

## ***Why the Black Kids Sit Together at The Stairs: The Role of Identity-Affirming Counter-Spaces in a Predominantly White High School***

**Dorinda J. Carter**

**Michigan State University**

*Many studies provide evidence for the strong influences of same-race peer networks on Black student achievement and racial identity in private and elite schools; however, research is lacking regarding these influences for Black achievers in predominantly White public schools. In this article, the author examines how nine high-achieving Black students in a predominantly White public high school created and used informal and formal same-race peer networks in their school to buffer experiences with racism and affirm their racial identity. Drawing on data from a yearlong qualitative investigation, the author discusses how the use of these identity-affirming counter-spaces serve as a positive resistance strategy for these students and allows them to maintain a strong racial sense of self in their maintenance of school success. Findings from this study reinforce the importance of having safe spaces in predominantly White learning environments for Black students to escape psychological, emotional, and physical stress stemming from experiences with racism.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Several studies provide evidence for the strong positive and negative influences of same-race peer networks on Black student achievement and racial identity in schools (Cookson & Persell, 1991; Fine, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fries-Britt, 1998; MacLeod, 1987; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994); however, research is lacking regarding these influences in predominantly White public schools. Nonetheless, findings from studies conducted in predominantly White private and elite schooling contexts provide lenses through which to analyze and understand how same-race peer networks positively influence the behaviors and adaptation patterns of high-achieving Black students in other predominantly White schooling contexts (Cookson & Persell, 1991; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991). For example, Datnow and Cooper (1996) posited that formal and informal same-race peer networks for Black students in a predominantly White independent school not only facilitated their adjustment to an environment where they were often seen as outsiders, but also supported these students' academic success and created opportunities for them to affirm their racial identities. Such findings indicate that creating and using same-race peer networks and spaces within the school environment to freely enact one's construction of Blackness allows some Black students to cope with negativity they experience in a predominantly White learning environment.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF COUNTER-SPACES IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT**

Same-race peer networks often gather in specific physical spaces within a school environment. Tatum (1997) described this phenomenon in her book *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* Tatum explained that in racially desegregated school contexts, Black adolescents are not only encountering racism and reflecting on their identity, but their White peers, even when they are not the perpetrators of racism, are also unprepared to respond in supportive

ways. Thus, Black students turn to one another for the much needed support that they are seeking. This support comes in the form of racial clustering in physical areas within a school. Tatum (1997) explained that often this physical space is in the cafeteria:

When a group of Black teens are sitting together in the cafeteria . . . school administrators want to know not only why they are sitting together, but what can be done to prevent it. We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. (p. 62)

While this physical space might be the cafeteria in some schools, Black students might establish this space in any area of the school environment. Some researchers have termed these spaces *counter-spaces*, because Black students feel that their experiences and racial identity can be affirmed and validated in these contexts where other same-race peers often share similar life experiences and racial affinity (see Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). In learning environments where Black students are the demographic minority, these spaces counter the hegemony of racist and other oppressive ideologies and practices of the institution and its members.

Counter-spaces can be formal or informal, academic or social. According to Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) in their work with Black college students, social counter-spaces serve several purposes for Black students. Firstly, the space, outside of the confines of a structured classroom environment, allows Black students to express concerns and frustrations with one another about their experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination in the school. Secondly, the space allows bonding between Black students who share similar cultural backgrounds and/or experiences. This author terms these spaces identity-affirming counter-spaces, because they allow Black students to specifically affirm the racial and/or ethnic aspects of their identity. These aspects of one's identity are often negatively represented or stereotyped by teachers and peers within the school environment (Carter, 2005). Specifically, researchers have found that often in predominantly White learning environments, the classroom domain—a domain where students spend much of their school time—does very little to foster a positive representation of Blackness or Black identity (Carter, 2005; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Therefore, the creation of an identity-affirming counter-space is a positive coping strategy for some students as a response to experiencing what they perceive as racism in the school environment.

There is considerable evidence that predominantly White learning environments are perceived as hostile to many Black students (Anson, 1987; Cary, 1991; Hamm & Coleman, 2001; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kane & Orsini, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991); however, when faced with such hostility some Black achievers cope by creating and using formal and informal, social and academic identity-affirming counter-spaces as a resistance strategy to buffer experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination. In this article, the author describes the creation and use of informal and formal identity affirming counter-spaces that nine high-achieving Black students occupy at Independence High School in which informal identity-affirming counter-spaces are defined as physical spaces in the school environment solely created by the Black students. Formal identity-affirming counter-spaces are defined as networks co-constructed by school adults and Black students (e.g., Black student organizations, organizations or offices that provide services to Black students and other students of color). These counter-spaces represent institutionalized mechanisms that serve as protective forces for these students and allow them to maintain a strong racial sense of self, while maintaining school success in a racially hostile environment. The presence of these spaces also offsets the challenges involved in effectively navigating classroom, social, and extracurricular domains in the school context in culturally accommodating but not assimilative ways.

## METHODOLOGY

The data reported are drawn from a larger qualitative investigation of the behaviors that high-achieving Black students employ within and across classroom, social, and extracurricular domains

within a predominantly White high school context to simultaneously maintain high achievement and a positive racial self-concept. Independence High School (pseudonym) is a four-year comprehensive, predominantly White, upper-middle to upper-class public high school in Lenox, Massachusetts—an affluent suburban town. The 2000 census revealed the racial makeup of the city as 88.07% White, 7.68% Asian, 1.97% African American, 0.07% Native American, 0.03% Pacific Islander, 2.52% Hispanic or Latino, 0.71% from other races, and 1.46% biracial and multiracial (Carter, 2005, p. 46). The median income for a household in the city was \$86,052, and the median income for a family was \$125,289. Of the 2,181 students that were enrolled in the 2003-2004 school year, there were approximately 0.20% Native Americans, 9.5% Asians, 5.6% Blacks, 80.7% Whites, and 4% Hispanics (Carter, 2005, p. 46). This author uses the term 'Black' to identify students of African descent through U.S. slavery and those of Caribbean descent who were born in the U.S. or have immigrant parents. Sixty-one Black students residing in inner-city Boston attended the school through its participation in the Metropolitan Council for Education (METCO) busing program, a voluntary urban-suburban educational desegregation program that provides opportunities for urban students of color to attend school in suburban public school systems.

The data collection methods included three in-depth individual interviews with students, one in-depth individual interview with select adults in the school environment (e.g., one teacher of each student, the school's four housemasters, and the director of the Office of Human and Civil Rights) participant observations, a focus group interview with students, and informal observations on a daily basis in the school. Interest in listening to students' voices about their school experiences led to qualitative research methods as most appropriate for the investigation. Interviewing was a central data collection procedure. The Three-Interview Series method (Seidman, 1998) was used to conduct three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each student. This interview method combines life-history interviewing with focused, in-depth discussion using open-ended questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experiences within the topic under study. By engaging participants in storytelling about their school experiences, this author was able to help them make sense of their experiences and also understand how participants related their perceptions to their experiences and behaviors.

### *Sample*

Black students in grades 10-12 were solicited to participate in this study. The in-depth interview and observation sample population of nine students (5 females, 4 males) was purposively selected from a screening sample of 13 students (Maxwell, 1996). Criteria for participation in the study included:

- Student is in grades 10-12;
- Student identifies as Black and/or African American;
- Student is a high achiever;
- Student is a METCO or non-METCO student;
- Student does or does not perceive shifts in their behavior in the school context.

For the study, a student was identified as a high achiever based on enrollment in at least one honors, advanced placement course or college preparatory course, participation in at least one extracurricular activity, and one or more of the following criteria: (a) a grade point average of 2.8 or higher on a 4.0 scale, (b) honor roll status, and/or (c) a teacher recommendation. Allowing a grade point average slightly below 3.2 for this study was necessary to yield a representative study sample since fewer than five Black students in the entire school had a grade point average of 3.2 or higher. Of the 121 students identified as Black/African American in the school, only 18 were enrolled in an honors or AP course. Of this number, five were freshmen students. Since student participation in the study depended on parental consent and student consent, this author expanded the screening sample to include Black students with a 2.8 or higher GPA and those enrolled in

college preparatory courses who met all other selection criteria. Table 1 summarizes demographic data for the in-depth study sample.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Data for Study Sample (N=9)*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>METCO (Y/N)</b>	<b>GPA</b>
Rodney	Male	17	N	3.20
Derek	Male	18	N	3.01
Rachel	Female	17	N	3.11
Leslie	Female	15	N	3.00
Kelis	Female	17	Y	3.00
Kimmy	Female	15	Y	3.11
Mark	Male	17	Y	2.89
Samantha	Female	16	Y	3.09
Aaron	Male	17	N	3.22

***Interview Protocol***

By using semi-structured interview protocols, the author was able to obtain similar information from all nine participants and allow participants to expand thoughts and ideas on particular topics of most interest. The first interview solicited background information from each participant and focused on participants' perceptions of their school, peer relationships and overall beliefs about schooling and success. Participants were also asked to describe the behaviors they employ in classroom, social, and extracurricular domains within the school context and whether or not they perceived their behaviors as shifting within and between these domains. The second interview focused on a comparison of participants' actual behaviors and behavioral shifts in these domains within the school context. This interview was used to focus on any new questions that had formed after reviewing interview transcriptions from the first interview. Questions were highly driven from observations and participants' reported behaviors. The third interview allowed participants to reflect on how their perceptions and understandings of the behavioral norms and expectations between the three domains informed, if at all, the behavioral choices they made in those various domains within their school context. The participants were asked to assess the personal costs and benefits associated with employing these behaviors. Additionally, the author inquired if participants believed race and/or social class had been a factor in their school experiences to-date. This interview served as a wrap-up, allowing movement through key concepts and topics not yet addressed, to ask for elaboration, and to talk about aspects of a participant's story that was puzzling or unclear (see Table 2 for select student interview protocol questions).

**Table 2**

*Select Questions from the Student Interview Protocols*

<b>Student Interview #1</b>
1. Do you like attending [your] High School? What is it like to be there?
2. Do you look forward to coming to school? Explain. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Are you proud to be a student here? Explain.</li> </ul>
3. Do you believe it is important to do well in school? Why?
4. Is it important to you to have friends of a particular racial or ethnic group? Why?
5. In a typical school day, are there ever times that you notice that some of your peers shift their behaviors in different settings (e.g., the classroom, the lunchroom, after school in a club meeting)? If so, when? What types of shifts? Why?

Table 2 continued

- a. Are there times in school when you shift your behavior towards others around you in academic, social, and extracurricular settings? If so, when? What types of shifts? Why?
- b. Probes: language shifts, dress shifts, etc.
6. What do you think is the purpose of school?
7. What do you think it means to be a good student?
  - a. Do you see yourself as a good student? Why?

---

**Student Interview #2**

---

1. What informs the behavioral choices you make in the classroom?
  - a. Probes: adult perceptions and expectations, peer perceptions and expectations, self perceptions and expectations
2. Do these behaviors differ from other behaviors you display in school? In what ways? Why do you display these behaviors?
3. When I observed you in class, I noticed that \_\_\_\_\_. Why did you do that?

---

**Student Interview #3**

---

1. What would you like to do after you graduate from high school?
2. How important do you think the behaviors that you display in high school are for your future plans?
3. How, if at all, have the cultural differences that you perceive at your school, been a factor in your behavioral choices in the school context?
4. Do you think your race has been a factor in your school experience? Why?
  - a. Probe: Academic and social success?
5. Do you think the racial composition of your school has been a factor in your school experience? Why?
  - a. Do you think your experience would be different if you went to another school with more people of your racial and/or ethnic group? Probe: Would it be easier? Harder? Why?

---

**Procedures**

Participants were interviewed between September 2003 and May 2004. Each interview was face-to-face, semi-structured and lasted no longer than sixty minutes. All interviews were audio taped and conducted privately in a guidance counselor's office or an empty classroom. Students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews were transcribed by an external transcriber, and transcriptions were shared with participants to ensure accuracy. Additionally, extensive field notes were taken for formal and informal observations.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The author used a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data in order to arrive at the concept of identity-affirming counter-spaces. Specifically, categorizing (coding and thematic analysis) and contextualizing (narrative analysis and individual profiles) were used as analytic strategies for examining the interview transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos (Maxwell, 1996). The author also created a within-case matrix for each participant based on emerging codes, themes and categories from interview data and field notes, and participant profiles and narrative summaries (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Cross-case matrices helped to develop a grounded theory regarding participants' use of identity-affirming counter-spaces to resist experiences with racism in the school context.

## RESULTS

The following sections describe how the students in this study use informal and formal identity-affirming counter-spaces as a positive resistance strategy in response to racism as an environmental stressor in their learning environment. Using a combination of observations and students' voices, the author first talked about "The Stairs" as an informal social identity-affirming counter-space, which allowed these students to enact their fictive kinship (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Stack, 1974) and sense of Blackness, because it represents the most significant counter-space for most of the participants in this study. The formal identity-affirming counter-spaces in the Independence environment is then described, which helps participants manage the stress associated with succeeding in a predominantly White learning context. Finally, the implications of these findings are discussed to understand the important role race plays in shaping Black students' responses to experiencing racism in predominantly White school contexts.

### INFORMAL IDENTITY-AFFIRMING COUNTER-SPACES

At Independence High, the library is located in the middle of the main hallway that runs the length of the school building, adjacent to the cafeteria and in front of the Senior House office. It represents a common area where students gather for academic and social purposes. A series of steps leading to the library entrance are populated with many of the Black students in the school. According to study participants, The Stairs is a social gathering place for many of the METCO students and some Black students who reside in Lenox. The Black students that congregate here share a social identity that crosses social class lines.

#### *Fictive Kinship*

In many ways, The Stairs provides a space for Black students to enact their fictive kinship (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Stack, 1974). A sense of peoplehood or collective social identity is evident in the behaviors of students at The Stairs. Fictive kinship is a concept, according to Stack (1974) that is very common to Black folks, and at The Stairs, these students align themselves as brothers and sisters not by blood, but through a relationship that bonds them on a social, cultural, and/or economical foundation. Having claimed this physical space in the school building as their own, gathering at The Stairs reduces some of the alienation and 'otherness' felt by Black students who live in Boston but attend school in a foreign community (suburban Lenox) and Black students who live in Lenox but feel more closely connected to METCO students.

Rodney, a student at Independence, described this fictive kinship when explaining the importance of having Black friends.

I mean it's perfectly alright to hang out with White kids, I mean it's cool. There's nothing wrong with White people. There's just that sense of . . . I guess peace when you're with the Black people, you know? I mean . . . we all have to struggle. It's just that sense of we're all here together. A lot of [Black] people out here, we all grew up like in the same little area of Boston, you know? We all know what it's like to be a Black kid in Boston. We all know what it's like to be a Black kid who lives in Boston but who goes to a White school. A lotta [Black] kids here are cousins, related. A lotta [Black] kids live next to each other. They all know themselves what you gotta go through. We're all raised in different families, but we're all close to the same and we all have a lotta the same interests. It's just easier. You see someone from where you're at, someone your color, it's just easier to make common ground. (Carter, 2005, pp. 220-221)

Although Rodney actually lives in Lenox, he shares a common social identity with METCO students, because he spent the early years of life growing up in Boston prior to moving to Lenox. He associates himself with a social identity that reflects his experiences in the inner-city. Even though his current demographic location separates him from his friends, Rodney alludes to a collective social identity that is rooted in many of the Black students sharing a common inner-city experience. He also articulates the commonality between METCO students who hang out at The

Stairs and deconstruct their experiences as students who travel from urban areas of Boston to suburban Lenox to attend school. Rodney all too well understands the experience of being a Black student at Independence. The sense of collective struggle—in one's home environment and as a Black student in Lenox—bonds him with other Black students at The Stairs in ways that White students cannot relate.

The inner peace Rodney experiences when gathered with other Black students at The Stairs indicates that he feels unsettled at other times throughout his school day when he is unable to surround himself with same-race peers. This is evident in his testimony regarding a classroom experience where he is the only Black student and a White teacher does not acknowledge his raised hand.

I'll be like, 'what's 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? (Carter, 2005, p. 184)

In this instance, Rodney perceives that the teacher dismisses his raised hand during a class discussion because he is Black and, thus, must not have anything worthy to add to the conversation. His teacher's actions result in his being positioned as invisible in the classroom. Through his fictive kinship with same-race peers at The Stairs who share his social identity, Rodney gains the necessary psychological, social, and cultural support and visibility needed to cope with the alienation and otherness he often feels in his classes where he is one of a few or the only Black student.

Yeah, like, beginning of each school year, you sit down and count how many kids . . . you know? I dunno. For me, I'm just sitting there and I realize, 'Damn. I'm the only Black kid in here.' I think for Black kids that's just a little bit bigger, you know? . . . being surrounded by so many White kids, like, so many days out of the year, you know? It's something, like, on the mind. [DC: So then after you're sitting there and you're like 'dang! It's just me,' what do you think?] I gotta get out of here! (Carter, 2005, p. 156)

Samantha expressed similar sentiments when explaining why Black students gather at The Stairs.

I just think we feel more comfortable amongst each other. We can relate to each other, you know? Stuff like that. We understand each other better. Like, how we're coming from the same place and we know what goes on there, you know? And we can—we can just talk about some things that only we would understand as opposed to other people that live in Lenox, you know? Like going home to . . . like, most people wouldn't get it. Like, okay, most people that live in Lenox, they have a lotta money. So we'll be like, you know, 'oh, I wanna get this, but I can't afford it.' And they'll be like, 'Why?' 'Well I don't have money. You do.' Stuff like that. (Carter, 2005, p. 222)

Samantha's comment illuminates the support she receives from gathering at The Stairs to deal with not only racial differences at Independence, but also social class differences, which provides an additional layer that isolates her and other METCO students from their Lenox peers. She is unable to establish the kinds of relationships that she has with the students at The Stairs with her White peers. Many of these peers are perceived to be the initiators of conscious and unconscious racist actions in the school environment; thus, Samantha does not believe she has much in common with these students by way of shared cultural experiences. She understands that many of the students in Lenox are a lot more economically advantaged than she; therefore, gathering with other Black students at The Stairs, who share her background and can relate to her experiences growing up in inner-city Boston, is central to Samantha's psychological well-being. The Stairs represents an identity-affirming counter-space where Black students can embrace their fictive kinship in same-race peer networks and bring their whole selves into the learning community. As expressed by Aaron, this opportunity is not often provided in the predominantly White classroom environment where students are either the only Black student or one of few Black students.

. . . Just more than one [Black] person takes the pressure off me, kind of. Like, I'm the only Black student in the class, and more people notice me very quickly, very easily, so I just kinda stand out. And with a larger Black

population, I think that would've been less. You're the only person in your class. You stand out completely from everyone else. I guess that makes you feel different from everyone else. I mean, it's an obvious contrast between you and the rest of the students, so that makes you feel kinda nervous, more shy, less open. There's no one else like you. (Carter, 2005, p. 159)

### *Enacting Blackness: Self-Initiated Racial Spotlighting*

In addition to cultivating a Black fictive kinship, The Stairs is a social counter-space in the school context where some participants shed their classroom masks to enjoy self-initiated racial spotlighting. In this way, students make themselves racially hypervisible through their own actions. Although these students perceive racial hypervisibility and invisibility to be negatively imposed upon them in the classroom domain (Carter, 2005), at The Stairs they enact a certain style of Blackness that feels more intrinsic to their self-identification. Certain styles of dress, speech, and behavior allow some participants to reclaim and perform an intrinsic form of Blackness that affirms their racial and ethnic identities. In this social space Black English is preferred, cursing is not shunned, voices are at their loudest volume, gossip is revered, horseplay is a must, people-watching is calming, joking is consistent, and "profiling" comes alive for males and females (see Majors & Billson, 1992). These behaviors might sound characteristic of any social group or clique at Independence; however, these activities represent a style of Blackness that many METCO students and some Lenox Black students employ as part of their self-presentation in a racially isolating environment. These behaviors represent the cultural traits of a particular fictive kinship network within a larger Black community at Independence. Kimmy expressed these feelings when stating,

You can be yourself, comfortable [at The Stairs] if you're around people who are the same race as you, act the same way as you, talk the same way as you. I'm just more, you know, comfortable with, you know, people of my own race. (Carter, 2005, p. 224)

Rodney expressed the same sentiments regarding his need to spend time at The Stairs.

I think there's a level where you're more comfortable like, uh, like [with] your race I guess. Especially the way I wanna act, and the odds are people of my race are probably acting that way . . . I mean it's just like talking the way I'm more comfortable with, and like listening to certain types of music. (Carter, 2005, p. 224)

What differentiates the significance of these behaviors from those in other social groups at Independence is the connection to race. For many of the participants in this study, race is a salient aspect of their identity, therefore, creating time and space in the school day to connect with same-race peers is critical. In an environment where they sense that their racial group is constantly devalued (particularly in the classroom context), several of the participants sought the comforts of The Stairs where they can affirm and be affirmed by other Black students who share a common social and cultural identity.

The left side of The Stairs is mainly occupied by junior, senior, and some sophomore METCO students, and the right side of The Stairs is occupied by the freshmen METCO students. Occasionally, one or two White, Asian, biracial, or Latino students join the Black students on The Stairs, signifying that the common identifying element is not being racially identified as Black, but sharing a collective social identity with students at The Stairs. This identity is primarily considered urban by the students—illustrated by dress style, speech style, knowledge of and association with hip-hop and R&B music, and an overall urban attitude. For boys, baggy jeans, matching (brand-name) shoes or sneakers and shirts are the style. For the girls, fashion ranges from skin-tight jeans and knee-high boots, a trendy shirt (mid-drift, halter, or regular length) and a matching purse, to brand-name sweat suits or jumpsuits. Samantha, Rodney, Kelis, and Kimmy identify The Stairs as their primary identity-affirming counter-space in the school. In this space, these participants enact their construction of Blackness that they value as part of their self-identification—an aspect of their identity that remains primarily hidden in the classroom domain where it is not highly valued.



Samantha spends time at The Stairs in the morning after arriving to school on the METCO bus, in-between classes, during lunch, and after school. A very outgoing, talkative, and friendly young woman, at The Stairs Samantha braids Sarah's (a junior non-METCO Black student) hair in cornrows during lunch. Engaging in this behavior allows Samantha to racially spotlight herself for a cultural skill that she takes pride in and which represents Blackness in a positive manner. In the comforts of her fictive kinship, Samantha does not have to concern herself with questions from outsiders (i.e., non-Black peers) regarding why she is engaging in this behavior. On display for the entire school to see, Samantha is not threatened by a negative racial stereotype. While braiding hair, she also exchanges stories about things that happen in Boston with Kelis and other girls. This group of girls forms a supportive peer network that uses The Stairs as a space to enact a collective Black female social identity which is suppressed in the culture of the classroom environment.

For Kelis, meeting these girls and other friends at The Stairs allows her to connect with cultural aspects of her Black and Jamaican identity during the school day. Her best friend, Reese, is, also, Jamaican. Because Kelis has no classes with Reese, the only time that she can exchange conversation with her during the school day is at The Stairs before school, during transitions between classes (which are five minutes), and after school. They do not share the same lunch period. The Stairs is the meeting place for these girls to talk about Black music, television, and other topics related to Black people, with other Black girls. Kelis's behavior at The Stairs is drastically different from her in-class behavior. In class, she works alone and does not collaborate with her peers unless it is required. Because many of her classroom peers are not a part of her primary social circle, her interaction with them during class is limited, even when there are other Black students in the class. Although her participation in many of her classes is limited, at The Stairs Kelis is very vocal with her girlfriends, where she shifts her speech from Standard English to Black English, and generally demonstrates a more relaxed demeanor in the company of her same-race peers.

I think in classrooms I'm a lot more quiet because usually there's people in the class that I talk to, but not all like that—to have an in-depth conversation. We're more into what we're doing in class, as compared to [at] The Stairs, we're more outgoing, like talkative. (Carter, 2005, p. 227)

Kelis and her girlfriends position themselves at the bottom left-hand side of The Stairs. Kelis never sits; she always stands, posturing herself with her back leaned against the wall with a sassy countenance. Samantha, Sarah, and Reese are always close by and sometimes prefer to sit after considering how long they might be at The Stairs.

Rodney is one of the few non-METCO Black students who hangs out at The Stairs. A good number of his friends eat lunch at The Stairs, he likes to people-watch, and he knows that all of the Black students who enact the style of Blackness that he prefers hang out at The Stairs. For Rodney, The Stairs is a place that allows him to release some of the bundled-up energy from class that, when enacted, sometimes gets him into trouble. He is renewed daily when he can enter the school building or exit a classroom and enter this counter-space where the majority of his Black friends congregate and discuss matters specific to them and enact their constructions of Blackness. At The Stairs, he, like Samantha and Kelis, self-initiates racial spotlighting in a way that affirms his racial self instead of denigrates it. Rodney likes to horseplay and joke with his same-race peers, and he speaks more freely than is allowed in the classroom. "I try to talk as correct as possible" (Carter, 2005, p. 229) in English class (enacting an academic-oriented behavior); however, when at The Stairs, Rodney can be heard using a louder tone and curse words (enacting social behaviors) in conversations with friends. The Stairs is not only a social outlet for Rodney. By frequently completing his homework at The Stairs, he is also using the space to engage in an academic-oriented behavior.

For Kimmy, the best thing about hanging out at The Stairs is that she feels she can just "be [my]self." Like Kelis, Samantha, and Rodney, Kimmy goes to The Stairs in the morning when arriving to school. She might complete homework for a class while sitting there talking with friends. A young lady who is somewhat soft-spoken in class, Kimmy uses the time at The Stairs to

enact a louder speech and uses Black slang. When describing her classroom experiences, Kimmy stated,

For most of my classes, I'm the only Black person in the room, and it feels like there's a lotta pressure or attention on me and . . . if there were more Black people in my classes I guess it would just take a lotta 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. (Carter, 2005, p. 163)

At The Stairs, Kimmy engages in horseplay with other girls, and it represents one of the few times that she actually uses a louder voice in the school environment. She jokes with her friends and has an overall radiance and energy that is not apparent in her classes. The author perceived her as much more relaxed in this element, and she interacts more freely with same-race peers who also share the common experience of being METCO students.

The fictive kinship and enacted Blackness that occur at The Stairs illustrate that some Black students benefit from seeking support from those who have similar schooling and life experiences (Tatum, 1997). Creating a space where Black peer networks who share a common social identity can enact and share cultural experiences in the presence of racism is critical for academic and social survival in the Independence school context. Being able to spotlight their racial identity in ways that are identity-affirming at The Stairs helps some participants in this study manage the stress related to experiencing stereotypical threats (Steele, 1997), and racism across all domains, but particularly, the classrooms at Independence High. Where race is an identity trait for which the participants are often negatively stereotyped in the school, the identity-affirming counter-space provided a physical location in the school where some participants could be racially spotlighted on their own terms and in ways that they felt affirmed their racial identity. Because race is a salient and primary aspect of these participants' identities, creating a racially based identity-affirming counter-space is necessary for self-preservation and academic survival in the often culturally isolating environment at Independence. Being able to informally gather at The Stairs helps some participants navigate between classroom and social domains and maintain high academic performance and a strong racial self-concept.

#### FORMAL IDENTITY AFFIRMING COUNTER-SPACES

Although few in number, there are formal identity-affirming counter-spaces in the Independence environment that have been jointly created by adults and Black students. For example, the Black Leadership Advisory Council (BLAC) is one of the primary student organizations in which participants can assert their racial and cultural identity. Rachel and Kelis take pride in being a part of the student group by serving as co-chairs of the organization. Although all of the current members are Black, students of various races are welcome and have attended BLAC planning meetings and events. The BLAC serves two primary functions: (a) the organization educates Independence students about Black culture, and (b) BLAC provides a counter-space for Black students to discuss issues related to Black students that arise in the school and in the greater Lenox and Boston community. According to Samantha, the planning meeting is "a time where everybody gets together, talks about what's bothering them or what's not bothering them" (Carter, 2005, p. 232). Rachel stated, "We talk about how many Black people are in classes together and how many Black teachers we have" (Carter, 2005, p. 232). The group also spends time discussing current events in the larger community that affect Black people. Teachers do not engage students in this type of discourse during regular classroom blocks. At one BLAC meeting, students discussed an incident in which an elementary-age Black student who attended school and lived in a prominent White suburban community was sent to inner-city Boston on a METCO bus after school because school administrators assumed that he did not live in the wealthy school district.

While many of the issues discussed at BLAC meetings are highly politicized and focus on race-related issues, the student group takes pleasure in planning many social and cultural events

for the Independence community. These events are evidence of racial pride in the struggle and celebration of Black heritage. For example, each year BLAC hosts a fashion show, plans a Black Culture Day, and holds a retreat for all students. Rachel describes the significance of BLAC.

I think it's important to talk about our culture . . . like no one really portrays Black culture. Like, this month is Black History Month, and in my school I've heard nothing about it. There's nothing going on. It's just one of those things I feel like we need to discuss, you know? Just get it out there. (Carter, 2005, p. 233)

As a co-chair for BLAC, Rachel primarily coordinated events for the Black Culture Day. She solicited Black students to take part in a student panel to discuss the experiences of Black students at Independence High. The Jubilee chorus performed a Black gospel concert during a class period. In addition, a film was shown on racial profiling during another class period. These events allowed some of the students (Rachel, Kelis, Derek, and Rodney) in the study and other Black students at Independence to publicly affirm their racial identities with few restrictions by the school administration. Having formal spaces to openly express their racialized experiences in the school and share Black heritage with the school community empowers these students in ways that are normally not afforded in the classroom environment. Through BLAC meetings and events, study participants become revitalized to tackle the next school day's challenges and navigate classroom, social, and extracurricular domains within the school context.

Students also identified the Office of Human and Civil Rights as a formal identity-affirming counter-space. On many occasions, the office director, Mrs. Davidson, provided academic and personal counseling to study participants, as well as other Black students in the school environment, regarding their adjustment to and ability to exist in the Independence context. In Mrs. Davidson's office, students reported receiving tips on how to be academically successful—tips that were not as explicitly made in the classroom. Derek identified Mrs. Davidson as playing a major role in his academic success and ability to survive at Independence.

Mrs. Davidson [has] been my support . . . She's been big . . . She's plays such a main part in the school from a Black standpoint. Been very visible. She cares and . . . I like that we share some of the same qualities. I see both of us as me trying to become a good leader and she being what a good leader is . . . I just think that [she] takes a genuine interest . . . and not every student you put yourself on the line for, and [she] as done that for me, and I appreciate that. (Carter, 2005, pp. 141-142)

Derek views Mrs. Davidson as a role model, because she has served in various administrative capacities designed to specifically cater to the needs of Black students and other members of underrepresented groups at Independence. In addition to formal counseling and support for these students, Mrs. Davidson had lunch with participants in the study and other Black students, providing them with words of encouragement for persevering in their school context and reinforcing the benefits of maintaining high academic achievement. The presence of an institutionalized office where these students can go to get personal counseling represents a safe counter-space for them to "exhale" in the Independence High environment.

The BLAC and the Office of Human and Civil Rights are two formal identity-affirming counter-spaces that exist at an institutional level at Independence to help these Black achievers in their negotiation of school success and positive racial self-conception in a predominantly White learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

While this author does not claim that same-race peer networks and identity-affirming counter-spaces directly affects participants' academic performance, it is asserted that the creation of these peer networks and physical spaces at Independence High is a positive resistance strategy for responding to racism as an environmental stressor in the school context. In this illuminating study, the significance of the presence of identity-affirming counter-spaces in predominantly White schools expands the understanding of the psychological and emotional pressures that high-

achieving Black students experience to maintain a positive racial sense of self *and* high academic achievement in a racially hostile learning environment. These students consistently reported experiencing negative racial stereotyping and other forms of racism at school, and the formal and informal identity-affirming counter-spaces allowed opportunities for study participants to affirm their racial identity while maintaining school success. The data presented support evidence found in other studies elucidating the role race plays in shaping participants' responses to perceived racism in the school context (see Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Gándara, 1995; Ogbu, 2003; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991). Moreover, findings from this study support existing research indicating that educators need to be more aware of the importance of allowing Black students to create and use identity-affirming counter-spaces in the school context—whether they are social or academic—as a way to balance their schooling experience (Tatum, 1997). At an institutional level, schools need to be vigilant about creating formal academic and social counter-spaces for Black students in predominantly White schools—spaces where oppressive and hegemonic ideologies and practices are non-existent (Perry, 2003).

In order to cope with daily experiences with racial hypervisibility and invisibility—primarily in the classroom context—study participants developed counter-spaces in the social domain of the Independence High School context as a way to self-initiate their own racial spotlighting in ways that do not denigrate them. These students gained the strength to academically persist in a predominantly White school by connecting with same-race peers who share a common fictive kinship and struggle in the experience of being a minority in a sea of White people. The role that The Stairs play in allowing students to affirm their racial identities is necessary for self-preservation and academic survival. Students' reporting of The Stairs as a place where they can enact Blackness as they choose and their involvement in formal structures, such as the BLAC and the Office of Human and Civil Rights, highlights the need of informal and formal racial identity-affirming counter-spaces in school environments where Black students' identity is often devalued, tokenized, or blatantly ignored. It is the hope of this author that future research will continue to explore how high-achieving Black students are able to resist and persist in predominantly White public schools, and that eventually these institutions will become places that are counterhegemonic in nature and racially affirming for *all* students who attend them.

#### REFERENCES

- Anson, R. S. (1987). *Best intentions: The education and killing of Edmund Perry*. New York: Random House.
- Carter, D. J. (2005). "In a sea of White people": An analysis of the experiences and behaviors of high-achieving Black students in a predominantly White high school. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Cary, L. (1991). *Black ice*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Cookson, P. W., Jr., & Persell, C. H. (1991). Race and class in America's elite boarding schools: African Americans as the "outsiders within." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60, 219-228.
- Datnow, A., & Cooper, R. (1997). Peer networks of African American students in independent schools: Affirming academic success and racial identity. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 66, 56-72.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of "acting White." *Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.
- Fries-Britt, S. (1998). Moving beyond Black achiever isolation. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 69, 556-576.
- Gándara, P. (1995). *Over the ivy walls: The educational mobility of low-income Chicanos*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Hamm, J. V., & Coleman, H. (2001). African American and White adolescents' strategies for managing cultural diversity in predominantly White high schools. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 30*, 281-303.
- Horvat, E. M., & Antonio, A. L. (1999). "Hey, those shoes are out of uniform": African American girls in an elite high school and the importance of habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 30*, 317-342.
- Kane, P. R., & Orsini, A. J. (Eds.). (2003). *The colors of excellence: Hiring and keeping teachers of color in independent schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- MacLeod, J. (1987). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations & attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Majors, R., & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mehan, H., Hubbard, L., & Villanueva, I. (1994). Forming academic identities: Accommodation without assimilation among involuntary minorities. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 25*, 91-117.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ogbu, J. (2003). *Black students in an affluent suburb: A story of academic disengagement*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Perry, T. (2003). Achieving in a post-Civil Rights America: The outline of a theory. In T. Perry, C. Steele, & A. G. Hilliard (Eds.), *Young, gifted, and Black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students* (pp. 87-108). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Seidman, S. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York: Teacher College Press.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education, 69*, 60-73.
- Solórzano, D., & Villalpando, O. (1998). Critical race theory, marginality, and the experience of minority students in higher education. In C. Torres & T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Emerging issues in the sociology of education: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 211-224). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a Black community*. New York: Basic Books.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*, 613-629.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tatum, B. D. (1997). *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.
- Zweigenhaft, R. L., & Domhoff, G. W. (1991). *Blacks in the White establishment*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

#### AUTHOR

DORINDA J. CARTER is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to [dcarter@msu.edu](mailto:dcarter@msu.edu)