:

Like sometimes, teachers—they may not be as happy with you, or as nice to you, if you're black. Or sometimes, they'll want to help you more, because they think you're stupid. Like, when I was in fifth grade—the teacher would—they'd come to me more, and see if I needed help, but I really didn't. I was excelling more than some of the white kids!

In a similar vein, Ranah (female, 15) complained that her teachers lavished praise on her writing, in part because they were surprised that a black student could write well:

In class to be respected—it's hard, to break those prejudices against me. I've never actually had a black teacher in my life. ... So you know, whenever I speak, or like if I write a paper, they'll write on top of my paper, "Good writing!" They never do that to anybody else—just me. It's because I'm black.

For Diversify students, school tracking practices and student-teacher interactions contributed to an environment colored by negative achievement-related stereotypes about blacks.

In an effort to counteract this, suburban schools sought to highlight Diversify students' academic achievement. For instance, posters proclaiming the "Honor Roll Achievements of Diversify students in the Black Student Union"—often accompanied by yearbook photos of these students—decorated the walls outside the Diversify offices (field notes from first author). The collective academic success of students from other backgrounds was not highlighted, since it was assumed. For example, no posters proclaimed the "Honor Roll Achievements" of students in the Asian Student Organization, the Korean Language Club (organizations composed of all Asian students), or the Jewish Student Union (an all-white, Jewish club.) Posters celebrating the successes of Diversify students thus seemed to broadcast black students' success as remarkable and unusual. Confirming this analysis, Robert, a 14-year-old white suburban student, noted the presence of these posters, explaining that he doubted the posters truly

reflected the Diversify students' collective academic achievement:

I guess reputation-wise, they're [Diversify kids are] seen sometimes as not trying their hardest or just not doing as well academically. I'm not really sure how well they do. I know right by my Spanish room there's this poster of Diversify students who achieve well. There's a good amount of kids, maybe 20 to 30 but I don't know. I don't know.

Despite his school's trumpeting the achievement of certain Diversify members of the Black Student Union, Robert remained incredulous as to how well, exactly, they were performing, revealing his doubts about their ability to succeed in the suburban school environment.

**Being Outsiders.** Diversify students not only faced doubts about their intellectual abilities at school, but also were largely positioned as outsiders, although they sometimes functioned as celebrated or fetishized outsiders (Ispa-Landa 2013; for similar findings, see Wilkins 2014). Diversify students described their otherness not only in terms of racial difference from the majority population, but also in terms of a set of closely intertwined attributes that included social class and being from Luton. Jade (female, 15) summarized this complexity in her description of what it was like to be in the Diversify program:

Okay, so you're a minority first, and like kids in Chilton, they are fascinated—like, "you are a different people from a different place where I don't live." So, mostly all the kids in your grade know who you are. ... You're just, different from everybody, and everyone gets to know you.

Later in the interview, Jade complained about her suburban classmates' stereotypes about urban disorder, making her earlier statement about suburban students' "fascination" appear more negative:

All of the kids in Chilton, I'd say like 95 percent of them, they all think that people from Luton live in apartments, around broke-down neighborhoods, and there's all these gangs and people getting shot all the

time. So people always think, "Oh, well Luton, that's a black neighborhood. ... We should be careful before we go down there, 'cause we'll probably get shot." And I'm like, "That doesn't happen every single freaking time in every place so stop stereotyping." No one I know in this neighborhood got shot.

As Jade's comments show, Diversify students faced acts and discourses that hinged on racialized notions of predominantly black urban areas as being poor and socially disorganized (Keene and Padilla 2010; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Wacquant 2007).

Although these racialized notions sometimes led to classmates' fascination and attraction, they placed a burden on the Diversify students, who often found themselves confronting racial stereotypes and dealing with heightened visibility (for similar findings, see Anderson 1999; Ispa-Landa 2013). Diversify students felt they were different in important ways from white suburban students, but they expressed feelings of resentment and frustration at having their difference positioned as inferiority. Some talked of feeling "tired" or "annoyed" by having their difference be the focal point of their interactions with suburban students and teachers. As Qamar (male, 15) said in a weary voice, "People look down on you, like they can count all of us in that school on like, two hands."

Like Qamar, Ebo (male, 15) expressed a sense of exhaustion and exasperation when discussing how blackness functioned in his suburban school. He described an interaction he had with a white basketball teammate who cautioned him against publicly displaying anger:

Like last year, I got mad on the basketball court ... and, I didn't even really do anything; I just got mad and was like "forget this game." So one of my friends was just joking around and was like, "Oh you're black; you might get lynched!" He's a white kid. ... He was like, "No really, seriously ... like once you [display anger], their parents will know in like an instant." And he was serious about that. Like, "Their parents will know and there's gonna be this reputation like, 'Oh my god, he's such an angry child, like probably his family is destroyed.'" And he was telling the truth.



'Cause in like a matter of two weeks, their parents knew.

Ebo had to agree that suburban parents would have a heightened awareness of his emotional displays because he was black. Like his classmate, Ebo believed suburban parents would assume his behavior was caused by a dysfunctional family environment.

Thus far, we have highlighted several aspects of affluent, suburban, predominantly white school contexts that create racially charged schooling experiences for black students. We now show how these experiences relate to Diversify students' discussions of school quality and environment. We focus on Diversify students' racialization of their suburban schools as "white" and their relationships with black youth in predominantly non-white urban public schools, which the Diversify students racialized as "black."

### *Racially Classifying Schools*

Diversify students lauded and racialized their suburban schools as "white" places that were uniquely capable of promoting achievement in part because of their orderly, calm environments. They also denigrated Luton's urban public schools as "black" places full of disorderly students who were not committed to school success. In line with findings on racialization processes within other contexts such as neighborhoods (e.g., Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Kefalas 2003), we found that when Diversify students racialized schools and school quality, they were also racializing the characteristics (e.g., orderliness and achievement, or disorder and school failure) they believed prevail within them. In this way, Diversify students often used race to explain why some schools produce achievement while others do not.

Terek (male, 15), for example, linked education and achievement to whiteness, explaining that he would be "less educated" and more like the "stereotype of Luton," if he were to attend an urban public school. Like other Diversify and suburban students, Terek used the words "Luton" and "urban" as ways to talk about blackness, without explicitly naming it; "suburban" was often a code word for whiteness. (For more on the use of code words for race in a society where explicitly naming race is frowned upon, see Lewis

2003a; Pollock 2001; Watson 2012.) Terek explained,

[I would be] probably less educated [if I didn't go to school in the suburbs]. ... And I would be more perceived as the stereotype of Luton, loud, obnoxious, things like that. 'Cause it's not a balance of races [in Luton]; it's pretty much all-black schools. Which means, people try to act out, and they're around more people like them. ... And that doesn't happen in Chilton, 'cause there's a lot of white people there.

Terek racially classified inappropriate "acting out" school behavior as a "black" trait that prevails in schools without a "balance of races." He also racialized school quality, arguing that when a school has a concentration of black people, they will misbehave, and this will lead to a school environment where students are less educated.

Mallory (female, 14) described her school as "white" and explicitly linked its whiteness to academic excellence, explaining that if you put a "white" school on a college application, "It's better. It's a very hard curriculum." Just as other scholars report that students classify individuals' achievement-related behavior as "white" and high-achieving peers as "acting white" (e.g., Fryer and Torelli 2010; Tyson 2011), Mallory classified her achievement-oriented *school* as a "white school." When prompted to expand on why white schools are different, Mallory explained,

Whites are more civilized. ... They are more calm and have more enforcement. Like I have heard that some of the teachers in Luton—they don't care what the kids do. They don't care. Like in the high schools ... my ex told me that one time his teacher was just like, "Go home 'cause nobody's here, and hopefully you won't get caught." So he just went home.

Mallory attributed her school's ability to produce high achievement to its whiteness. She emphasized that what makes white schools superior is that "whites are more civilized." This was a causal argument. Mallory stated that the lack of disruptions in this more civilized, "white" environment is responsible for the high achievement levels of "white" schools (for more on links

between school violence and achievement, see Burdick-Will 2013).

Ranah (female, 15), like Mallory, called her suburban school a “white school” throughout the interview. She also made an implicit link between a school’s “whiteness” and the appropriateness of the behavior of its students:

*Interviewer: Have you ever thought about switching schools?*

*Ranah:* Never. I could not last a day in one of the Luton schools.

*Interviewer: Why?*

*Ranah:* ‘Cause, like, no offense, but, like once you go to a white school, you kind of adapt. No, I’m being serious. I couldn’t handle it, and I would get beat up. I’ve never gotten into a fight, and I would like to keep it that way.

Ranah went on to explain that she would “stick out like a sore thumb” in her neighborhood school: “The way I act is different from the way they act. They act more ghetto, like I said. My sister goes to a Luton school.” In this excerpt, Ranah, like Mallory and Terek, racialized academically disruptive behaviors like fighting as “ghetto” (a popular way of signifying and derogating blackness among the Diversify students; see Wacquant 2007 on the broader use of the word “ghetto”). Ranah’s discussion of her “white” school shows how the racial classification of a school is tied to a student’s racial classification of the characteristics (in Ranah’s case, the lack of a propensity to fight or be tough as white) believed to prevail within the school.

Even when participants did not explicitly call their suburban schools “white,” or call Luton schools “black,” race was implicit in Diversify students’ discussions of school quality and environment. Using code words such as “Luton” and “ghetto,” they racialized school quality, linking blackness to a school’s overall influence on its students and claiming they would be different (and worse) if they were to attend a predominantly black and Hispanic Luton school. Karla’s (female, 15) description of what she would be like if she were not in Diversify exemplifies this logic:

If I weren’t in Diversify, my attitudes would be different, for some reason. I’d be more “Luton-ified,” more how the Luton kids act. You know, ghetto—they act more loud and obnoxious. So I would act more like that. In Chilton, you’re more tame

and stuff. ... I think if I went to a Luton school, I’d be bad, more uncontrollable. ... If I went to a Luton school, there’s a lot of bad kids in the Luton schools, and they cut classes. ... I wouldn’t [cut classes], because I’d be too scared, but I think I’d be more bad if I went to a Luton school.

Karla believed that if she attended a Luton public school, she would acquire a range of behaviors—such as cutting class and being loud and obnoxious—that would undercut her achievement. Furthermore, Karla used the highly racialized term “ghetto” to describe the constellation of anti-achievement behaviors she believes are produced in the Luton public schools. In saying she would be more “ghetto” if she were to attend the Luton public schools, Karla racially classified anti-achievement behaviors as black.

Not only did Diversify students assign schools to categories of whiteness and blackness that carried meanings about race, but these assignments were also explanations for racial disparities in achievement (see also Pollock 2001). As we saw, Diversify students often described their suburban schools as producing achievement *because* they were white spaces. Furthermore, in explaining why their “white” schools were superior, Diversify students repeated racial stereotypes about blacks as academically unsuccessful and disruptive—the same racial stereotypes that bothered them as students in their predominantly white, suburban schools.

Previous scholars have shown how students may racially categorize school spaces as “white” when a school’s cultural environment supports middle-class white culture (e.g., Horvat and Antonio 1999). In our study, Diversify students’ discussions indicated they implicitly or explicitly racially classified schools as “black” or “white.” They did so not only on the basis of a school’s cultural environment but also on the basis of how, in their view, the school produced (or failed to produce) academic achievement.

### *Accepting Stereotypes and Distancing from Black Peers*

Beliefs about race and school quality had consequences for how Diversify students viewed other black youth attending predominantly black and Hispanic urban schools. Diversify students

distanced themselves from black students attending other schools, including their own neighbors and relatives. Jovita (female, 14), for instance, explained how, in going to a “white” school, she had become different and superior to her sisters, who attended Luton schools:

Not to be racist or anything, but I go to school with more suburbians [*sic*], and they’re more respectful than black people. So the people that [my sisters] hang out with ... all they do is fight and stuff. And the people I hang out with, is good people. ... I hang out with more white people than black people. ... They just seem like a safer route, less drama.

In this excerpt, Jovita, like other Diversify students, racialized her school’s environment. She had clearly assigned a racial category to the prevailing norms of “respectfulness” within her school. Furthermore, she states that being exposed to her school’s “white” (“suburban”) cultural norms has made her superior to her sisters. Jovita’s descriptions of her sisters also show that she has accepted the legitimacy of a devaluation of blacks: She accepts as accurate harmful racial stereotypes about blacks as prone to fighting and violence.

Similar to Jovita, Cassidy (female, 14) indicated that she believed many of the racially charged stereotypes about Luton public school students are true. Although she prefaced her statement with the caveat, “You can’t judge a book by its cover,” she went on to explain that “Luton kids” conform to stereotypes of black deviance and academic failure:

*Cassidy:* I heard stories about them! I mean, you can’t judge a book by its cover, but a majority of Luton kids I hear about *are* bad.

*Interviewer:* *What makes them bad?*

*Cassidy:* Well, they don’t have enough teachers, and not enough focus on school ... like the ones that are on TV and stuff, and going to jail for shooting people and stuff. Like I wonder what kinds of schools they go to.

Later in the interview, Cassidy noted that although the interviewer was meeting her at a neighborhood community center that was popular with local black youth, she kept away from the “ghetto” kids at the center and was only there to earn money from her job as an after-school tutor.

Cassidy, like the other Diversify students, made a point of her social distance and superiority to other black youth in her community.

Students in Diversify used a range of narrative strategies to underscore their distance from stigmatized notions of poor, “ghetto,” or “dramatic” black youth attending urban schools in Luton. These strategies included expressing gratitude that they had escaped a devalued identity by attending a “white” school, as we saw earlier in the interview excerpts from Terek and Karla. They also included derogating Luton public schools and their students for fighting, “drama,” and “acting out,” as we see with Jovita, Aria, Ranah, and Cassidy.

All these statements are forms of defensive othering, a type of identity work that members of subordinate groups use to circumvent stigma and its consequences. Defensive othering occurs when members of a discredited group accept the legitimacy of a devalued identity and respond by claiming that the identity does not apply to them personally (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Diversify students sought to distance themselves from their peers in the Luton public schools on the basis of the same stereotypes of blacks and majority-black neighborhoods as unruly and undisciplined that were applied to them in the suburban schools. As Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) note, when members of stigmatized groups pursue security or gains by othering members of their own group, they strengthen the belief system that legitimates the dominant group’s claim to superiority. Defensive othering also weakens subordinate groups’ potential solidarity. We speculate that defensive othering may have helped Diversify students accomplish a more honorable self within the racialized belief system of their suburban schools. Yet by engaging in defensive othering, they supported the belief system that subordinated them and created a sense of separation between themselves and black youth who attended urban public schools.

## RACIALIZATION BY WAITLISTED STUDENTS

*Social Behavior and Styles.* Waitlisted students were not blind to race and racial issues. They willingly discussed race with a white interviewer, and they racialized nonacademic behaviors, practices, and preferences. For example, waitlisted students sometimes categorized their

classmates' and their own clothing styles and cliques as "black," "Hispanic," "Asian," "Puerto Rican," "Colombian," "Dominican," or "Haitian." Some students racialized out-of-school social behavior, classifying, for instance, the practice of spending unstructured time out-of-doors with friends as "an African American thing" (Micah, female, 16). Yet waitlisted students did not racialize school quality. Instead, they stated that high-quality programs, professional and strict environments, school safety, and caring teachers were at the root of high-quality schools, describing these as race-neutral properties. We contend this is because, within their predominantly black and Hispanic schools, waitlisted students did not personally observe situations where white students dominated the highest-achieving courses and programs.

### *Race-neutral Discussions of School Quality*

**High-quality School Programs.** Reginald's (male, 15) conversations about school were representative of waitlisted students. Reginald acknowledged that race was salient to his school's *social* life, but he did not racially classify any aspect of his school's *academic* environment or quality. For instance, Reginald racialized certain clothing styles as "Hispanic" (see Warikoo 2011 on how youth often decouple style, ethnic identity, and achievement): "They [Hispanics] dress with their shoes. Like, they match their shoes to their clothes, and everyone kind of follows them." Yet Reginald emphasized and praised his school's curricular offerings and disciplinary policies in a race-neutral way:

They [my school] have good programs. And ... they try to help us with college. ... Their job is to help us get social or something because like the name of the school is Social Advancement and Equality Academy. They teach a lot different I think than other high schools, like they give us certain privileges so long as we be respectful to the rules that they give.

It may not be surprising that Reginald did not racialize good school programs and a trusting environment, the characteristics he believed were responsible for the high quality of his school. After all, he attended a charter school primarily composed of students from nondominant groups. Reginald

thought highly of his school, yet the broader culture lacks a strong discourse linking blacks and Hispanics to high achievement (Tyson 2011). Lacking access to such a discourse, it may not have occurred to Reginald to explain that the "blackness" or "Hispanic-ness" of his school is what makes it a place where high-quality programs and trust prevail.

Nonetheless, in light of our findings on the Diversify students, it is notable that waitlisted students like Reginald did not assume a widespread logic wherein schools enrolling more privileged and white students are automatically "better" (Holme 2002; Johnson 2006; Roda and Wells 2013). If they had, this would necessitate lengthy explanations of why and how their predominantly black and Hispanic schools could offer positive academic environments. Yet waitlisted students like Reginald did not discuss the perceived positive academic aspects of predominantly nonwhite Luton schools as though they were unusual or exceptional, given the demographic composition of the students within them.

Furthermore, Reginald's charter school advertised itself as addressing the alienation of students from nondominant groups. Its website stated, "Until now, many of our students have suffered from schooling environments that did not address their unique challenges."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Reginald's school's identity, mission, and programs drew on a discourse about the needs of "at-risk" students from nondominant groups. Importantly, however, Reginald's charter school did not offer programs for "at-risk" students alongside programs for more academically advanced students in a way that led to the dominance of white students in high-achieving programs and courses. Perhaps as a result, Reginald did not racially classify aspects of his school that he believed were responsible for its positive *academic* environment and quality.

**Professional and Strict School Environments.** Abraham (male, 15) attended a predominantly black and Hispanic "no excuses" charter high school that did not track students, and there was no racial and ethnic segregation at the classroom level. (See Dobbie and Fryer 2011 for background information on "no excuses" charter schools.)

Abraham's school was founded on a mission of serving poor students from nondominant groups. Like Reginald's school, the school's promotional materials drew on a language of such students as "at-risk" and "vulnerable" to school failure. For

instance, Abraham's school's website proclaimed that "we address the severe academic deficits and low college attendance of urban minority students." One could easily imagine a student adopting this perspective and explaining that his school is positive because it successfully addresses the problems of minority failure. In so doing, the student might classify academic failure as "black." However, such a discourse was missing from Abraham's account. Instead, Abraham used adjectives like "professional," "strict," and "hard" to portray what, in his view, makes the school a positive place for learning:

They have the uniform, and ... everything is very professional. ... Everything is neat, everything is organized, everything is in very tip-top shape. ... And the school policy is not so strict that you can't even breathe, but strict enough that they will get you back on task and help you out with things.

Other students might explain that the low-income, non-white student body "needs" the kind of strictness that Abraham describes as responsible for his school's high quality. In so doing, they might racialize deviance and misbehavior, as well as professionalism and order. Abraham, however, did not. Abraham did not reproduce the discourse about students from nondominant groups that his school's promotional materials relied upon.

At the same time, Abraham did bring up race in other conversations. In response to the question, "What are the kids like at school?" he explained there was more interracial mingling at school than out of school. As Abraham described it, while everyone was "friendly" at school, race and ethnicity organized close friendships with classmates (partially indicated by the extent to which students spent out-of-school time together). Like Reginald and other waitlisted students, Abraham recognized that a student's race and ethnicity were *socially* consequential. Yet race did not appear to be salient to his understanding of what produces *academic* achievement, either for his classmates or for his school.

**Safety and Violence.** Unlike the Diversify students, waitlisted students did not racialize school safety and violence, characteristics of a school environment that, in their view, influence school quality. Micah (female, 16), for instance, had rejected her initial school assignment because she believed it was a violent place and the students there were

indifferent learners.<sup>4</sup> However, Micah described this problematic school environment without employing a racial or demographic frame:

*Micah:* It's a bad school, and I have friends there—and they say they don't like it.

*Interviewer:* What's bad about it?

*Micah:* Violence, the teachers. ... Well, not the teachers. You know, like the teachers are teaching, but the kids aren't learning. Nobody learns anything, and the teachers just teach it.

Micah's description of the school she rejected resonates with Diversify students' statements about the violence and indifference that, according to them, prevail within Luton schools. Micah pointed to these same problems, but she did not racialize them as characteristic of "black" schools. Like other waitlisted students, Micah was not hesitant to racially classify other public spaces. She readily and (without prompting) racialized several of the city's neighborhoods, complaining that her new "white" neighborhood was "too quiet" and her old "black" neighborhood was more fun. Thus, Micah's nonracial classification of the school she had rejected on academic grounds appears to reflect her tendency not to racialize schools as sites that produce achievement, rather than an overall tendency not to racialize public spaces.

Houston (male, 13) also emphasized school safety and order as important to school quality, but without racializing these characteristics. Houston attended a predominantly black charter school where no white students were enrolled. Although it was featured in the local newspaper as having "persistently low standardized test scores," Houston clearly thought highly of his school. He emphasized that it was "good," in part because it was safe. In his interview, Houston did not racialize violence as a typical characteristic of "black" schools:

*Interviewer:* Would you want your kids to go there (the school you go to)?

*Houston:* It doesn't matter to me, as long as the school is good ... as long as there ain't no violence.

*Interviewer:* And do you have violence at your school?

*Houston:* No. They expel bad kids and suspend them.

In this excerpt, Houston explained that his charter school was good because of its zero-tolerance

disciplinary procedures of expulsion and suspension for fighting—not because of anything race related.

Darnell (male, 15) attended a predominantly black and Hispanic charter school. Like other waitlisted students, Darnell racialized some styles and behaviors, saying he does not buy “ghetto type clothes,” because he does not want to be viewed as the stereotypical black man “from the hood.” He also racialized some nonacademic behaviors, calling his neighbors’ practice of “messing with their cars” a “Latino thing.” Yet race was absent from Darnell’s discussion of the lack of fighting at his school and the school’s ability to enforce discipline: “My school is—there’s almost no fighting there because it’s really small. Usually everybody knows everybody and it’s cool. So yeah, there’s been a fight maybe three times in four years. If you fight in that school, you will get in trouble.” Darnell emphasized that good schools are those with safe environments, which he attributed to strict disciplinary policies rather than to the race of the student body.

***Caring and Concerned Teachers.*** Other waitlisted students emphasized “nice teachers” as important to school quality. Byron (male, 14) attended a predominantly black and Hispanic public school that did not track students into courses or programs by their academic achievement. Byron thought his school was good because it had caring teachers: “If we have problems with our work, teachers help us. I know that there’s things that they’ve done to help the students just ‘cause [they care, not because they have to]. They are good teachers, they are just strict.”

Cantrice (female, 15), another waitlisted student, attended a predominantly black and Hispanic pilot school with a strong academic reputation. Her school, like the other schools attended by waitlisted students, did not track students. Cantrice highlighted the “caring teachers” who “push students to achieve” as responsible for her school’s high quality:

The teachers—they always make sure ... like, my geometry teacher, she gets behind you, purposely puts you in detention so you can do your homework, always making sure you’re on top of things. Then comes my history teacher. She’s assertive. It’s like she treats you like you’re in college already.

As in other waitlisted students’ interviews, race was missing from Cantrice’s conception of what makes for a good school.

In sum, within their own schools, the waitlisted students in our study did not observe and participate in academic courses or programs where white students dominated the highest-achieving levels. Although waitlisted students racialized neighborhoods, peer groups, and even clothing and interactional styles, they did not racialize school academic quality. In contrast to the Diversify students, they described the characteristics of “good schools” in race-neutral terms. Specifically, they highlighted high-quality school programs, professional and strict school environments, school safety and discipline, and caring and concerned teachers as responsible for a school’s academic quality. Further, they did so without racially classifying these characteristics. We do not interpret these findings to mean that waitlisted students were unaware of race, racism, or racial inequality. Rather, our interpretation is that not personally observing white-dominated achievement hierarchies within one’s own school can make societal messages about the racialization of achievement less painful and relevant, perhaps prompting students not to view school academic quality through a racialized lens.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we bring together two distinct research streams. One set of research findings demonstrates that individuals often attribute racial characteristics to institutions (Barajas and Ronkvist 2007; Kefalas 2003; Lacy 2004, 2007; Omi and Winant 1994; Pattillo 2007). Another shows that students from nondominant groups who observe white-dominated achievement hierarchies at school often racially categorize academic achievement as “white” (Fryer and Torelli 2010; O’Connor et al. 2011; Tyson 2011; Warikoo and Carter 2009). Black Diversify students, whose school contexts reinforced racial academic hierarchies, racially classified some schools as “white” based on their perceived ability to produce achievement. These students spoke of schools as racialized spaces, imputing to these racialized definitions the same meanings about white academic superiority that their schools’ sorting and discursive practices supported. Waitlisted students attended predominantly black and Hispanic

schools where achievement hierarchies were not white dominated. Although they racially classified a number of nonacademic behaviors, they did not racially classify the characteristics they believed were at the root of high-quality schools. Nor did they racially classify schools as “white” or “black” places based on their perceived academic quality. Our findings have three main implications. First, personally observing white-dominated academic hierarchies at school seems to be the mechanism behind black adolescents’ racial classification of achievement as white, and this is true whether students are racially classifying high-achieving individuals or institutions. Second, therefore, scholars may productively conceive of schools, not just individual students, as sites of potential racialization. Just as actors may classify individual-level achievement as a racial phenomenon, so too might they classify the collective-level achievement produced by institutions as a racial phenomenon. Third, the racialization of achievement, at both the individual and collective levels, may be more complex than previous research would lead us to expect, involving social class and place as well as race. We conclude by expanding on each implication and offering suggestions for future research.

### *Personally Observing White-dominated Achievement Hierarchies at School*

Like others who study the racialization of achievement (e.g., Fryer and Torelli 2010; Tyson 2011), we find that personally observing and participating in white-dominated achievement hierarchies within one’s own school makes societal messages about race and achievement more raw and salient. We extended previous work by suggesting that these same processes may prompt black students to assign racial meanings not just to individual achievement, but also to overall school academic quality. We also identified how attending a school with a white-dominated achievement hierarchy could relate to black students’ ways of understanding racial achievement patterns. After all, Diversify students’ racial classifications of their schools as “white” were not neutral depictions of schools’ demographic composition. Nor were they matter-of-fact ways of indicating that racial achievement patterns exist. Rather, these descriptions served as explanations (see also Pollock 2001). Diversify students drew on racial stereotypes about white

civility and motivation to account for the perceived collective achievement produced by the suburban (“white”) schools they attended. They also drew on racial stereotypes about black intellectual inferiority and disorderliness to explain the collective underachievement produced by the predominantly black and Hispanic urban public schools in their home neighborhoods. Attributing racial achievement patterns to black/white differences in ability, motivation, or discipline—rather than to racial inequality—could be harmful for Diversify students’ educational beliefs and motivation. Students’ beliefs about the meanings associated with their racial identities relate to attachment to schooling (Chavous et al. 2003).

### *Racialization of Achievement on the Collective Level: Schools as Racial Spaces*

In examining racialization as a process, research within the sociology of education has mostly focused on the racialization of individual-level achievement and behavior. However, as we have shown, racial meanings about white academic superiority, and black academic inferiority, may become part of a school’s academic reputation. Just as one might think of students as producing (or failing to produce) reputations for achievement, we might also think of schools as institutions that produce (or fail to produce) achievement-related reputations. Furthermore, just as individual-level achievement might be racialized, so too might the collective-level achievement produced by institutions. As we demonstrated, schools are collective institutions that may (or may not) be racially categorized as “black” or “white” based on their perceived ability to produce achievement. At the same time, racialization is not a universal or inevitable process; actors who do not racially classify achievement as a white phenomenon may not racially classify schools based on their ability to produce achievement.

Conceptualizing schools as collective producers of achievement paves the way for future research on how racialization processes affect perceptions of educational institutions at all levels of the academic pipeline. This conceptualization also draws attention to how, when individuals racialize institutions, they are racializing the characteristics they believe prevail within them. For instance, other researchers have shown that individuals

across race and income groups categorize neighborhoods in racial terms. People associate neighborhoods where whites predominate with security and safety, and neighborhoods where nonwhites predominate with disorder and dysfunction (Holme 2002; Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Saporito 2003; Saporito and Lareau 1999). In so doing, individuals racialize safety and security as white characteristics, and disorder and dysfunction as nonwhite characteristics. In conceptualizing schools as collective institutions, we showed that parallel processes attend some adolescents' perceptions of schools.

Future research could examine how students from other racial and ethnic groups racially classify schools, whether this depends on schools' demographic composition and mission, and how these potential racial classifications ultimately shape educational choices and outcomes. For instance, do adolescents' racial categorizations of schools influence their enrollment decisions in an era of increasing school choice? If so, how? What are the implications of these processes for students' educational outcomes? The current project was interview based and included data from students attending a range of urban and suburban schools. Taking a different approach, future research could use ethnography to engage in a close examination of how, within a single school, micro-level interactions among students and teachers influence how students racially classify their schools. Future work could also address this study's potential selection bias by asking the same questions, but using an experimental research design that includes randomly assigned treatment and control groups. Finally, the findings presented here suggest that some black adolescents racially classify schools they perceive as high achieving as white, and schools they perceive as low-achieving as black (the Diversify students); but other students do not racially classify schools based on their perceived ability to produce achievement (the waitlisted students). Future research could identify the conditions under which black students racially classify "good" schools as black, based on schools' ability to produce achievement.

### *Race, Class, and Place in the Racialization of Achievement*

Our findings suggest that the racialization of achievement may be more complex than previous

research might lead us to expect, involving social class and place as well as race. Taken together, the attributes of the student body that the Diversify students described as promoting their schools' success were not just racial. Rather, Diversify students' descriptions and explanations of school quality and environment depended on the meanings they imputed to the multiply determined demographics of students and teachers in their schools. The meanings students associated with race, class, and place were the result of an "analytic interaction: a nonadditive process" (Choo and Ferree 2010:131), in which several social locations (i.e., white, suburban, and affluent) transformed the meanings they attached to others.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the attributes the Diversify students described as making urban schools unsuited for academic success were not intersectional, involving race, class, and place. Urban neighborhoods are not merely geographic territories, but also symbolic places laden with meanings about race and racial stereotypes (Keene and Padilla 2010; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Wacquant 2007; Winkler 2012). Our findings suggest that racialized spatial stigma, which attaches to people in low-income, predominantly black and Hispanic urban communities, may also attach to schools.

***Black Group Cohesion.*** The racial categorization of individual achievement may have negative implications for black group cohesion. These negative implications have previously been understood on the individual level, as researchers of "acting white" examine relationships among students attending the same school. They show that black students in schools with racial achievement hierarchies may become hostile to their higher-achieving black classmates (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Tyson 2011). Our findings suggest that the racial categorization of achievement may have additional, broader negative implications for black group cohesion. Diversify students who racially categorized achievement on the collective level not only rejected individuals whom they knew personally and saw as conforming to negative black stereotypes, but also were ready to distance themselves from individuals, unknown to them personally, who were immersed in institutional environments they classified as "black." Some scholars argue that blacks who seek bonds of solidarity with other blacks are more likely to engage in positive collective action on behalf of the group, and that black group solidarity should be accepted as a desirable



cultural norm leading to positive economic, social, and political development (e.g., Hoston 2009). Taking this perspective, Diversify students' use of defensive othering strategies to distance themselves from other blacks warrants concern.

Arguably, the differences in how Diversify and waitlisted students engage in racial classification reflect their own experiences and are aligned with the strategies they adopted to navigate the social and academic aspects of their own schools. For both Diversify and waitlisted students, racially classifying some behaviors and practices is not a trivial adolescent pastime but a tactical social strategy in a racialized society. At the same time, racially classifying achievement, and applying these racial classifications to schools based on their ability to produce student achievement, puts black students in a bind. It undermines the potential for them to articulate a positive image of blackness that includes school achievement. It also destabilizes their own potential for identification and solidarity with other blacks. For all these reasons, Diversify students' accounts of the superiority of "white schools" are troubling. Not only do they reinforce stereotypes and create the grounds for their denigration of fellow blacks, but these accounts emerge from Diversify students' need to emphasize their position as "exceptional" blacks within schools where blacks' intellectual ability and motivation are questioned. At the same time, waitlisted students' accounts of their schools' quality and environment offer hope, as these black students do not view achievement, and educational spaces that produce achievement, as "white." Clearly, how achievement is understood and racially categorized varies across context. Even children living in the same neighborhoods may come to radically different understandings of race and achievement, depending on the messages and practices they are exposed to at school. Ultimately, it appears that educators and the public, through the school policies and programs they promote, can powerfully influence how students understand race, achievement, and school quality.

## RESEARCH ETHICS

Our research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Harvard University Institutional Review Board. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research, and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

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## NOTES

1. Ethnic and racial achievement hierarchies are multi-dimensional and go far beyond differences between white and black populations. Nonetheless, in this article, we focus on perceived differences and explanations for white-black achievement gaps because our black adolescent participants focused on these two races in their own discussions of school quality.
2. We refer to waitlisted students' schools as "predominantly nonwhite." In all of the waitlisted students' schools, whites made up less than 20 percent of the student body population. This stands in marked contrast to the demographic composition of the Diversify students' schools, where whites were always in the majority.
3. Here, as elsewhere, we modified words to protect participant and school confidentiality. We also refrain from including details that would reveal the name of the program or the location of the schools and neighborhoods where we conducted our study.
4. In Luton, a deferred acceptance mechanism designates school assignments. In this system, students first propose their first-choice school. If students are rejected, they may propose their next choice. The cycle terminates with assignment by geography when students stop proposing alternatives. See Gale and Shapley (1962) on the deferred acceptance algorithm.
5. Choo and Ferree's (2010) article is on *intersectionality* as this term refers to mutually constitutive social locations of race, class, and gender. Here, we took some of Choo and Ferree's insights and applied them to our findings about the intersectionality of race, class, and place.

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