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# Their Story, My Story, Our Story: Oral Histories of African American Women Educators Paradoxical Navigation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Vanessa Sims Tossie

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THEIR STORY, MY STORY, OUR STORY:  
ORAL HISTORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN EDUCATORS  
PARADOXICAL NAVIGATION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

by

VANESSA SIMS TOSSIE

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This study explores the lives of three generations of African American women teachers in my family, my mother, Carolyn T. Sims, my aunt, Natalie T. Woods, and myself. Using Critical Race Theory (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic; 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999) as the theoretical framework and oral history (e.g., Armitage & Mercier, 2009; He, 2003; Jefferson, 2008; Scott-Simmons, 2008; Vaz, 1997) as the methodology, I explore the educational experience of my mother and my aunt during segregation, desegregation, and post segregation. I weave my experience of teaching as an African American teacher into the stories my mother and my aunt told and into my analyses of their stories.

This inquiry draws upon a wide array of research on African American educational history (e.g., Woodson, 2008), education of African Americans in the South (e.g., Anderson, 1988), learning while Black (e.g., Hale, 2001; Hillard, 2003), culturally responsive pedagogy (e.g., Au & Jordan, 1981; Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 1995; Gay, 2000; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994), caring and justice

(e.g., Siddle-Walker, 2004), achievement gap or educational debt (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006), African American women teachers (e.g., Bethune (1942/1992); Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001; Cooper, 1892/1988; Shaw, 2004), and paradox of segregation vs. desegregation (e.g., Baker, 2006; Fairclough, 2007; Haskins, 1998; Morris & Morris, 2005; Saddler, 2005; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The power of this line of inquiry lies in its possibilities to tell the silenced stories to counter the stereotypical narrative about the paradoxical experience of my aunt, my mother, myself, and many other African Americans during segregation, desegregation, and post segregation, to honor our cultural and linguistic heritages and our life long struggles, to challenge both the culturally relevant and contested aspects of pedagogy, and to create hopes and dreams for all the African American children to thrive in education and life in an unjust and unequal world.

My inquiry illuminates that oral histories allow the silent voices of Black women teachers to be heard. Listening to and telling the stories of my mother, my aunt, and myself is an empowering and moving experience. Fostering a sense of caring in and out of the classroom enhances positive teacher-student relationships and promotes active learning. The paradox of feeling cared for and learning in segregated schools versus being schooled without learning in the absence of caring in today's desegregated schools engenders a demand for a curriculum of caring and justice and a culturally relevant pedagogy where learners engage in active learning; teachers care deeply about their students; policy makers make culturally responsive policies; teachers, educators, parents, community workers, administrators, and policy makers work together to create culturally inspiring, caring, and just learning

environment to inspire all learners to reach their highest potential and thrive in education and life.

INDEX WORDS: Culturally relevant pedagogy, African American education, African American women, Segregations, Desegregation, Achievement gap, African American women educators, Oral history, Critical race theory

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## DEDICATION

*The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in which I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety.*

(Psalm 18: 2 New Living Translations)

I dedicate this work to the one who has kept me during my darkest hour when I thought I could not complete this daunting task. I give honor and glory to you God for never leaving me, but for giving me the strength to accomplish my dream.

I also would like to dedicate this work to my Grandma Tucker and Grandma Sims. They were my first teachers and without them I would not be the person I am today. I am an African American woman educator who continues the struggle to ensure that all children especially African American children reach their highest potential in the classroom and in a world that at times still does not accept them for who they truly are.

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Words cannot express how thankful I am to have you as my mother. You have truly been a true supporter of my quest to obtain my doctorate. Your words of encouragement have been what has kept me going over the years. When I would throw a “tantrum” and say I was quitting you would in your own loving way say “Do what you think is best, but I really want you to accomplish this goal.” You continue to inspire me as a person while listening to your stories on a daily basis. Lastly, I thank God every day for blessing me with a strong, insightful, caring, and loving mother. I love you.

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### **Dr. Ming Fang He - Committee Chair**

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a more distinguished dissertation chair than you. I hope that I will continue to make you proud as I fulfill my highest potential as an educator and scholar.

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**Ms. Debbie "Sister" Brown - Friend**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This study is an oral history inquiry into the lives of my mother and my aunt as black educators who taught during segregation and desegregation; a time when their voices were not heard. I tell my own experiences and struggles as a teacher whose voice is not heard in a predominately white school district. Specifically, I evaluate the uses of culturally relevant pedagogy during these time periods. I explore our lives in order to have a better understanding of how our experiences in the field of education manifested themselves during the time of segregation, integration, and post integration.

Today's students come with a great deal of "baggage" and educators can do little "to alleviate the poverty and oppressive forces" (Nieto, 1995, p.10) that their students encounter on a daily basis. But as educators they can provide an educational environment that will encourage all students from a variety of backgrounds to reach their full potential. To reach this potential the teacher must be willing to welcome diversity in their classroom, understand their own beliefs, and their students' cultures (Davidman & Davidman, 1997). The purpose of this study was to explore how African American women flourished as mothers, daughters, and teachers in the South in spite of a variety of adversities. Did culturally relevant pedagogy play a role in their success?

The unequal and separate education of African Americans in the South became a central theme of the civil rights movements of the 1930s through the

1950s. Even though the court rendered a decision in 1895 in the Plessy v. Ferguson case that segregated schools was constitutional (Spring, 2005). The schools were far from being equal. The 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision officially signaled the end of segregated schools. Fortunately, the Supreme Court reversed the “separate but equal” decision and stated that separate educational institutions are unequal. In spite of this, desegregation was the focal point for educational reform to benefit African American children.

“Black education was one of the central arenas for that struggle to define social reality and shape the future direction of southern society” (Anderson, 1988, p. 279). Although educational opportunities for women were expanding during the period preceding the Civil War, the education for African American women was severely limited. There were two higher education institutions for African American women that “sprang” up during the post-Civil War period; those colleges were Bennett College which was founded in 1873 as a normal school to provide an education to newly emancipated slaves and then in 1926 it became a woman’s college; Spelman College was established in 1881 as The Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary and in 1884 the name was changed to Spelman Seminary. In 1924 Spelman received its collegiate charter. These are the only black women’s colleges today. Traditionally, the role of African American women in the South has been that of a housekeeper, the cook, or an occupation that did not include a degree. Falk (2004) interviewed a Southern woman from Colonial County in the Low country. Grace wanted a better life than the one she saw from the other women in the

county. She wanted to be more than a cook or work a job that was physically draining. So, she decided to go back to school in her thirties to become a registered nurse. During the interview Falk told Grace the other women in the county told him working in the service industry was the only jobs they were able to have as black women. Grace quickly reiterated she would never do that type of work. In her opinion she wanted to break the cycle of working domestic jobs like her family members.

### **Key Research Issues**

The key research issues for me to explore in this study are:

- What do their story, my story, and our story have anything to say about culturally responsive pedagogy that inspires African American women to thrive in the midst of segregation and desegregation throughout history?
- What practices promote a culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally engaging subject matter, culturally active learners, and culturally inspiring learning milieu?

### **Tracing the Roots of My Inquiry**

The topic of this study began to emerge at the time I was taking a multicultural education course at Georgia Southern University. The course was an elective in the doctoral program. During the class, the professor asked us to focus on a topic that would hold some type of meaning for us if we were to do research on the topic. I struggled in the beginning to think of something to focus on, only to realize that the topic was with me all along. I wondered what role culturally

relevant pedagogy played in the lives of the women who are major contributors in my life.

### **Carolyn's Story**

I was born February 21, 1937 in Savannah, Georgia. I was born during a time when it was understood "Blacks knew their place in society." My father was a postman who did attend college but never finished. My mother was a homemaker who did not have the opportunity to attend college. Even though my mother did not attend college she was a Sunday school teacher. Growing up there were three of us who caused havoc in the Tucker household. My older brother Charles left home when I was in high school to join the Navy. I was the middle child, so needless to say I was the parent pleaser. I never wanted to be a problem. My youngest sister Natalie was the rebel of the family. She would go toe-to-toe with my parents constantly about any and everything.

I attended all Black schools during my educational career. By the time I graduated from Beach High School it was the end of segregation and the beginning of desegregation. In the fall of 1954 I packed my bags to attend the "Vassar of the South" Spelman College. My mother was determined I would attend college and she had visions of me graduating from Spelman College. When I left Savannah to attend college, my father reminded me I had exactly four years to graduate, and that is what I did. In order to ensure I had things I needed for school, my mother went back to work for several white families cooking and cleaning to send me money for my books and essentials. I graduated May of 1958. After graduation I

taught in the Atlanta Public School System for 35 years. During my tenure as an educator I started my Master's at the University of Denver but my mother quickly reminded me that I should not keep my future husband waiting. So I completed my Master's in Early Childhood in the spring of 1975 from Georgia State University.

*Listening to my mother never ceases to amaze me. I grew up knowing my mother was an art teacher but it was not until I understood how she became a teacher that I had a greater appreciation for the profession. I am thankful that my grandparents believed in the power of education. I often wonder during my mother's era did culturally relevant pedagogy have a major influence in her educational journey.*

### **Natalie's Story**

I was born May 29, 1938. I was the youngest of the three children and I was affectionately known as "sissa" because my older sister Carolyn could not say sister. So that has been my nickname since I was a child. I believe I have been different since the day I came into this world. Since the day I spoke my first words it seems as though I have challenged my parents every step of the way. Being that "strong willed" was a good indicator to my parents to be ready for anything.

Growing up in the South was not an easy task especially when you have been told repeatedly by your peers you sound as though you are white. I heard this constantly growing up as child. It was not until attending elementary school that I realized, I was given a gift; a gift to debate. That gift allowed me to earn a scholarship to Morris Brown College. Even though I did not attend it was nice to

know that I was able to achieve a goal regardless of how I sounded. I graduated from Fort Valley College after I was not successful at Spelman College. During the years when I was not in school I quickly learned it was not easy in the real world without a college degree. My parents did forewarn me but being the rebel that I was I had to learn on my own. Once I graduated from Fort Valley I married and traveled because my husband was in the Air Force. We settled in Denver and started a family. It was in Denver that I began my career in teaching. My career in education was filled with many positives and negatives but I wouldn't change a thing. You learn from these things in life in hopes that you have made a difference in a student's life. I taught for 28 years and I wanted to teach longer but circumstances did not allow me to fulfill that goal.

*Listening to my Aunt's stories never ceases to amaze me especially since she did not carry on the tradition of attending Spelman College like her parents wanted. She had to find her way and found it later in life. While going to school did her teachers promote a culturally relevant pedagogy?*

### **Vanessa's Story**

I was born May 24, 1969 to Mr. and Mrs. Horace Sims. I was born at the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement so I feel as though I am caught in the middle of Generation X. My father was very active in the movement and I often wondered how I would have reacted if I was old enough to understand his involvement. I remember hearing stories about the sit ins that had taken place around certain parts of Atlanta. My father was a postman who had aspirations of becoming an Episcopal

Priest. He never fulfilled his dream; he died of a massive heart attack at the age of 50. I was told later in life that my father was the same age as his mother when she died.

Since my parents witnessed and lived through the Civil Rights Movement, they expressed their desire for my brother and I to attend diverse schools growing up. My educational career began at a Montessori school; where it was a garden of children. From Montessori, I was enrolled in a public elementary school that was diverse. Then I went to an all black middle school and ended my educational career in Atlanta at one of the largest black high schools in the Atlanta Public School System. My collegiate career began at Georgia Southern University where I was sometimes the only African American in the class. As I pondered my future, I could not help but think of my journey and how it would impact me as an African American woman.

When I began my career as a teacher, I taught in a multicultural school environment where over twenty nationalities were represented. The teachers and students flourished in this type environment. In the beginning for me, it was not all peaches and cream because I struggled to meet the needs of my diverse classroom. I did not have an understanding of my students' backgrounds and unfortunately, there were misconceptions about their cultures. I knew then I had to seek help before I destroyed these lives. I expressed my concerns to my Instructional Lead Teacher and she reassured me things would get better once I attended the workshop on "Cultural Diversity." To my surprise she was right. I realized the

things that I learned in this workshop were not taught while studying for my education degree. This workshop allowed me to gain an understanding of my students' customs, cultures, and backgrounds and provided the tools I needed to insure that I was utilizing the appropriate teaching strategies for my diverse class.

The past several years have been a struggle for me since I am one of three African American teachers at my school where the majority of the faculty is white. Recently, the school's population began growing and is gaining more students of color, especially African American students. The problem actually started when I first came to the school. "Seasoned teachers" were complaining that they did not know how to reach African American students and began asking me for suggestions. I was truly offended because these were the more experienced teachers to whom I should have been able to go for assistance. Furthermore, these teachers took it for granted that because I was an African-American, I held the answers to how all African-American students could be reached. But then I remembered something I had read by W.E.B. DuBois. He believed that African American teachers are more sympathetic towards African American students and are aware of their cultural setting and background. Because of their knowledge this allows African-American teachers to be more committed to the students. DuBois was not a separatist but he did understand that "race prejudice ...is such that most Negroes cannot receive a proper education in White institutions" (DuBois, 1935, p.328-329). From that moment on, I realized it was up to me to acquire the proper skills that would enable me to reach, and therefore teach the underserved African-American

student. I would like for more teachers to validate the student's culture and to appreciate those differences that are represented. As educators we must realize that there is a great deal of diversity within our schools and the world in which we live (Delpit, 1995). My hope is that teachers will avail themselves of every opportunity that helps them to adapt to the dynamic changes that are taking place within our schools.

### **Understanding the Context**

I could hardly believe another school year was here. It was 7:25 a.m. on August 1, and it was the first day of school. I imagined the faces of my new students and their voices as they walked down the hallway. I wondered if they were feeling anxious or would they be content that they were beginning another school year. Poignantly, I reflected on the thought that many of my students will be "diverse." The school's economic demographics have changed over the years and the majority of our students are upper class, middle class or poor. There are no wealthy students in my school. Many of my students will be diverse as in "different," not the "norm," but "where are you coming from?" So, what is the norm?

I sat in my classroom with anticipation, with joy, and yes, fear of the unknown. Thoughts brewed of what awaited me for the beginning of the school year, and in my ruminations, the seeds of my study were planted. As I waited for the doors to open for "Meet and Greet," I could not help but wonder how many African-American and Latino students I would have this year. I began to question

how the teachers were addressing the change in our student population that has been evolving over the past several years. Are teachers aware of how the differences in students' backgrounds influence teaching and learning? What is the teachers' knowledge of the cultures represented by the students? Are teachers willing to learn about the variety of cultures represented in their classrooms, and are they applying this knowledge that it lends itself to the success of their students of color? Responses to these questions are imperative because of the increase in students who have culturally diverse backgrounds that are represented in the classroom.

### **Voices Left Out Then**

My mother grew up during an era when the voices of Black educators who taught during racial segregation were not heard. Their stories have been systemically excluded from the history books (Baker, 1996; Davison, 1995; Payne & Strickland, 2008; St. James, 1980). By not allowing their stories to be heard there was a sense of a lack of participation, fear of job loss, and an opposition regarding the cause of acquiring civil rights for all citizens (Tushnet, 1987). There was no rational conclusion as to why their stories have been omitted, but the conclusion can be drawn that their ideas and sacrifices were on the verge of being eliminated due simply to racial segregation.

Black educators during the time of segregation were advocates for equality of education before and after the Brown decision. This was obvious with the establishing of the Georgia Teachers and Education Association (GTEA) in 1878.

This was an organization for black educators who protested the inequality of the distribution of school funds. Dr. Horace Tate was the executive director for nine years, and he was responsible for promoting educational opportunities for black children. Speaking in front of a crowd June of 1970 he delivered his speech entitled: "Some Evils of Second-Class Integration," he detailed how many black educator organizations had been advocating for "real integration" instead of "second-class integration." Real integration meant appropriate funding for schools, adequately trained teachers, new books/buildings, and the vision to provide educational opportunities for black children. Instead they were met with "elimination, annihilation, liquidation of everything initiated, developed or directed by the Negro" (Tate, 1970, p.23). Speaking to the crowd, Tate described "second-class integration" as the failure of school desegregation policies to meet the expectations of black educators by disposing of their jobs, their ideas, and their organizations. These actions effectively eliminate their voices from ever being heard (Siddle-Walker, 2009).

Tate (1970) was concerned with the firing and dismissal of black educators during desegregation. He viewed their dismissals as a means of undermining the qualifications of black educators in the public eye. Also, the firing of black educators symbolizes a system that has sought "to eradicate injustice and foster psychological resilience in the face of overt oppression with black boys and girls" (p. 23). Tate's ongoing fear was that without black teachers in the school there would be no one to instill in black children that they could be anything they wanted

to be when they grew up. Tate (1970) wanted everyone to understand that there was no commitment to the development of black children:

Second-class integration is evil because it is designed to steal from the Negro boy and or girl that black image which has motivated boys and girls and made them to roll up their sleeves and carve out a new role for what we call our democracy in this country Second-class integration is evil because it is designed to make the Negro feel he is not good enough or trained enough or qualified enough to be the head of anything with which whites are involved. Second-class integration is evil because it does not consider the desire, the customs, the mores, the traditions, or feelings of black people as important in the scheme of our society. There can be no first-class citizenship with second-class integration. I say to you again that second-class integration is evil (p. 31).

Yet, his voice and others who decried black racial pride and upliftment were left out of the conversation about school desegregation and its ultimate impact on black students. Their voice needed to be heard for the sake of the children's educational future.

Notably, Tate was not against integration. He, along with other black educators, embraced the Brown decision of desegregation. With the decision that mandated integration educators thought there would be white students attending black schools and black students attending white schools. They also believed that being integrated would allow them to continue with their exemplary programs and

would provide funding and social benefits of being schooled with whites. In Tate's (1970) address, he suggested that the vision of black educators for integration has collapsed. Integration is a façade and that it was "degenerating into a powerless desegregation where black children would be left with little support to forge new educational terrains. We must work to hasten the day when second-class integration is no longer in existence" (p. 40).

My mother and aunt both grew up in the eras of segregation and desegregation. My mother often talks about how different things were when she was in school. With a smile on my face, I ruffle her feathers and say it could not have been that different. Then she would reply with a sharp tone in her voice, "Yes it was." She remembers being in high school and for a particular class the textbooks were falling apart. The teacher instructed the class to leave the books and they would have to learn the lesson from supplemental instructional items. This went on throughout my mother's high school career having inadequate books. My mother often said my grandparents were disgusted with how they treated the black high school. She was not privy to the ramifications of desegregation as a student. But she did embark on this adventure as an educator. During integration she was assigned to an all white school as the art teacher. Being in this type of environment in her opinion felt at times very hostile. She often felt the eyes of her co-workers piercing her soul. One teacher actual told my mother she needed to go back to her side of town. With a smile my mother replied that she had every right to be there and walked off.

Her frustration continued to mount along with her fellow co-workers when they wanted to express their concerns regarding the African American students. One specific example my mother remembers entailed a young lady who was very bright but had discipline problems. When several of the teachers tried to discuss the future of this student, the principal simply brushed them off, implying that the young lady could not help herself. The teachers voiced their opinion to the principal letting him know this student was so much more than what he thought of her. Needless to say, that year was filled with navigating through the negativity of those who did not want to listen to the voices that truly mattered. My mother's voice and those of the other educators seemed as though they were never heard.

### **Voices Left Out Now**

Currently, the state of the educational arena has come full circle. We are back to where we began – segregation. In some instances, black children have returned to segregated schools, or they never left them. Even though desegregation has been implemented for over fifty years, the voices of black educators are still being silenced. There are teachers, black and white who exhibit the characteristics of the educational values of teachers from the past, their beliefs are not valued in an environment that is test driven (Irvine, 2003). Unfortunately, black students are disproportionately placed in special education classes as well as being reprimanded more often than their white counterparts with the same disciplinary action (Blanchett, 2006; Witt, 2007).

Even though our students have gained limited access to better facilities, black educators are trying to voice their concerns regarding the plight of education with African American students. As a Black educator I can honestly say that I know my voice is not heard. I am constantly saying that we lack the key or the formula for the success of our students. Our students still lack the appropriate resources needed to ensure their success in school. Black educators who would like for their voices to be heard have tried to voice their concerns regarding the lack of resources that are still not available for some. The resources that are available only meet the students' needs to some degree. Also, Black educators have observed that the school climate, involvement of black parents, and equity have been ignored since integration (Siddle-Walker, 2009).

The frustration is associated with the lack of change of how black schools are viewed as inadequate. At times the inadequacies are seen through the eyes of parents in the teachers who work at the school. Black educators have noticed as well, that the teachers lack the qualifications needed to teach the students. It seems as though these teachers do not have the same goals as the veteran teachers have in mind. The schools during segregation operated with a sense of purpose for the intention of uplifting the African American race. Integration to Black educators seems to have taken a detour from this goal. The school has been seen as an extension of the community (Siddle-Walker, 2009).

### **Consequences**

The Black educators feel they are voiceless in the testing arena and they want to be heard. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has left many without a voice. Those left without a voice are students with cognitive disabilities, ESOL students, African American students, and African American teachers. Policymakers are convinced that the NCLB will solve the ills of education; but to Black educators they realize this is not the answer. School districts who serve certain ethnic groups can prepare the students to a degree in order to get the test scores needed to make AYP, but they are not necessarily getting a good education (Rose, 2009). Many Black educators complain that our students are receiving what Mike Rose (2009) states as a “lower-tier education, while students in more affluent districts get a robust course of study” (p. 48). This is not what Black educators had in mind when schools were integrated. They argue that the NCLB focuses on the public report card and not supporting the people that are in the trenches everyday with the students. NCLB does little to “...address the deep structural inequalities embedded in failed integration and desegregation efforts” (Siddle-Walker, 2009, p. 279).

Unfortunately, scandals have plagued certain school districts in the Atlanta metropolitan area all in the name of No Child Left Behind. Educators have felt as though in order to meet the pressures of NCLB and achieving AYP they have succumbed to cheating. The schools that were targeted in the scandals have been in low-socio economic neighborhoods. Their scores drastically rose from one school

year to the next. In some instances there exceptional gains that “ranged from about one in 700 to one in 21,000” (Tagami & Perry, 2010).

For example, in one particular school district the principal was released from his position because he admitted to changing the answers on the tests. The rules for No Child Left Behind have created the potential for this scandal to take place. Educators and administrators have been pushed against a wall with what some call unrealistic goals. Administrators are concerned with funding and in turn put pressure on their teachers to improve the scores. This pressure has resulted in cheating. Some teachers have taken matters into their own hands by changing the students’ answers once the tests have been turned in. Black educators did not have this in mind when they fought for integration. When some tried to have their voices heard no one wanted to listen. There were teachers who did go to their administrators voicing their concerns about the cheating. Those teachers were told to mind their own business or this does not concern them.

If our voices are not heard the consequences will continue to be severe for our students. Testing will remain a major focus and not the injustice of failed integration. Allowing non-qualified teachers into our students’ lives through education and not focusing on the school to be the extension of the community. The school and family need to work together as one and not two separate entities. In order for our students to truly succeed, our voices must be heard that testing is not the cure all and it should not hold us hostage to the degree that we are teaching for the test and not for enduring understanding. For the past 17 years, I have had the

privilege of teaching the youth of our future. During mid-career, I was fortunate to work in a school with quite a diverse student population. While there, I realized there were certain things that either were not taught, or I did not learn, from my teacher education program. One thing in particular was learning how to adapt to the diverse cultures that were represented in my classroom and how to make that connection for home and school. According to Bandura (1986), our school was not practicing cultural discontinuity, which is based on the premise that students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds often do poorly in school because of mismatches between home and school cultures. Some teachers were making those connections by practicing cultural continuity in order for our students to be successful in the classroom. Confronting diversity in the twentieth-first century will be a challenge for all educators (Darling-Hammond & Garcia-Lopez, 2002). Bridging the gap among students, teachers, schools, and communities is possible, and it can begin with teacher education programs. However, such programs must realize the awesome responsibility they have to prepare well-rounded teachers who are capable and up to the task of educating a diverse student population while at the same time connecting the students in the curriculum.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this inquiry is to provide a deeper insight into one of the most important challenges facing teachers today: the ability to effectively teach students of color using culturally responsive pedagogy. The ever-changing dynamics within our nation's schools are growing more diverse, and it is important

that teachers make a concerted effort to understand the needs of their diverse students. Also, this study lends itself to the validation and encouragement of the student's culture and to help teachers and students to appreciate the beauty found in a variety of cultures. As educators, teachers must realize that there is a great deal of diversity within our schools and the world in which we live (Delpit, 1995) and they must freely encourage their students to express their individuality. They must adapt to the dynamic changes that permeate the classrooms in our schools. Hopefully, this study has allowed me a better understanding of how the women in my life were influenced culturally by their teachers.

This study is also significant for policy makers. From the voices of African American females, policymakers will be able to discover the impact that culturally relevant pedagogy has on race and gender for these students while in school. Policies that allow a student's culture into the classroom will enable them to flourish into productive African American women.

The significance of the study is of course for the participants. The participants deserve to have their voices heard. They faced challenges growing up in a society that at one time did not embrace the importance of culture as a whole even though their culture was embraced in the community. Unfortunately, that has changed in this day and time. It seems as though in today's society the educational arena is test driven. As educators it is important to incorporate the student's culture into the curriculum especially for African American women. This particular group continues to be marginalized in society and if their culture is incorporated into the

curriculum it allows them to express their individuality in the classroom and society.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Schools are failing to provide African American students the educational programs they need that allow them to flourish in the classroom. The review of literature explores how culturally responsive teaching empowers teachers to effectively instruct African American students. The review of literature begins with my quest to gain a greater understanding of the impact of education in the African American community during the different timeframes, the educational focus of African American children in the classroom, and the meaning of culturally responsive pedagogy followed by the relevance of caring among African American students. Finally, the achievement gap between students of color and their white counterparts is examined and challenged; a review of teacher education programs and the significance of African American women educators in the educational arena conclude this chapter.

#### **African American Educational History**

The saying is cliché but it is undeniably true: knowledge is power. African Americans have sought the quest for that power through education. Since slavery, African Americans acquired ways to learn how to read and write, but if their masters found out they had these skills they were punished. Even though slavery ended after the Civil War, education for African Americans was still hard to come by as recorded in Frederick Douglass's autobiography (1845/2005). In this section I detail the perils of segregation, desegregation and the state of education during

these specific timeframes. I complete the section by discussing the education of blacks in the South.

### **Segregation: Separate *isn't* Equal**

Is “separate but equal” truly equal? According to the United States Supreme Court in 1896 it decided that separate areas for blacks and whites were equal in the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson. This decision would not be challenged or overruled for 60 years. Once the ruling was handed down it was a major setback for equality between the races in the United States. It also set the stage for racial segregation in the South.

The Reconstruction Era occurred from 1867–1877 and during this period many positive changes occurred for African Americans. For example, the enrollment of black children in school rose from 25,000 in 1860 to 149, 581 in 1870 (Haskins, 2001). Another positive change African American voters rose from 0 in 1860 to 700,000 in 1867. These positive changes took a drastic turn when federal troops were withdrawn from the Southern states in 1887. This was the end of the Reconstruction Era and conditions for African Americans deteriorated quickly.

On June 7, 1892, Plessy, a young African American shoemaker was jailed for sitting in the “White” train car of the Louisiana state rail. Plessy was one-eighth black and seven-eighths white, but under Louisiana law, he was considered black. Therefore he was required to sit in the “Colored” car (Haskins, 2001). When he was asked to move he refused to do so. Homer Plessy and other groups that supported him took the case to the local circuit court, the Louisiana Supreme Court and lastly

the United States Supreme Court and all three courts ruled against him. The United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Judge Ferguson on May 18, 1896 and the state of Louisiana (Haskins, 2001). By this time, the damage had already been done. The Supreme Court had given Southern states the permission they needed to let the remaining equality between the races fade away and to be replaced by the hideous Jim Crow laws (Margo, 1990).

During the era of the Jim Crow laws the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson was the basis of saddling the “separate but equal doctrine” on becoming key to widespread racial segregation in public schools in the South (Haskins, 2001). In 1879 black voters in Augusta, GA pressured the school board to open the first African American high school in the state. Ware High School thrived until 1897, but to the surprise of the black community the school board closed the high school due to funding. Outraged at the closing of the high school, a group of African Americans in 1899 appealed to the United States Supreme Court demanding that public support for the white schools be discontinued since the only black high school had been disbanded (Anderson, 1988). This was the first school case to reach the Supreme Court. The United States Supreme Court sanctioned that the treatment was unequal.

Throughout this time period it was obvious that African American schools did not compare to the white schools. There were records kept in the southern states of the distinctions among the schools. Falk (2004) states “...the white ones always received the best physical facilities, equipment, books, curricula, and

teacher training. Black schools lived on hand-me-down from the white schools” (p. 74). Even though there was the obvious white-black contrast in the schools, what became the unequal outcomes from the experience of being a student in the black schools? The black student’s experience in the school was met with low test scores, higher dropout rates and fewer students going to college (Falk, 2004).

Two great leaders in the African American community in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Both were acknowledged as outstanding educators, but they sharply disagreed on strategies blacks should use in their struggle for black social and economic progress. Washington and DuBois did agree, however, that in order for African Americans to advance in society it must be through education.

Washington was a graduate of Hampton and Agricultural Institute in 1872. In the African American community he promoted industrial education over a liberal arts education, mirroring his own education (Anderson, 1988). He embraced the philosophical idea of vocational and technical training for African Americans such as becoming blacksmiths, locksmiths, plumbers, masons, etc. During this time he encouraged recently freed African Americans to learn a specific vocation in order to gain economic autonomy and status, which he thought, in turn would earn them civil and political rights (Anderson, 1988).

W.E.B. DuBois was born free in Massachusetts and attended Fisk University, where he received a traditional liberal arts education. While attending Fisk, DuBois became very much aware of the racial inequalities in the African American

community. The chain of events that occurred ultimately affected DuBois' worldview. As a result, DuBois promoted African Americans attaining a liberal arts education. He felt that whites supported Washington because he used his influence over African Americans to go into the field of industrial education. DuBois (1963) felt "in conscience bound to ask of this nation three things: The right to vote, civil equality, and the education of youth according to ability" (p. 84).

In opposition to Washington, DuBois believed that African Americans could earn their rights through education, not through economy. DuBois favored higher education for African Americans. He reasoned that if African Americans obtained a higher education and equality in society, they would be able to experience the economic growth Washington sought. For DuBois, the education of African Americans served two purposes: the betterment of his race and the alleviation of ignorance about blacks in the white race. Through education, DuBois (1963) "hoped to eliminate ignorance about Black people and educate the world about the potential contributions to society that people of African descent could make" (p.237).

There is no question that Washington and DuBois agreed on the social uplifting of African Americans. However, the disagreement centered around how to best achieve this goal. It is reasonable to believe that DuBois' ideas were superior to that of Washington's. Thus each man believed in the method of training that had shaped him and, consequently, led him to promulgate his philosophy of education from the advancement of African Americans.

### 1954-1970: Desegregation after Brown

The landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* began in the fall of 1950 with members of the Topeka, Kansas, Chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) challenging the “separate but equal” doctrine that governed public education. Over a two year period prior to legal action the president of the NAACP attempted to persuade Topeka school officials to integrate the schools. To no avail, thirteen parents agreed to enroll their children in white schools that were nearest to their homes. In their attempt to enroll their children they were denied entrance. The children in Topeka had to travel past and away from nearby schools to attend four schools designated for African American children. Hence, the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* was born.

Who could imagine that the Jim Crow segregation laws would remain legal and in existence for almost 60 years until a new an open minded United States Supreme Court Justices issued a unanimous decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954. It was deemed unconstitutional and violated the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment which states you may not separate children in public schools for no other reason than their race (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954*). The *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision was met with a mixed bag of emotions from whites and blacks. There was both celebration and resistance to the decision. Unfortunately, segregationists did not feel the same way as the United States Supreme Court. In the South segregationists sprang into action to prevent the implementation of public integration (Ogletree, 2004). Some states legislatures

passed state laws to uphold segregation and those laws were challenged in court by the federal government. Most black southerners saw this as a good thing, some saw the decision as still inherently racist. How did they see the decision as racist? Some black southerners thought the ruling was a knock against black teachers, and black Americans in general. Many black southerners worried that the black teachers would lose their jobs along with the school administrators (Ogletree, 2004). The truth was the *Brown vs. Board of education* ruling was not one which was discriminatory toward the black educator or a black person's ability to teach but a ruling that reflected the mistreatment of blacks by state and local governments (Ogletree, 2004). More money was given to the white schools than was giving to the black schools.

Even though the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was illegal many schools in the South did not integrate when the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision was rendered. For example, in Little Rock, Arkansas integration was not widely accepted. Little Rock made its name by being overly opposed to desegregation. The order to desegregate schools came in 1954 following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case but in 1956, schools in Little Rock, Arkansas had still not made an attempt to desegregate (Ogletree, 2004). The black families of Little Rock sued to hurry desegregation. They won and Little Rock, Arkansas schools were told they would have to desegregate by 1957. The influential people of Little Rock were opposed to desegregating the schools. Knowing this and wishing to block segregation Governor Faubus of Arkansas sent state militia troops to the

Central High School in Little Rock to prevent black students from entering the school (Kirk, 2002). With the help of the President of the United States and the courts, Governor Faubus was ordered to remove the troops. When he removed the troops a mob of Little Rock citizens surrounded the school and prevented the black students from entering the school (Johnson, 2000). To ensure the safety of the black students entering the school, President Eisenhower had to send out the 101<sup>st</sup> airborne infantry. The following year, Little Rock citizens voted to close down the Little Rock high schools rather than desegregate. When the school did reopen in 1959, six black students were selected to attend school that term (Kirk, 2002).

By 1964, ten years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* Ogletree (2004) states “that only 2.4 percent of African Americans in the South were attending largely white schools” (p.45). With this low number being enrolled in white schools one would question if *Brown vs. Board of Education* was truly worth it. During the mid-1960’s, many observers felt that the desegregation was not really embraced by society as a whole. This was evident by the fact that segregation remained a reality along with racism during this time in history. Despite the efforts to desegregate the schools many whites did not want their children to attend school with children of another race. They found ways to avoid desegregation by manipulating the school boundaries to their advantage – this was known as the “white flight”, moving to the suburbs where few or no blacks would be in the area, or many transferred their children to private schools (Ogletree, 2004).

The 70's seem to be the key for desegregation in the South. There were statistics that indicated that the South had become the most racially integrated region in the United States. An estimated 44 percent of African American students attended majority white schools in the South and 28 percent in the North and West. However, in many of these communities, these changes resulted in white flight. For example, in Mississippi, enrollment dropped between 25 and 100 percent in white public schools in at least thirty school districts with high black enrollment (Ogletree, 2004).

### **1980's to Present: Generation X**

In January 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This act was a congressional reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The ESEA renders schools effective by providing additional funds to school districts, through the states ([www.k12.wa.us/esea](http://www.k12.wa.us/esea)). In order to receive the additional funding the NCLB act requires states to have learning standards and testing programs that will assess the student's performance in achieving those standards.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to give students in grades 3-8 an annual test in reading and math. Test scores at individual schools must improve for all students and for minorities, low-income students and other subgroups. If a school receiving federal Title I funding misses the target two years in a row, students must be offered a choice of other public schools to attend. Students can be

offered vouchers for extra tutoring if a school fails to improve three years in a row (Pulliam & Patten, 1999).

To satisfy NCLB requirements, schools must prove that each one of its students is proficient, or on grade level in key educational areas, such as reading and math in order to continue to receive federal funding. The federal government plans to make the results from these tests available in annual report cards so parents can measure school performance and statewide progress, and evaluate the quality of their child's school, the qualifications of teachers, and their child's progress in key subjects ([www.ed.gov/nclb](http://www.ed.gov/nclb)).

Does the NCLB benefit students of color? Many critics of this act say it will be the demise of many of the subgroups that are targets of the NCLB. The NCLB centers on assessing the achievement gap rather than addressing what the gap represents. It represents severe inequalities in opportunities to learn. So, why are African Americans and Latinos failing? That question is ignored in favor of NCLB's simplistic measurements in achievement, graduation rates, and teacher certification. The ability to raise the bar within the comprehensive education levels has fallen short during the time of NCLB. NCLB measures only basic proficiency levels in math and reading. So is the NCLB act addressing the issue that many African Americans do not graduate high school, or those who do? The fact that many are not qualified to enroll in four-year colleges. The NCLB act focuses on measuring achievement, not preparing African Americans students to be successful

in the future. The NCLB measures inequality while reinforcing academic structures that continue to fail African American students.

### **Education of African Americans in the South**

Anderson (1988) contends that the public school system was created in the South and the emergence of African American schools was largely due to the ex-slaves wanting to attain an education for the purpose of liberation. Unfortunately, American education in the South was segregated. The elementary and high schools were “created and sustained” as segregated entities in the African American communities. Within these bleak conditions African Americans were forced to compete with White schools for limited resources (Bond, 1939). Despite the bleak conditions African Americans employed a self-help attitude when they embarked on ensuring their children received an education. Anderson posits (1988) “black education developed within this context of political and economic oppression” (p.2).

Within the African American community education continued to develop and with that development came increased educational opportunities. For instance, high school was becoming available in certain areas, but in rural areas that was not the case (Bond, 1939; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The lack of high schools in certain areas created a greater demand in the African American communities to find ways to provide a high school education for those in this age group. Their goal in the communities was to keep one step ahead of those who wanted African Americans to have an education for the purpose of keeping the “Negro in their place” (Bond,

1939). Keeping African Americans in their place meant providing them with an industrial education and this was not acceptable. African Americans wanted to achieve a classical training that enabled them to gain access to “the best intellectual traditions” (Anderson, 1988, p.29).

In order to meet the needs of the educational concerns the distribution of resources was not evenly distributed in the African American schools. The distribution of resources during this time was not equal by any means. Sadly, there was a refusal attitude among whites not to distribute appropriate funds for African American education. Anderson’s (1988) research lends itself that Whites believed that African Americans did not make a major contribution to the tax base so they were not creditable of receiving funds for their schools. Since they were not able to receive the much needed funds, schools would remain in the “primitive one-room frame structures, lacking in modern facilities” (Ashmore, 1954, p. 28). African American parents took matters in their own hands by utilizing churches, vacant tenant houses, and lodges to educate their children (Anderson, 1988).

Educating African Americans in the early years was a challenge. There was a lack of teacher training and availability of teachers. Anderson (1988) states “in the 1900’s there was only one African American teacher for 93 school age children” (p.111). During the 1920’s and 1930’s there was a surge in African American teachers in the South. Unfortunately, the education and training of the teachers was below national norms. Fultz (1995) posits African American teachers faced other challenges such as excessive teacher-pupil ratios and poor working conditions.

There were other gloomy conditions that confronted African American teachers, students, and parents during this era.

Black teachers in the South during this period had substantially higher teacher-pupil ratios than their White Southern (or Northern) counterparts and confronted potentially chaotic classrooms. The problems of overcrowding, irregular attendance, skewed grade distributions and the general “over agedness” of African American students-compounded by dearth of supplies and equipment-all contributed to an environment that might “tax the ingenuity of the best trained teachers,” as Ambrose Caviler commented (p.404).

African Americans faced many obstacles pertaining to funding and the curriculum of educating their children. These obstacles were important to understand in the behaviors of schools and communities after 1935.

To gain a better understanding of the education of African Americans in the South there are several components that enrich the educational experience. The richness starts with 1) exemplary teachers, 2) curriculum and extracurricular activities, 3) parental support, and 4) leadership of the school the principal.

### **Exemplary teachers**

As an adult I can remember my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Norma P. Teasley. Mrs. Teasley was considered to be an exemplary teacher among her peers in the educational arena. She was exemplary because of her “no non-sense” attitude with the students and their parents. Her expectations were set high for her students

every year. There were no such words as “I can’t.” A friendly reminder was posted in the classroom that “I can’t” left the building and would not be returning. Even though at times our class was given entirely too much homework my mother would remind me what Mrs. Teasley expected out of her students – the best and nothing less.

Reading some of the qualities that are detailed about exemplary teachers, I realize they were embodied by Mrs. Teasley. African American teachers had high expectations for their students; they were dedicated and demanding in their teaching style. They knew all students had the ability to go beyond what was expected they just needed that nudge towards success. Sowell (1976) states it best, “teachers were hard task masters who gave lots of work, refused to lower the standards, and if you didn’t learn, you stayed after school as long as necessary to learn” (p.31). To ensure the students’ success, the African American teacher interacted with the students beyond the classroom. If a student needed extra help the teacher would work with the child after school, visit their homes and the churches in and out of their community.

Also, the teachers were highly trained. Even though their education was below the Whites in the 1920’s, their levels of education were increasing by the end of the 1930’s. They also engaged in continuing education classes by participating in summer schools and traveling away to enhance their learning. Perkins (1989) indicates that the Negro Teacher Association held sessions on how to meet the needs of the slow learner and enrich the advanced students in their classrooms. The

African American teachers attended these workshops and would report back to their school community what they had learned and to keep those who did not attend abreast of the latest trends in education.

### **Curriculum and Extracurricular Activities**

I remember sitting in the gym my sophomore year of high school with my mother. The guidance counselors were discussing the curriculum and what would be expected of you in order to receive your collegiate or vocational diploma. My mother, with that stern but loving face turned to me and said, "You will be on the collegiate track." There was no discussing the other option; my life had been planned for me. I was headed to college whether I liked it or not. It seems this has been a topic in the African American community but it was titled classical instead of collegiate and vocational had the same name.

The curriculum in the South for African Americans tried to emulate, or even go beyond the White curriculum but there were two major constraints. First, scarce financial assets and school size was hindering progress in the African American community (Edwards et al., 1979; Siddle Walker, 1996). Second, white schools wanted to make sure that African American schools did not offer academic courses that equaled or exceeded those being offered at the White school. For example, Foster (1997) explains how Everett Dawson wanted an advance math class implemented into the curriculum at an all black high school. This would have been the first advanced math class in the county but the class was blocked. It was blocked because the White school had not established a class like this and they did

not want to be behind the black high school. The teachers and principals realized the importance of raising the educational bar for African American students.

Extracurricular activities for African American students were an important part of the community. It allowed the student to foster their development in personal interests or talents. From the 1920s and continuing into the 1960s schools offered a variety of extracurricular activities. Many of the activities existed in a sense that fostered relationships with other schools and the community. For example, students participated in debate clubs and they would compete against other segregated schools. Often the debates were held at historically Black colleges that provided exposure to the campus and academic excellence.

### **Parental Support**

As a teacher I often say one of the major components of educating our youth are the parents. In order for a child to continue to be successful in the educational arena there has to be parental support. I was fortunate to have a very strong parental support system growing up. The major role of parental support is the "advocacy" role (Siddle Walker, 1996). During times of uncertainty, African American parents would go before the White school board, or appeal to school supervisors for items that were needed for their child's school. In the 1940s advocates demanded new buildings from the school board and if their demands were not met they would sue. The 1950s advocates wanted money for better gymnasiums and other structural needs that would make their schools equal. This fight for equality continued into the 1960s. This form of advocacy led to school

desegregation suits to assure equal educational opportunities for African American students.

### **Leadership of the School Principal**

The principal was the central figure of the segregated school. This was a visible role that allowed the principal to communicate the needs of the school to the community. The principal was able to motivate the parents to contribute resources when the school was in need of something. When he was not talking to the parents he was speaking with the PTA. He was the school's chief fund-raiser (Rodgers, 1967).

The principal's role continued in the capacity of role model for the students and his teachers. For the students he provided attributes that he wanted the students to display in the community. For example, the principal volunteered for community service projects such as the United Way. He wanted to instill a spirit of volunteerism among his students. Being a role model for his teachers he encouraged them to go back to school for further education. Also, he attended the professional meetings with his teachers. The strongest attribute he demonstrated was how he wanted the teachers to interact with the parents. The principal led by example in all situations.

Finally, the principal was the "go between person" when communicating with the white community. He would advocate for the needs of the school in a politically correct manner. Even though he was considered the "middle man", Larkins (1959) states that it was still the principal's place to consult with the white

community and he was still powerless when making policy decisions. Rodger's (1967) gives an extensive description of the impact of the African American principal:

The man who headed this important community structure, the principal, was the man who ran the school and, in many cases, the Black community. His influence in community affairs was almost without exception great. He was, therefore, central in community life and was indeed more knowledgeable about what was going on than anyone else. Also, as head of the black high school, he had a role in the White power structure as well. This usually put him in the position of knowing more about the larger community than any other black in the black community. He was often the only black with whom influential members of the White community had anything approaching professional contact...When we say that the high school played a major role in the functioning of the community and in its development, this implies that the principal of the Black high played a major role in the functioning and development of this community because of the importance of his role in the school (p.16).

The African American principal made significant contributions to the school community. The principal imparted leadership and modeled the attributes that students and teachers were to exemplify. African American principals were the back bones of the schools and the community.

## Learning While Black

Dr. Carter G. Woodson (2008) stated it best in his book *The Miseducation of the Negro*:

No systematic effort toward change has been possible, for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit.

His education makes it necessary (p.5).

This paragraph epitomizes the plight of African American children in public school systems. African American children continue to struggle in school with curriculums that do not meet their academic needs. The curriculum that is being taught is culturally irrelevant and prevents meaningful instruction to prevail. To their dismay African American children continue to fall behind in the academic arena.

Janice Hale believes that the American education system is failing to properly educate African American children. She posits that African American children need an educational system that acknowledges their strengths, abilities, and culture that will be encompassed into their learning process (Hale, 1982).

Hale has identified three components that she feels are ideal for the success of African American children in the classroom. The components are: 1, political/cultural; 2, pedagogical relevance; and 3, academic rigor. Even though these components are for early childhood they can be adapted for the middle & high school curriculums.

The first component political/cultural ideology is referenced as the “foundation of an accurate historical and political analysis of the situation of Black people in America and in the world” (Hale, 1982, p. 152). In this component Turner (1971) emphasizes the point: “Black education must make students consistently conscious of struggle and commitment. Black studies programs must develop Black youth with a revolutionary sense of identity” (p.17). The presentation of this political ideology should be done in the sense that it “complements the home and community culture” (Hale, 1982, p.156). While working on the Stanton Study Dr. Nettles had the opportunity to listen to teachers who realize “They must recognize their heritage and stand tall. Our world is made up of a very diverse population. They must give respect and demand respect” (Field notes, August 28, 1996). This statement shows that teachers are aware of the importance of students knowing about their culture and to be proud of who they are and where they come from. Parents would like to see the traditional curriculum expanded to encompass African and African American culture that allows the student to survive in mainstream society.

The next component, pedagogical relevance is the method that will be used to teach the African American children in the school systems. There have been numerous studies that discuss the culture of African American children and the compatibility of the cultural influence and behavioral styles they bring to school.

The last component is academic rigor. Academic rigor is described by African American parents as a very important component. This module should allow African American children the skills and exposure needed to compete in the academic arena. Their education “must equip them for excellence” (Hale, 1982, p. 158). Dr. Asa Hilliard (2003) posits that if African American children are to excel they “need an intellectually challenging curriculum” (p. 103). Telling students they are smart and teaching them content that is not intellectually challenging sends a message that you are not smart or capable of being intelligent.

Hale (1982) has suggested that these areas will be emphasized within the curriculum: (1) language/communication skills; (2) mathematical concepts; (3) positive self-concept & positive attitude toward learning and school; (4) Afro-American studies.

African American children tend to utilize a different vernacular when they are expressing their thoughts. Hale has written that African American children have a hard time mastering standard English. This inability at times hinders achievement on standardized tests regarding language and communication skills that are being measured. Dr. Asa Hilliard (2003) discusses Carrie Secret, a teacher who routinely exposes her students to individuals who write in both Black

language and edited American English. She asserts that when her African American students read literature written by African Americans in Black language it makes them feel good.

Language is also tied to culture, and some sociolinguists have taken an in depth look at the cultural incompatibility theory and posited that African American language patterns can be a key source of cultural misunderstanding that can affect African American students' academic performance. These educators subscribe to what Erickson (1987) characterizes as the communication process explanation. The communication process explanation dictates that minority students originate from different speech communities or networks from white teachers. They have their own set of ways when communicating, when wanting attention, showing sincerity, or disapproval.

In *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit (1995) stresses the importance of incorporating the students' "home culture" in the classroom when instructing students of color. By incorporating a student's "home culture", teachers can start with the child's own language. The use of the child's own language perhaps can be used as a tool to teach Standard English. According to Delpit (1995) "...there is a culture of power, everyone should learn the codes to participate in it..." (p.39). An example of codes of power was illustrated by a Native Alaskan teacher who provided her students with an explanation of these codes. The teacher explained to the students the importance of their own heritage language and the need to adapt to Standard English in order to participate in the

mainstream of society. To add further to their understanding, the students were given the opportunity to apply what they had learned in the classroom to the experience of having a formal dinner. During the dinner, the students were required to speak Standard English. The students were also given the opportunity to practice their own language at a picnic (Delpit, 1995). When teachers acknowledge and validate a student's home language they are allowing the students to have a voice and not eliminating the one they bring to school.

Mathematical concepts for African American children are mastered on a daily basis when they are calculating everyday things, but when they are asked to demonstrate their skills in the classroom they have a problem doing so. Hale wants an emphasis placed on developing mathematical proficiency within the curriculum. She feels math and science are both analytical subjects where African American students can benefit from hands on activities and minimize the use of textbooks and worksheets. Mathematical activities should be integrated into all aspects of the students day and during science the scientific method is emphasized (Hale, 2001).

In order to ensure African American children succeed within the educational arena they must have a positive self-concept and positive attitude toward learning and school. Teachers and parents must encourage students; showing them that they have the ability to achieve academic excellence. If they lack belief in themselves, there is a great probability that they will not have the positive self-concept needed to achieve at the level that is desired.

Afro-American studies should be integrated throughout the curriculum. By incorporating African American studies it provides cultural relevancy to and for the African American student. They are able to see themselves at the center of their learning while simultaneously allowing various perspectives to be taught. For many years African Americans in America were told that they have no history or culture, that African culture was primitive, savage, and uncivilized. In addition, African American culture was rarely placed within the context of its history. Teachers would use a variety of books to demonstrate African Americans contributions to that particular subject being taught. For example, when teaching American History to show the African experience in America the teacher can use the book *A Journey to Liberation* by Molefi Asante as a book of reference (Kafele, 2004). To ensure that all students are absorbing the Afro-American studies, the subject areas will integrate into the curriculum through guest speakers, field trips, hands on activities and a host of other learning possibilities.

As educators we want all of our students to be productive citizens that will aspire to the top no matter what they accomplish in life. The words of W.E.B. DuBois, written in 1906, are still true today:

When we call education, we mean real education. We believe in work. We ourselves are workers, but work is not necessarily education. Education is the development of power and ideal. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings,

or simply for the use of other people. They have a right to know, to think, to aspire (1968, p. 251).

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

According to King (1994), “Teachers need sufficient in-depth understanding of their students’ backgrounds to select and incorporate into the education process those forms of cultural knowledge and competence that facilitate meaningful, transformative learning” (p.42). When a teacher appreciates the correlation between cultures and learning, it can make a difference in how the student is taught (Graybill, 1997). By 2020, 50 percent of the nations’ students will be children of color (Parekh, 1986). What does this mean? It means African American students will make up the majority of the student populations in metropolitan and urban areas.

What is culturally responsive pedagogy? “Culturally responsive pedagogy” can be defined as an ideal design of curriculum and instruction whose objective is to build on the students’ cultural knowledge (Villegas, 1991). Geneva Gay (2000) describes her definition as a representation of ideas and explanations that coincide with classroom instruction and the cultural orientation of ethnically diverse students. *Culturally responsive* (Gay, 1994, 2000; Howard, 2003) can be used interchangeably with an assortment of terms such as: culturally appropriate (Au, 1981), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995, 2001), culturally reflective (Gaughan, 1997), culturally imaginative and passionate (Greene, 1993, 1995), and social justice (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002) utilizing these terms allows the teacher to be receptive to the

student's cultural heritage. Culture is central to learning and plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of students.

In order to meet the needs of the diverse population in the school systems, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that culturally responsive/relevant teaching should be implemented in such a manner that it "empowers students' intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p.17-18). Toward this end, Ladson-Billings (1995) summarized three criteria essential to the execution of culturally responsive/relevant teaching. First, culturally relevant teaching must result in the pupils' academic success. Second, culturally relevant teaching should preserve students' cultural identity and relevance when promoting their academic success. Third, culturally relevant teaching should create a social consciousness among students that will allow them to question the structure of society and education as an instrument for social change. Gay (2000), on the other hand, advocates that for culturally responsive teaching to occur:

A very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups-one that teaches to and through their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments. Culturally responsive teaching is this kind of paradigm. It is at once a routine and a radical proposal. It is routine because it does for Native American, Latino,

Asian Americans, African Americans, and low income students what traditional instructional ideologies and actions do for middle class European Americans. That is, it filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful. Education or human relations courses that serve to exoticize diverse students as “other,” is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student-relationship, the curriculum, schooling and society (p.20).

In order to achieve the goal of culturally responsive teaching, Gay (2000) describes several characteristics to reach this end: (1) acknowledges the authenticity of cultural heritages of diverse ethnic groups, (2) builds and obtains meaningful connections between home and school for continued academic success, (3) makes use of a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of the various learning styles, (4) teaches students to recognize and praise their own and others’ cultural heritage, and (5) integrates multicultural information, along with resources and materials that are integrated in all subjects (p.29).

When these characteristics are utilized, it will improve culturally responsive teaching within the classroom environment. Additionally, these characteristics enable teachers who teach literature within the classroom to reflect upon multiple ethnic perspectives and literary genres. If teachers are to be successful in improving culturally responsive teaching, they must address the various learning styles of the students.

In *Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms* (2001), Ladson-Billings contributes three vital criteria that define the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally relevant teachers who have the ability to cultivate students academically demonstrate the following characteristics (Ladson-Billings, 2001): (1) The teacher presumes all students are capable of learning; (2) The teacher clearly outlines what achievement means in his or her classroom; (3) The teacher knows the students and how to facilitate the content; (4) The teacher supports critical consciousness toward the curriculum; and (5) The teacher promotes academic achievement as a complex conception not amenable to a single, static measurement.

Culturally relevant teachers exhibit eagerness to nurture and support cultural competence through the following characteristics (Ladson-Billings, 2001): (1) The teachers recognizes the role of culture in education; (2) The teacher takes responsibility for learning in regards to the student's culture and community; (3) The teacher utilizes the student's culture as a basis for learning; and (4) The teacher promotes a flexible use of students' local and global culture.

Culturally relevant teachers nurture the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness through the following characteristics: (1) The teacher recognizes the larger sociopolitical context of the school-community-nation-world; (2) The teacher has an investment in the public good; (3) The teacher prepares and applies academic experiences that connect the student to society in the proper

context; and (4) The teacher considers a student's success and the consequences that impact his or her own quality of life.

The concept of culturally responsive/relevant teaching can be seen in mainstream classrooms. In her analysis of issues facing Anglo-Saxon educators and the instruction of children of color, Delpit places particular emphasis on teachers incorporating the students' "home culture" in the classroom. When teachers dared to incorporate the students' "home culture," they did so by including the students' own language as a tool to teach Standard English. Hollins (1996) indicates that education that is designed specifically for students of color incorporates "culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum" (p.13). A culturally responsive teacher realizes the importance of academic achievement and has the ability to maintain the student's cultural identity and heritage. Therefore, when teachers are able to bridge the gap between home and school, they approximate Gay's (2000) assertion that culturally responsive teachers teach the whole child by encouraging a community of academic learners. This allows teachers to respond to the students' need for individualism that promotes belonging in a community that accepts them for who they really are as a person.

Even earlier than Gay and Ladson-Billings' advocacy of culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally responsive/relevant teaching, the terms may have had their genesis in the work of Au and Jordan. Au and Jordan (1981) originated the phrase "cultural appropriateness" in their research of native

Hawaiian students who were enrolled in a reading program that allowed them to use their own cultural communication pattern. It was known as “talk story”, and it improved their reading comprehension. In this regard, Ladson-Billings appears to be in agreement with Au and Jordan for she proposes that “culturally relevant pedagogy” extends the use of culturally sensitive language in the classroom to integrate the student’s culture into the school culture. This method is implemented to help offset the negative effects of the dominant culture’s values and beliefs, which forms today’s basis of educational programs.

In her book, *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) made the distinction between the theoretical frameworks sustaining culturally relevant teaching and assimilationist practices. The focal point of this work was on the teaching practices rather than on the teachers of the curriculum, so that the “art and craft of teaching” were recognized (p.13). From the results of classroom observations and teacher interviews, Ladson-Billings was able to demonstrate culturally relevant practices. She saw students as a part of a collective effort that was designed to encourage academic and cultural excellence where expectations were clearly expressed, skills were taught, and interpersonal relations were exhibited. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant teaching is supported in three structures: (1) how teachers view themselves and others, (2) the social relationships teachers develop with students, and (3) how teachers perceive their role in creating knowledge.

## Caring

I have often thought to myself if a student realizes that the teacher genuinely cares for them they are more receptive to you as a person. As a teacher I often remind my students that I care about them like they were my own children; this establishes a sense of family. Once the relationship of care and trust has been established my children seem more willing to be open to new challenges in the classroom. The classroom environment is a place in which students should feel care, support, and encouragement to work together in a culturally responsive classroom.

One of the most important qualities a child needs in their education is the knowledge that their teachers care about them, their education, and their well-being. According to bell hooks (2003) "...all caring teachers they see that to be successful in the classroom they must nurture the emotional growth of students indirectly, if not directly" (p.130). These conditions are in keeping with the basic needs of human beings: the need and desire for love and care. This theory especially holds true for schools and their curricula. The schools must develop a caring curriculum that acknowledges and cares about the needs of the children throughout their education. Considered as one of the leading figures in the field of educational philosophy, Nel Noddings firmly believes that today's educational system is faulty in that it neglects the fundamental needs of humans. This idea is promoted by the fact that today's schools have not reached the social changes over the last twenty or more years, have put too much emphasis on achievement, and

are largely ignoring the full range of human capabilities that are evident in the population.

In order to better understand the facet of caring Noddings is referring to, a definition in this regards is helpful. Noddings (1992) defines a caring relationship as “a connection or encounter between two human beings” (p.15). In this relationship each party must contribute something, or else the connection is broken and caring doesn’t occur. This type of broken connection is seen easily and often in the teacher-student relationship when one or the other refuses to acknowledge the other. To emphasize the idea of caring, Noddings believes there are certain traits a teacher must exhibit. Noddings’ (1984) idea of a caring teacher is found in her statement: “When one cares, one listens openly without relying on structures activated by our needs” (p.42). To be a caring teacher, the teacher must have the needs of the individual student in mind when preparing the structure of lessons rather than solely preparing students to achieve higher test scores. Noddings (1992) further explains that “all students want to learn; it is just a question of what they want to learn” (p.19). Noddings would encourage teachers to enrich their curriculum by nurturing students’ diverse abilities, talents, and interests. As teachers gain a better understanding of the students’ background, teachers are better able to deal with problems that students may have regarding the material taught in class. Teachers need to know their students and to understand which methods work best for them when they are learning certain skills. Acquiring this knowledge and creatively applying it allows the teacher to accommodate the

student's personal learning needs. For example, if there is a student who is a hands-on learner, and the teacher understands this to be the student's style of learning, the teacher can help the student understand the material more readily by adapting the teaching method to the students' learning style. Implementing a caring curriculum recognizes the diverse range of talents and abilities in the classroom and takes into consideration that each student learns differently. If the needs of students are a legitimate concern of teachers, then they must realize that students will be taught in the style they learn in order to meet their educational needs. Noddings (1984) raises one basic question to a conscious level when she stresses exercising care within the classroom, and that is: "Does this practice help me respond to the needs of these students, of this student" (p.217)? It is incumbent on teachers to take the time to get to know students in order to accommodate their needs. This requires extra time to do so. Nel Noddings is convinced that caring teachers will put forth the extra effort to ensure that their students will succeed in the classroom.

Jane Roland Martin (2002), the author of *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution*, states there is "an importance of transmitting the three C's of care, concern, and connection to the next generation," and these virtues should be conveyed within the educational arena (p.41). When teachers apply the three C's, they create an environment in which students are comfortable enough to ask questions without fear of embarrassment. When teachers encourage students instead of disparaging them, teachers create that sense of a tension-free environment.

It is crucial that students feel comfortable in the classroom and can sense that the teacher cares about their opinion when they fearlessly ask questions. By asking questions, students demonstrate how well they understand the material, and in turn, the teacher better understands those areas for which students need extra practice and help. The mutual relationship between teacher and student encourages students in their studies because the teacher truly cares about their opinion, what they learn, and how they learn.

Noddings emphasizes the dire need for dialogue and authentic mutual engagement rather than moralizing. This leads to compassion and understanding as well as to a critical awareness of the limitations of our own cultural conditioning. The personal relationship that develops between the student and the teacher brings about a positive dialogue that enhances the classroom environment to the extent that the student/teacher relationship advances. Martin Buber (1968) quite aptly describes this relationship when he states:

The master remains the model for the teacher. For if the educator of our day has to act consciously he must nevertheless do it "as though he did not." Those raising fingers, the questioning glance, are his genuine doing. Through him the selection of the effective world reaches the pupil. He fails the recipient when he presents this selection to him with gesture of interference. Interference divides the soul in his care into an obedient part and a rebellious part. But a hidden influence proceeding from his integrity has an integrating force (p.90).

Therefore, when teachers enter into a relationship with a student, it does not have to be one of interference and control. That relationship can be one of apprenticeship from which the student learns a vast amount of knowledge from the teacher.

Gay (2000) states that educators need to display culturally responsive caring and to adopt a “tough and take no stuff attitude” (p.70), which in the sense of culturally responsive caring means setting limits, providing structure and maintaining high standards for children in diverse classrooms. Irvine (2003) states that all students do like school, and they like it even better when they know the teacher shows them respect and acknowledges them as an individual. When teachers can systematically combine these components with caring, it may be reasonable to assume that caring is essential to instructional effectiveness.

In the African American community the teacher-student relationship provided the nurturing educational environment that extended beyond the classroom. Siddle-Walker (1996) interviewed students from Caswell County, North Carolina and they spoke about how the teacher-student relationship changed their lives for the better. Some students indicated that they received more than book education and the teachers in Caswell County took an interest in every student. That interest was a sign that the teachers cared about their students and what they would do after graduating from high school. For example, Siddle-Walker (1996) interviewed a veteran teacher Bell Tillman and she stated “they were interested in not only teaching arithmetic and spelling but they were interested in the whole child” (p.123).

Personal sacrifices from the teachers was seen as an act of caring. These sacrifices included financial contributions and becoming a surrogate parent. For instance, Deborah Fuller, an elementary teacher during that time had a student who was going to sing in the school's operetta. Well, at the last minute the student's mother wrote a note stating the girl could not be in the performance. Ms. Fuller took it upon herself to ask the mother if the girl could spend the night with her in order that the girl could participate. This was a personal sacrifice that demonstrated to the student and her family that the teacher did care. As one employee of Caswell County explained "the relationships teachers established with students, both in and outside of homeroom, were seen not just as a central part of their jobs but also as part of who they were" (Siddle-Walker, 1996, p.126). Former students realized the teachers truly cared when they were trying to prepare them for the real world. This type of caring led the students to want to be like their teachers because they deeply believed what teachers told them about the world and themselves (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

Teachers in Caswell County were not the only ones who cared for the students. The principal Mr. Dillard was available to the students in and out of school, he had a vast knowledge of the students; and he had a personal interest in the students becoming productive adults (Siddle-Walker, 1996). His vast knowledge of the students was demonstrated by knowing all of their names along with the family members. Knowing everyone's name made them feel special. One former student described Mr. Dillard as a person who took his time to treat all the

students as individuals. He greeted the students daily as they entered the school and conversed with them in the hallways about their goals – plans for the future. Dillard believed in the importance of education. If he thought the students were not taking education seriously he would confront that particular student with the truth. For example, he would tell students they needed to straighten up or they would not amount to anything in life. Dillard was viewed as a father figure and the students did not want to disappoint him in anyway.

In the African American community teachers often exhibited a variety of roles that can be characterized as attributes of caring. Those roles consisted of counselors, encouragers, benefactors, & racial cheerleaders.

The first role teachers in the African American community seemed to embrace was one as the counselor. Students at the Caswell County Training School expressed how they felt comfortable speaking with the teachers about their personal and academic problems. The teachers also demonstrated that they did not mind talking to the students before school, during their planning periods, and after school. The teachers felt the advice they provided the students would be beneficial in their personal life and the African American race.

The next role is the encourager. The students asserted that the teachers provided guidance that encouraged them to “move beyond what was expected of them and urging them to take on new challenges” (Siddle-Walker, 2004, p. 82). Caring was also exhibited when the teacher encouraged the students beyond academic matters. This was best illustrated when the teacher Mrs. Hyler reminded

a student of appropriate behavior pertaining to a school setting. Apparently, when this student misbehaved in school Mrs. Hyler would walk up behind the student and give them a tap on the head. This did get their attention and they did not take offense by the tap. They knew Mrs. Hyler had their best interest at hand. It was obvious the student felt affection and not abuse from this gesture.

A third role that demonstrated care was that of the benefactor. Teachers were seen as benefactors when they helped students beyond the classroom. This type of support was seen often in the times of a death, personal needs, and when students needed financial assistance to attend college or acquiring a job after graduation (Siddle-Walker, 2000). When teachers exhibit these examples of caring this was considered “the norm” in the African American community and teachers are seen as “extensions of the community” (Siddle-Walker, 2004, p. 83). To ensure that people in the community reached their potential, teachers taught parents or others who could not read or write in the evenings. This was done out of the goodness of their hearts without monetary compensation.

The final role displayed by caring teachers was the racial cheerleader. The racial cheerleader veered away from the curriculum by encouraging the students to take pride in their race by understanding their history and heritage (Siddle-Walker, 2004).

African American teachers had the daunting task of meeting the students’ needs in these various roles. They realized that caring was an integral part of educating African American students effectively during a turbulent time in history.

Ruth Foster (1997) stated it best, "It is impossible to discipline or teach Black children unless the children believe you care about them" (p. 31).

### **Achievement Gap or Educational Debt?**

One of the most ongoing discussions in schools and America today is the achievement gap. What is the achievement gap? The "achievement gap" is the disparity in academic performance between different groups of students. When Black and Hispanic children enter kindergarten, they are on average far behind their peers in reading and math readiness. Osborne notes, "Statistics clearly indicate that the vast majority of students from non-Anglo cultural/social groups in Western nations are not receiving quality education and that inequality continues to expand rather than contract" (1996, p.286).

The nation's segregated schools continue to maintain an achievement gap between White students and students of color and it continues to widen despite supposed attempts to improve the education of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lipman, 1998). Jonathon Kozol details vast inequities between the races in terms of schools in his book *Savage Inequalities*. In the book he describes the horrific circumstances in which children of color are expected to learn on a daily bases. Numerous Americans feel that segregation is a past injustice and that it no longer exists (Kozol, 1991).

Ladson-Billings discusses the educational climate in her book *The Dreamkeepers* (1994):

African-American students continue to lag behind their white counterparts on all standard measures of achievement. African-American children are three times as likely to drop out of school as white children are and twice as likely to be suspended from school....African-American students make up only 17 percent of the public school population but 41 percent of the special education population (p.2).

These disparities in achievement persist or even decrease during the school years. Across the nation, a gap in academic achievement persists between minority, disadvantaged students and their white counterparts. For example, there have been many compensatory programs like Title I and more than \$200 billion has been spent and still the achievement gap persists. Title I has not shown consistent and significant effect on students achievement. According to the former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige (2010) he warned there is a great deal of work needed to improve education in order to close the achievement gap that has widened over several decades.

Research states that there is a need to recognize that the gap between White students and students of color does and still exists, despite a wave of reforms that have seemed to fail. McLaren (1989) posits "The failure of reform programs is often used by the dominant culture as evidence to support the myth-based definitions of academic failure: that failure lies in the genes, character traits, or home lives of the students themselves" (p.225). Even good programs can fail because the clientele is

unreachable, hence unteachable. Failure, therefore, simply proves the assumptions on which the policy was based (McLaren, 1989).

Lipman (1995) states the achievement gap continues to exist despite the numerous attempts of reform:

Over the last ten years, countless local and national projects have been launched to reshape curriculum instruction, assessment, school organization, and governance and the professional roles of educators. The real test of these educational reforms will be: Do they improve the academic performance and educational experience of all students, especially those whom our schools are failing the most (p.202)?

The previous quote helps to demonstrate that educational change is ongoing.

There are several misconceptions, however, that continue to allow this issue to be perpetuated within the academic arena. The causes for the achievement gap span multiple contexts, such as poverty, family experience with education, cultural norms and values, racism, prejudice and segregation, inequities in school resources, school and teacher attitudes, student motivation and overall school environment.

First, if educators want to close the achievement gap, they must address negative stereotypes that hinder the student's academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2006). When certain ethnic groups enter school, the cards are already stacked against them because of stereotyping. For example, the stereotype that Asian students are excellent mathematicians, or African-American boys can only excel at

basketball and football, are only a few stereotypes that some teachers and children have fallen prey to.

According to Devine (1989), as young children, they are aware of the various stereotypes regarding different cultures. A common stereotype endorsed by many Americans is that Latinos and African-Americans are unintelligent (Smith, 1990). As educators, we can help by curtailing this stereotypic threat. Teachers are able to minimize this misconception by implementing cooperative structures in the classroom. Allowing students to work in this type of setting diminishes the stereotypes others may have of their fellow classmates (Aronson & Patnoe, 1981).

Scholars also assume the home environment of ethnic groups and lower income families are inadequate to prepare students for success in school. Some educators readily assume that if a child is from a lower socio-economic class, they will not perform as well as the child from a higher socio-economic class. Delpit (1995) states that when teachers make these kinds of assumptions, they are focusing on inadequacies rather than the potential for success. Such assumptions oftentimes bring about streamlining curriculum and have led educators to reduce instructional content, which further results in educators teaching less. So, this perceived lack of results in students bringing to school insufficient academic and intellectual stimulation. There seems to be a cultural difference that may contribute to academic problems, and with this comes discontinuity between the home and school culture. If educators will only acknowledge that there are cultural differences, then they can

begin to teach students the skills necessary for them to succeed in school and in the educational system.

Ogbu (2005) states that poor academic performance among African-American students can be credited to “low-effort syndrome.” This implies that African-American students “do not exert sufficient effort in pursuit of schooling” (Ogbu, 2005, p.437), although they have the capability to do so, Ogbu proposes that African American students tend to reject certain preconceived notions that are initiated by the dominant culture or an institution. Many African American students have developed a variety of coping techniques that allow them not to meet their educational goals. Further, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) report that African American students intentionally shun academic success for fear of peer pressure and the label of “acting white.”

This study does signify that our cultural beliefs of people do influence certain student behaviors. Obviously, if this study’s findings are true, teachers and students can easily operate with two different mindsets of what behaviors are acceptable within the classroom. Gay (2000) elaborates on this cultural mismatch:

Culturally diverse students often have difficulties succeeding in school because how they go about learning is incompatible with school expectations and norms, not because they lack desire, motivation, aspiration, or academic potential. Opportunities to participate in the substantive components of teaching and learning frequently are a condition of the extent to which students conform to the “correct procedures and social protocols” of

teaching. Failure to master these virtually ensures academic failure as well (p.47).

In a 2006 Presidential address, Gloria Ladson-Billings argues that the focus on the achievement gap has been misplaced. She draws an analogy with the concept of the national debt in contrast with the national budget deficit.

To gain a better understanding of the debt and educational disparity Ladson-Billings discusses this topic with Professor Emeritus Robert Havenman of the University of Wisconsin. He believes that the education debt is linked to resources that should have been invested in schools primarily in the low income areas. This leads to a host of social problems that include low wages, crime, and unemployment. These social problems take away valuable resources needed to decrease the achievement gap. If there was no education debt then the achievement debt could be narrowed.

In order to fully comprehend the term “education debt” to understand why there is an achievement gap Ladson-Billings contends that there are several aspects of debt that have contributed to the educational debt. She defines four debts as historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions that have constructed an education debt.

The historical debt is defined as the educational inequities in the United States. These inequities were formed around race, class, and gender. Specifically, African Americans during slavery were forbidden to have an education and after emancipation education was introduced but only for the purpose of maintaining

the servant class. In the South, African American students did not experience collective schooling until 1968 (Anderson, 1988).

Currently, the economic debt is the disparity of funding that exists between urban and suburban schools. Kozol (2005) gave specific figures that represent major school systems in the United States. For example, per pupil expenditures in Philadelphia are \$9,299 for a student population that is 79% Black and Latino. Once you cross city limits to Lower Merion the per pupil expenditure increases to \$17,261 for a 91% White students population. Another school system mentioned was New City public schools, their per pupil expenditure was \$11,627 with a student population that is 72% Black and Latino. The 91% White students that live in the suburb of Manhasset per pupil expenditures are \$22,311. Even though some may argue that this is not enough evidence to prove that schools are poorly funded because Black and Latino students attend these schools, it is obvious that schools in pre-dominantly white school districts do receive more funding.

The sociopolitical debt suggests that communities of color are excluded from the civic process. This debt began when African Americans were denied the right to vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Also, the sociopolitical debt can be applied to African American, Latino, and Native American parents that have been constantly excluded from any type of decision making mechanisms to ensure their children receive a quality education. These parents have not had access to parent-teacher organizations and other organizations that advocate for their children in the educational arena.

The final component associated with the education debt is moral debt. Moral debt reflects the inconsistency between what we know is right and what we actually do. The nation's society at one time embraced slavery; knowing this was morally wrong they continued to enslave African Americans in other ways.

By addressing the educational debt Ladson-Billings asserts "it has implications for the kinds of lives we can live and the kind of education the society can expect for most of its children" (2006, p. 9). There are three primary reasons why the education debt must be addressed - 1) the influence the debt presently has on education progress, 2) understanding the debt in regards to past research findings, and 3) forging towards an enhanced educational future.

We as a nation cannot make adequate education progress if our debt continues to mount. When trying to improve the educational progress, the debt the nation has accumulated is counterbalanced and that effects the programs needed to improve the curriculum. Such a debt "leads to distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do in communities that serve the poor and children of color" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.9). Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the amount of the debt demolishes the trust that has been established between the parents and teachers.

To truly understand the debt in relation to the past research findings Ladson-Billings (2006) details two interventions that have not been addressed - school desegregation and funding equity. School segregation still persists and it has transformed due to the changing demographics of the nation. Even though we have

entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, America's public schools are in the process of resegregation. For example, at least 2 million Black and Latino students in the Northeast and Midwest attend segregated schools. States that are segregated the most are New York, Michigan, Illinois, and California. Funding equity seems to be a problem in at least 30 states. These districts have that high minority districts and receives less money for each child in low minority districts ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)). It seems as though we have forgotten why the verdict was rendered during the Brown vs. Board of Education and that was to bring equality to segregated schools. Equality means equal funding and desegregating the schools.

Maybe there are some who do not understand the repercussions of the mounting debt in terms of the educational future. To better understand the educational debt Ladson-Billings (2006) asserts that our imagination must be engaged to visualize the debt and those images must prompt us to perceive the "...effects of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind" (p. 10).

### **Teacher Education Programs**

When I made the decision to go back to school to become a teacher I had the enormous task of finding a teacher education program that would meet my needs as someone who had decided to change their career. Kennesaw State University (KSU) was the school I chose to attend to begin my teaching career. The program met my expectations in the beginning as far as learning the core essentials in early

childhood education. As I continued in the program, I began to look at things differently than when I was in the actual work force as a paraprofessional. I realized that if I decided to stay in this field I would have a diverse classroom; but was I truly ready to embark on such a quest? In my opinion I was not prepared and my thoughts were not well received when I voiced my concerns. To meet the challenges, I was told by a professor that I would take a cultural diversity class and this should address any concerns I may have. Needless to say this was not the answer and I left that class somewhat confused. When I did enter the educational arena as a teacher I know for a fact I was not prepared to teach a diverse classroom.

Recent indicators that placed education achievement in the United States near the bottom of the scale strongly suggests that, confronting diversity in the twentieth-first century will be a challenge for all educators (Darling-Hammond & Garcia-Lopez, 2002). In order to meet the challenges educators will face in diverse classrooms, the inadequacies in teacher education programs must be addressed. Ladson-Billings (2000) addresses the inadequacies of teacher education programs by questioning whether these programs are preparing teachers to effectively instruct the diverse groups of students that currently occupy our schools, and more specifically, that the African American cultural experiences are not usually a main feature of these programs. Ladson-Billings (1994) states that most current teachers report that their preservice preparation has done very little to prepare them for today's diverse classrooms. According to Ladson-Billings (1994):

No single course or set of field experience is capable of preparing preservice students to meet the needs of diverse learners. Rather, a more systemic, comprehensive approach is needed. Work that uses an autobiography, restructured field experiences, situated pedagogies, and returning to the classroom of experts can each provide new opportunities for improving teaching (p.4).

Irvine (2003) posits that teacher education programs should be revamped by teaching teachers how to learn. She implies that teachers should get to know the environments of the students, and most importantly learn what makes the students tick.

The greatest challenge for teacher education programs is preparing prospective teachers to bond meaningfully with ethnically diverse students. Gay (1993) proposes that all graduates of teacher education programs should be prepared to function as “cultural brokers.” A cultural broker is one who is culturally knowledgeable of the various ethnic groups and has the aptitude to serve as a change agent that is willing to develop cultural pedagogy practices. Delpit (1995) insists that preservice teachers should be exposed to successful models of instruction rather than preconceived notions of failure that can be readily found in labeling and low expectations. She also charges that most teacher education programs’ focus on “so-called progressive pedagogy” which is ineffective in preparing teacher candidates to teach African American children (p.131). Further, students should seek community input to help assist with firsthand knowledge of

the community being serviced. Gay (2000) prescribes to the notion that teacher education programs need to meet the challenges of educating pre-service teachers. To meet the challenges, veteran teachers should be willing to assist pre-service teachers in acquiring information that will be useful when teaching a diverse group of students. The acquisition of this information affords pre-service teachers the opportunity to accommodate the ethnic and cultural diversity in the classroom.

Even though there are some teachers who have been successful in teaching diverse student populations, researchers contend that many prospective teachers are not prepared to be effective with diverse students and assert that the teacher preparation programs should address the concern (Grant & Secada, 1990). There are several challenges that exist in preparing teachers to achieve successful outcomes with diverse student populations; Zeichner (1996) has proposed key instructional strategies that can be implemented in teacher education programs.

First, the student must examine their own internal beliefs. For example, when students are admitted it should be on the bases of their willingness to educate all students no matter the background. The students must develop an honest understanding of their own ethnic and cultural identities. When taking an honest look at themselves they should examine their attitudes towards other ethnic groups. Students are willing to be taught the dimensions of prejudice and racism in the classroom and how to deal with it. Lastly, the students will learn the dimensions of privilege and economic oppression and the school practices that contribute to the reproduction of societal inequalities.

Next, specific issues should be taught to the students in the teacher education programs. For instance, the teacher education program should address the histories and contributions of the various cultural groups. In order to meet the educational needs of their students, they should be given information on the various learning styles and how to use a variety of instructional strategies to adapt their classroom instruction to accommodate the cultural resources they bring to school. The program should allow students the opportunity to develop a relationship with the students' homes and communities.

Lastly, students should be willing to embrace the diversity of the classroom. Students are exposed to successful teaching of all minority students. During their enrollment students will complete community service with fellow classmates that represent other cultures. When the students are student teaching they will complete their practicum experience in schools that serve ethnic and language minority students. To gain a better insight of the students they will be teaching the students where they work and live in a minority community. The instruction will be embedded in a group setting that provides intellectual and social support.

In order for teachers to be able to view their students from diverse backgrounds, the teachers must have a knowledge base from which to operate.

Nieto (2000) writes:

To have knowledge of another culture does not mean to be able to repeat one or two words in a student's language, nor is it to celebrate an activity or sing

a song related to their culture. To acknowledge and respect is to be able to understand and apply this information to everyday activities (p.1).

Nieto (2000) recommends that teacher education programs should incorporate in the curriculum a class that focuses on social justice. The social justice class would focus on how and why schools are unjust for some students. The unjust can be analyzed in the policies and the practices of adoption books and other things related to the learning environment. Furthermore, Nieto believes that teachers need to face and accept their own identities and limited experiences with students of diverse backgrounds. Cochran-Smith (1995) believes African American teachers are naturally prepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds simply because of their own backgrounds, but this is not always true.

Bridging the gap among students, teachers, schools, and communities is possible, and it can begin with the teacher education programs. These programs must realize that they are responsible for preparing well-rounded teachers who are capable of educating the diverse student population and are able to connect the students to the curriculum as well. It is also absolutely necessary that teacher education programs are developed to the extent that teachers are willing to immerse themselves in programs that facilitate a broader and better understanding of multiculturalism. As a result of these revamped teacher education programs, teachers learned understanding should be easily and caringly transmitted to students whose learning patterns differ from the accepted and expected norms of

our school system. When this occurs, both teacher and student will emerge as the greatest beneficiaries because learning will have mutually taken place.

### **African American Women Teachers**

As an African American woman in the educational field I have often wondered about my responsibility I hold to my students. I also wonder about the roles of African American women in society. Historically our roles have been limited to that of a cook, nanny, or a teacher. But before that question can be answered I contemplate how African American children are being helped based on the “white, middle-class” perspective, and educators wonder why their programs are not working as African American children continue to lag behind. When White administrators try to address the problem they at times fail to include and seek the opinion of African American educators. Seeking their opinion includes their vantage point because many of us have been where these students have been and we can offer hope to these students who so desperately are yearning for.

Consequently, I am compelled to discover how the influence of Black women has contributed to education. Black women in the work force seems as though it has always been a necessity for the survival of the family. As time went on they were encouraged to attend institutions of higher learning that would enable the African American race to be uplifted intellectually and socially (Logan, 1999). African American women had the opportunity to attend institutions such as Spelman College, Oberlin College, Atlanta University, and Bennett College (Shaw, 2004). Receiving a degree allowed African American women to do more than

domestic work. It permitted them to become teachers, college professors, and entrepreneurs. These careers and a host of other careers helped them to propel the Black race to something viewed as uplifting. Pioneers in the field of education such as Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Marva Collins had a vision for African American children. Those dreams were reached with hard work and determination.

Anna Julia Cooper was born to a slave woman, Hannah Stanley, and her master George Washington Haywood in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1858. Anna showed great academic promise from an early age. She received a scholarship at age ten to attend St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute in 1868 and graduated in 1871 at the age of 13 (Washington, 1988). While working at St. Augustine's in 1877 she met and married her husband George C. Cooper who also was a former slave. The cultural norms during this time period did not allow Anna Julia Cooper to remain in her profession as a teacher while she was married. So she left her profession as a teacher. Unfortunately, Julia was widowed in 1879 and never remarried. After the death of her husband she returned to teaching. In 1881 she entered Oberlin College in Ohio where she earned a B.A. in 1884 and an M.A. in mathematics in 1887. In 1902 she became principal of M Street High School, Washington D.C's only black high school. Anna Julia Cooper was sixty-five when she became the fourth black woman to earn her Ph.D. She earned her degree in Latin from the Sorbonne in Paris.

Cooper spent the next forty years of her teaching career at M Street High School where she made an impact on the school, the curriculum, and the school's students. Cooper encouraged all of her students to seek their careers in institutions of higher education. She fought against Washington's vocational approach to education. Her strong will led to M street graduates receiving scholarships to schools like Harvard, Brown, Yale, Dartmouth, and Wilberforce. Cooper's White supervisor Perry Hughes did not agree with Cooper's college preparatory course design or her determination to make African American students competitive with Whites (Washington, 1988). During this ensuing crisis, one student recalled that Cooper's real crime was the level of academic achievement she expected and got from her students: "It was pure heresy to think that a colored child could do what a white child could (Cooper, xxxiv,1988). Hughes urged the school board that Cooper should be dismissed for not following proper protocol. Refusing to change her educational tactics she was eventually relieved of her duties as principal in June of 1906.

Another chief interest for Cooper was higher education for Black women. She felt they held a unique place in the context of history that would enable them to contribute greatly to issues of social justice and equality: "But to be a woman of the Negro race in America, and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis, is to have a heritage, it seems to me, unique in the ages" (Cooper, 1892/1988, p.144). Achieving a higher education for Black women, Cooper felt it would allow men and women to approach matrimony as equals

educationally and economically and they would be better equipped in educating their children. She remained an academic motivator for all African Americans so they would all reach their full potential which would allow them to uplift the race (Washington, 1988).

By what was to be the end of the Great Depression, Mary McLeod Bethune was one of the most visible African Americans in America. She was the fifteenth of seventeen children born to Samuel and Patsy McLeod in Mayesville, South Carolina. Her educational career began when a Presbyterian missionary, Emma Jane Wilson, came to South Carolina to educate and convert those who had been impacted by injustice. Once Bethune had concluded her studies with Wilson she was given a scholarship to Scotia Seminary a boarding school for Black women in Concord, North Carolina. After graduating, Bethune was awarded yet another scholarship to Dwight Moody's Bible Institute for Home and foreign missions in Chicago. Upon graduation Bethune wanted to go to Africa to serve as a foreign missionary but her request was denied. She was appointed by the Presbyterian Board of Education to teach at the Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia. Teaching at the Haines Institute allowed Bethune to fine tune her teaching skills.

Bethune had the desire to start her own school that would benefit African American girls so she moved to Daytona, Florida in 1904. When she arrived she established the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls. Bethune (1942/1992) wrote:

I opened the doors of my school, with an enrollment of five little girls, aged from eight to twelve, whose parents paid me fifty cents' weekly tuition. My own child was the only boy in the school. Though I hadn't a penny left, I considered cash money as the smallest part of my resources. I had faith in a living God, faith in myself, and a desire to serve (p. 134).

Within two years of the initial enrollment of five the school size did increase to 250 students.

Bethune (1941/1992) focused the school on educating African American girls because they had few opportunities for education. To further reach the masses of the African American race Bethune united in 1923 with Cookman Institutue, a school for boys to become a co-ed high school. In 1941 the Florida Board of Education approved a 4- year baccalaureate program in Liberal Arts and Teacher Education. February 2007 the school received university status after the institution established its first graduate program.

If there was a founding mother for culturally relevant pedagogy that woman would be Nannie Helen Burroughs. She was born May 2, 1879 in Culpepper, Virginia to John and Jennie Burroughs. Her educational journey began at M Street Preparatory School in 1896 (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001). Nannie Burroughs never earned a college degree but she was awarded an honorary M.A. degree from Eckstein-Norton University in 1907.

Burroughs began her life work at the National Baptist Convention in 1900. During the convention she gave a speech titled "How the Sisters Are Hindered

from Helping” (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001). Even though she was twenty-one years old, she was developing a reputation for being a “powerful speaker” (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001). Burroughs believed in the empowerment of African American women and girls, so in 1909 she opened the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. She was the school’s first president at the age of 26 years old.

When Burroughs opened the school her focus was on the “economic and moral status of the great mass of laboring people especially black women” (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001, p.46). The school concentrated on offering classes such as sewing, home economics, nursing, bookkeeping, shorthand, interior design, Latin, English literature, and the students were required to take at least one course in black history. Her goal in offering this type of curriculum was to ensure that the students were well rounded in the vocational and professional arena. She wanted her students to become self-sufficient wage earners and proficient homemakers.

Nannie Burroughs believed that black women should be empowered and that came from having an education, job training, and voting rights. Through this type of racial uplift ideology, she was a strong advocate of racial justice. Burroughs stated racial justice was an expression of God’s will. When Burroughs gave her speeches she frequently used scriptures throughout to support racial uplifting and social justice. When arguing for racial justice in her speech “Twelve Things the White Man Must Stop Doing to the Negro” the scripture she quoted affirming

human equality that asserted “one blood of all races” (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001, p.60).

In her later life Burroughs continued to stay involved in racial justice activities into the nineteenth- and early into the twentieth and the Civil Rights Era. She was the co-founder of the National League of Republican Colored Women which is not in existence today and she was an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Burroughs was a strong advocate for anti lynching laws, the desegregation of public facilities and fair wages (Hine & Thompson, 1989). The major goal for Burroughs in life was to improve the life of African Americans but especially the lives of Black women. She died in 1961.

Educator Marva Collins was born Marva Delores Nettles August 31, 1936 in Monroeville, Alabama during the time when segregation seemed to be the norm. Her father instilled in her the strong desire to learn, a strong sense of pride and self-esteem. She attended Clark College where she received a bachelor’s degree in secretarial science in Atlanta, Georgia. Upon graduation she returned to Alabama to teach for two years. Even though she did not want to be a teacher she left the profession in 1959 to become a medical secretary at Mount Sinai Hospital in Chicago. A year later she married her husband Clarence Collins in September of 1960.

Realizing she missed the joys of teaching she returned to the profession in 1961 as a substitute teacher. While teaching in the public school system for 16 years

Collins realized the quality of education for African American children was not up to par (Collins, 1982). The teachers had given up on the students who were labeled as disruptive or unteachable. She felt this was unacceptable. With that conviction she decided to open her own school. Westside Preparatory School opened its doors in 1975 in Garfield Park (Collins, 1982). Like Mary McLeod Bethune Collins started with a small enrollment of 6 students.

Collins credits her success, which is spelled out in her 1982 book *Marva Collins' Way* by providing the students with a nurturing atmosphere where they learn the basics - reading, math, and language arts skills. Her teachers also offered an abundance of individualized attention with strict discipline. She was able to raise test scores of many students who in turn went on to such colleges as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford (Collins, 1982).

Marva Collins curriculum was based on the Socratic Method to teach reasoning skills, and the students were immersed in literature by Plato and Shakespeare (Collins, 1982). The students took hold of the complex ideas and learned to think critically and independently. By becoming independent thinkers the students learned the value that holds society together and that we all have different viewpoints. They were encouraged to challenge anything they had read as well as contrasting their own ideas that differ from those around them. Unfortunately, the Westside Preparatory closed its doors after 30 years of service to those who truly deserved a chance due to a lack of funding and a decline in enrollment in 2008.

Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs and Marva Collins are educators who saw that their race needed to be uplifted and that was done through education. Their stories remind me of teachers that I have known through the years who wanted the best for their students.

### **Summary of Literature**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to evolve into a melting pot in America's schools. But to the African American student the demise has begun in the educational arena. Public schools should recognize the importance of cultural influences on children's development and learning. There is a need for the curriculum of public schools to become more responsive to cultural diversity. For African Americans to be successful in school, culture is an important part of an effective pedagogy.

In the educational arena educators must create curricula "around forms of culture and school knowledge that students who traditionally have been excluded from the benefits of a critical education" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 156). The notion of culturally responsive teaching is indicative of the teacher's conception of knowledge and how it is constructed and shared (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching aims to assist students in building learning blocks by creating educational environments that embrace culturally influenced behavioral and communication patterns that allow students to more efficiently connect school and home/community experiences (Au & Kawakami, 1994).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Since the beginning of time women have struggled to be heard and women of color have continued this struggle from slavery, segregation, and integration. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American women who have flourished as mothers, daughters, and teachers in the South during the time of segregation, integration, and post integration. Critical race theory was chosen as the framework and oral history as the methodology. Through the use of critical race theory and oral history, the voices of my mother, aunt and myself are heard to ensure that the life experiences are told in hopes of gaining an understanding of our plight through the struggle to gain quality and an equitable education through culturally relevant pedagogy.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory**

According to Delgado (1995), Critical Race Theory (CRT) arose in the 1970's out of the realization that the civil rights movement of the 1960's had stalled and that many of its gains were being rolled back. Critical race theorists believed that new approaches were needed to analyze and understand the complex interplay among race, racism, and U.S. law and as a result we have the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman who were both critical race theorists. They were distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) have defined CRT as a movement that contemplates:

Many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (p.3).

Critical race theory examines the historical and contemporary relationship between the dominant and non-dominant cultures. Delgado and Stefancic (2001), and Crenshaw et al. (1995) surmise there are five central tenets or features of critical race theory. The first element recognizes that racism is an ordinary part of life for most people of color.

Secondly, white supremacy groups and people of color support racism through a process of hegemony. This is often referred to as “interest convergence” or material determination, seemingly racism has advanced the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically). “White elites will tolerate or encourage racism advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.xvii). Eradicating racism is difficult when a large segment of society has no incentive to do so.

The third element describes the “social construction” thesis. The Social construction thesis holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations that correspond to categories that have been invented by society,

manipulated or retired for their convenience. Fourth, racial differentiation is the process in which society has assigned a variety of positions along with privileges to the various minority groups. This is done so there is rivalry among each other. The last element of CRT contends that people of color have a unique voice. This unique voice is heard for racial justice because it is “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Daniel Solórzano (1998) identified five tenets of CRT in the field of education: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the obligation to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches.

The first tenet intercentricity of race and racism deals with the premise that these are central parts that define and explain how the US society functions. Also, CRT acknowledges the many facets of race and racism of gender, class and so forth.

The second tenet the challenge to dominant ideology employs CRT to challenge the White privilege and contest many claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy, and race neutrality. CRT questions the perception of “unbiased” research or “objective” researchers and exposes research that ignores and distorts the epistemology of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

CRT is committed to social justice because it seeks to transform relationships among the races and influence cultural, economic, political, and social structures towards a greater understanding and interactions among racial groups.

CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This is accomplished by focusing on the lived experiences of people of color through storytelling, biographies, family histories, and interviews. Also, CRT explores transdisciplinary perspectives by analyzing race and racism within historical and contemporary contexts.

The CRT's five tenets provide useful guidelines that help define research in the educational arena among people of color. When one thinks of education many African American parents think of the schools in their neighborhoods. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest that the condition of African American schools and schooling is due to institutional and structural racism. The researchers make the point that if racism were merely isolated, individualized acts, we would expect to see some examples of educational excellence and equity in the public schools. CRT challenges the ideas that the American educational system operates to "ensure objective, meritocracy, neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Solorzano, 1997). Additionally, CRT acknowledges that people of color have been treated the same regardless of their region, economical status, and gender (Duson & Rousseau, 2006).

Unfortunately, this type of racism seems to be very complex and when one realizes how to make sense of it, they still continue to employ and deploy it (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This type of racism seems to have stirred up secretiveness and hence new terminology has been coined. For example, “school achievement,” “middle-classness,” and “intelligence,” are all terms used when referring to white students. Terms that are seen as marginalizing such as “gangs or welfare recipients” are referred to African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Furthermore, CRT argues that institutional and structural racism are the causes of the inadequate schools in the African American communities. The majority of states fund their schools through property taxes. Consequently, the better schools are funded in wealthier neighborhoods.

Critical race theorists believe that the current pedagogy presumes that African American students are deficient. Constantly educators are in a never ending battle to acquire the “right strategy or techniques” to teach African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000). Deficiencies in individual performances are not seen using this race-neutral perspective. Unfortunately, when these instructional strategies fail, the strategy is not blamed but it is the student who is blamed (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Tate (1995) suggests that the cause of poverty in the African American community lies in conjunction with the condition of the schools/schooling due to institutional and structural racism. The researchers have pointed out that if racism were merely isolated, individualized acts, we would expect to see some examples

of educational excellence and equity in public schools. CRT addresses and challenges the ideas that the American educational system operates to “ensure objective, meritocracy, neutrality, and equal opportunity” (Solorzano, 1997). Dusek & Rousseau (2006) posits that CRT acknowledges that people of color have been treated as though they are all the same despite the region, socioeconomic, or gender differences that may contribute to how they experience the world.

One of the strengths of CRT is the way it is represented through the storytelling. Critical race theorists often “use parables, chronicles, stories, counter-stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine” (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). Primarily narratives are used in CRT because they add contextual contours to the seeming “objectivity” of the positivist perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theorists assimilate their experiential knowledge with their history of racism and sexism to transfer a world deteriorating with racial hegemony (Delgado, 1995). Delgado (1995) explains three reasons for representing scholarly ideas in this manner: (1) Much of the world is socially constructed; (2) stories are a vehicle for those who are represented in the non-dominant group as self-preservation; and (3) exchanging stories from the teller to the listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way. African-Americans have been a group of people that have been marginalized and in order to have a voice they have told stories. “What are the issues that marginalized or disadvantaged people speak of with excitement, anger, fear, or hope” (Ayers, 2006,

p.88)? Delgado (1995) states the dominant group of society justifies its power by instilling their stories and these stories construct a reality in ways to legitimize privilege. Stories in the African-American community can counter those stories of the oppressor.

### **Critical Race Theory and My Dissertation Study**

Critical race theory is manifested through the development of counter-narratives by persons of color that challenge the dominant legal, political, ideology, and epistemological thinking about race and power. Furthermore, critical race theory not only highlights discrimination through narratives, but also offers alternative visions, perspectives, and politics that are based on placing race (and its partial intersections with other areas of difference., e.g., ethnicity, language, gender ... social class) at the center of the remedies for changes in the current power relations in U.S. society (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas , 1999, p. 5).

The three ways that CRT affects school systems is through the curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT questions the role, processes, and structures of schools in maintaining racial, ethnic, and gender subordination (Lynn, 1999). When one reflects on the school curriculum it is a culturally specific artifact used for the purpose of maintaining a White supremacist master script (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Swartz (1992) says the master script is used to silence the voice of the non-dominant culture and legitimize the dominant male culture as the “standard” voice of knowledge. Delgado (1995) posits that people of color have had their stories deleted or distorted, especially when they have tried to

challenge the powers that be in the dominant culture. Only those differing accounts and perceptions may be disempowered through falsification are allowed (Swartz, 1992).

### **Oral History**

On a recent visit to my mother's house I had the opportunity to go through several boxes of family pictures. I could not help but think of the women who were pictured in the photos; these were the women who helped mold me into the woman I am today. While looking at the pictures a sense of sadness came over me and that was due to the death of my mother's sister Natalie. My aunt died August of 2008. She was very instrumental in me pursuing the highest degree I could as an African American woman. Aunt Natalie would often say it was my responsibility to obtain that educational knowledge because it was often denied to those who came before me. I have frequently repeated those words for encouragement while pursuing my degrees.

It saddens me to know that when my aunt was alive I did not take the opportunity to understand what shaped my aunt as an African American woman. I was often told she was the rebel of the family. She stood up for what mattered and that says a lot during the time period which she grew up. I have heard the stories from my mother but I wanted to hear the stories from my aunt's point of view; how culturally relevant pedagogy shaped her as an African American woman. Hearing her story, listening to oral history allows the stories to be told without judgment or an opinion being rendered. There was always something missing from my

relationship with my aunt – I am not sure if it was the distant between us (my aunt lived in Denver, CO while I lived in Atlanta) or the stereotypical bond of aunt and niece. Listening to her stories would have provided a deeper connection and understanding of her memories and relationships that shaped her as a woman. To gain this insight from my aunt will never happen but I still have the honor of gaining knowledge from my mother and my other aunt.

When I think about history, the image of dusty old history books and aging documents appear. Fortunately, I realize that these items are not all about history. We all have stories and memories from the past that can be told to others. So, to effectively translate the lived experiences of my family, I used oral history. Oral history involves interviewing a person or persons to gain an understanding of their lived experiences. By listening to these stories I understand that these are “threads that tie together bits of data” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pg.69) from my mother’s and aunt’s experiences. I am providing a voice for my family members who have a story to tell.

Storytelling is an accepted part of the human experience. We all communicate with meaning when we talk. Ritchie (2003) states that “Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved” (p. 19). Oral history allows me to connect with family members by engaging in conversations that will detail their experiences from the past. During this time of conversation I had moments of “realization, awareness, and ideally, education and

empowerment during the narrative process” (Portelli, 1991, p. 150). In a general sense, oral history provides a way for the person to tell their story of the past.

In the African American community stories have been passed down from generation to generation in an oral format. Their stories have never been told and during a time when the world is changing so rapidly it is important that their narratives are validated to reflect on what they have to say. When listening to their oral histories it provides insight into their personal lives with intriguing details; “they always cast new light on explored areas” of the story and “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (Portelli, 1998, p. 36). Capturing the stories of their journey by recording and highlighting the changes that took place in their lives with in-depth individual interviews and maintaining journals from which I will “articulate a relationship between one’s personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 122).

When the author Alex Haley was doing research for his book *Roots* he sought the help from an African griot. The griot is a professional oral historian. Historical researcher Jan Vansina explains that the African griot is traditionally trained in one of the following areas of the tribe’s oral history: 1) formulas, 2) names of people and places, 3) private and public poetry, 4) various types of stories, and 5) legal and other miscellaneous information (Thompson, 2000). The griots are a

valuable resource in retaining or being keepers of the tribe's information. African American women are seen as griots in their families.

### **Exemplary Oral History Research**

Exploring the exemplary research inspired me to make the connection with my mother and aunt in a number of ways. First, I was able to recapture a time in history that impacted their lives especially during segregation and integration. The most profound connection was reading about the women who attended Spelman College and the students who had the opportunity to give these women a voice through their stories, achievements and struggles.

In reading the book entitled, *Speaking History: Oral Histories of The American Past, 1865-Present*, Sue Armitage and Laurie Mercier (2009) discuss the importance of why we look to oral history to answer a number of questions. First, our need to recapture significant events that we feel has impacted our lives. In addition, we are trying to see how people lived their lives from day to day. Finally, oral history allows for that event to come back to life for us. Oral history allows us to tap into "the memories of individuals that contain a wealth of information, information that is usually not available in any other form" (Armitage & Mercier, 2009, p.3). By collecting oral history, I am providing the opportunity for my mother and aunt to tell their story which would not be heard.

*Oral Narrative Research with Black Women*, edited by Kim Marie Vaz (1997), is an exemplary research on the experiences of African American women. In the articles the researchers detail the importance of preparing questions before the

interview, establishing credibility, the location of the interview and the interview techniques. In collecting oral history, these suggestions are important for the interviewee to feel comfortable when telling their story. Diane Turner (1997) an Assistant Professor of African American Studies at the University of South Florida states there are three benefits of oral history. The first benefit is building a relationship between the past and present. Bridging the past and present allows you to honor those who have come before you and tell their stories which ordinarily would not be heard. The next benefit is documenting and recapturing history. Documenting and recapturing history allows the interviewer to document the interviewee's contribution through photographs, valuable documents, and any other important artifacts. Lastly, the personal benefit of oral history allows the interviewer to gain friendships and to inspire others to except the challenges associated with preserving the past.

Rhonda Y. Williams conducted several oral history projects and one of those projects she interviewed two African American women, Shirley Wise and Goldie Baker. These women were tenant activists within their housing development. Williams (2004) posits that African American women, accept the tradition and value the preserving of narratives that are orally passed from one generation to the next as a responsibility not only to themselves, but to their community. Kim Vaz further clarifies this particular cultural characteristic makes African American women's stories well suited for oral histories. Vaz (1997) states their histories focus

on the phenomenological and psychoanalytical aspects of their role and experiences in society.

Georgia W. Brown (1997) utilizes oral history by speaking with African American women in Louisiana who detailed their journey adapting to life during the eras of the Depression and segregation. While listening to their stories some of the women freely detailed the issues of racial discrimination at their jobs, but there were others who did not discuss freely the issues of certain topics that were being discussed. These women either felt ashamed or pain because of the nature of the topic.

*Their Memories Our Treasures: Conversations with African American Women of Wisdom*, provides an opportunity for readers to hear the stories from African American women who attended Spelman College. The project initiated and carried out by Spelman's Independent Scholars (SIS) under the direction of their mentor Dr. Gloria Wade Gayles.

The two year project allowed the SIS to experience and preserve long standing traditions in the African American culture: oral tradition. The main purpose of the project was to allow students to learn from "seasoned" African American women of the South. The students were given the opportunity to listen to the stories of African American women in their homes. During their conversations Floyd states "...the students learn about sustaining values that translate into family and community, faith and education, resistance and achievement" (Gayles, 2006, p. 1). Using the oral history methodology allowed these students to give these women

a voice through stories. Their stories will allow others to gain insight into their achievements and struggles. The narratives will embrace the voice of older African American women that will enable the future of African American leaders to emerge. Floyd states it is important to hear the stories of African American women from the past so the younger generation can celebrate the past in order to create a meaningful future.

Oral histories have been used in works by Ming Fang He (2003), Sonja Jefferson (2008), Wynnetta Scott-Simmons (2008) and Nettles (2001). All four women have told their stories in an effort to have their voices heard and enrich the lives of others (Ayers, 2008). He (2003) has created a written dialog between her and two other Chinese women who experienced life during the Cultural Revolution in China. He (2003) writes in detail of living between two worlds, never fully embracing the “river of the past” or the “river of the present.”

Sonya Jefferson (2008) uses a generational oral history and uses the voices of her mother, grandmother, and herself. The stories powerfully depict the stereotypical view of black women as ignorant as well as lacking power. The stories present a timeline and gives way to new visions for education in these oral histories (p.33).

Wynnetta Scott-Simmons (2008) draws analogies between the “jump rope community” and strength, power and victory within the segregated community. These narratives are given by Scott-Simmons and three friends attending private

school in Philadelphia. The value of their community upbringing helps them assimilate into an unfamiliar situation and new community successfully.

Nettles (2001) also effectively shares her experiences with a brain tumor in her medical memoir, *Crazy Visitations*. Through this oral history/autobiographical work she inspires those younger than her to triumph despite their medical impairments. During this trying period of her life she writes "...the tumor had undermined my motivation, confidence, and desire to be a teacher..." (p.110). Despite the obstacles Nettles has faced her story inspires those to continue to reach their full potential no matter what they maybe be facing in life.

That's why it is important that I tell my mother and aunt's stories so they can be heard. Their stories have never been told and during a time when the world is changing so rapidly it is important to reflect on what they have to say. I hope to capture the stories of their journey with in-depth individual interviews and maintaining journals from which I will "articulate a relationship between one's personal interests, sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p, 122). Using critical race theory and oral history methodology will allow me to make connections with the stories I will hear.

### **Making Meaning of Oral History**

To make sense of the information that I gathered and continue to gather on the topic I plan to analyze the information from my mother and my aunt regarding their experiences in and out of the classroom during the time periods of segregation

and integration. Information was gathered from casual conversation with my mother and the gathering of information from my mother and cousins to fill in the blanks of my Aunt's journey. Talking to my mother and hearing stories about my aunt helped me to gain a better understanding if culturally relevant pedagogy had an influence in their journey in the field of education during the time of segregation, integration, and post integration.

The interviews helped to me envision the various roles my mother and my aunt where thrust into during periods of uncertainty. Listening to their stories filled in the gaps so that I was able to make a personal connection. This personal connection has allowed to me understand my impact in the post integration era of education.

## **Their Voices, My Voice, Our Voices**

### **Participants**

The voices of this study included my mother, my aunt and myself. The participants were chosen based on their personal experiences that were endured in an educational system of segregation over a certain course of history. I chose my mother and aunt as participants of this study because they have been positive role models in my life as African American women. As Harris (2005) states, "The issue of validation of the autobiographical text is another common concern for Black women autobiography writers" (p.47). I turned to my family members to understand about the past in hopes to fill in the gaps of certain areas of history. In an age that is rapidly changing in the field of education I am intrigued to know if culturally relevant pedagogy influenced my mother and my aunt while growing up. Unfortunately, my aunt died alone, but there were numerous resources available for me to piece together my aunt's story.

### **Interviews**

The interviews were conducted at my childhood home so my mother felt comfortable and at ease while she was answering the questions. The interviews lasted from an hour to two hours. I was able to use open ended and specific questions. Ritchie (2003) asserts:

Use open-ended questions to allow interviewees to volunteer their own accounts, to speculate on matters, and to have enough time to include all of the materials they think relevant to the subject. Use more specific questions

to elicit factual information, often in response to something the interviewee has mentioned while answering open-ended questions (p. 92).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. I also kept a journal that allowed me to correspond to certain periods of my mother and aunt experiences. This allowed the researcher to review the information and once it was reviewed the researcher allowed the interviewee to verify for accuracy and clarity.

## CHAPTER 4

### TALKING RACE AND CULTURE ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

The following chapter is outlined into three sections. The sections are the early, middle and later years. Before hearing the stories of my mother and aunt an historical context is given. The sections will then detail stories of my mother and aunt's lives. I also intertwine my story as a reflection.

#### **The Early Years**

The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was not the first segregation case in the United States. The actual first case was in Boston, Massachusetts when the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts delivered its opinion in the *Sarah C. Roberts v. The City of Boston* April of 1850 (Schwarz, 2000). Sarah was an African American student who wanted to attend a white public school that was closer to her house. The school district denied her the right to attend but said she could attend the black school that was further away. Unfortunately, the court ruled in favor of the school district "equality before the law did not require identical treatment in all situations" (Schwarz, 2000, ¶6). The Chief Justice, Lemuel Shaw wrote that separate schools were necessary to meet the differing needs of Black and White students.

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was originally heard by the courts February 28, 1951 and the judges ruled against the plaintiff citing the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling that separate is an equal approach to schooling (Pitts, 1999). The case was argued twice before the Supreme Court in December of 1952 and 1953. A

decision was rendered May 17, 1954 and it was read by Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, which stated,

In the field of public education the doctrine 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold the plaintiffs and others similarly situated...deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

(High court outlaws school segregation, 1954 May 18, p. A1)

This was the beginning of a long struggle for African American children to attend schools that would be equal to their counter parts.

In response to the Supreme Court's decision in 1954 of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the powers that be in the state of Georgia refused to desegregate the schools. The Georgia General Assembly amended the state constitution and Governor Marvin Griffin interrupted the funds going to any public school that became integrated. Gov. Griffin was staunch segregationist who was adamant that schools would be integrated. He stated in a Times (1954) article "Social equality was impossible. The schools are not going to be mixed come hell or high water" ([www.times.com](http://www.times.com)).

Governor Ernest Vandiver was determined to maintain segregation in the state's public schools. Vandiver stated "...desegregation was the most overriding problem ever to confront the people of Georgia in our lifetime" (Henderson & Roberts, 1988, p.148). But that goal to maintain segregation was quickly put to a halt when a U.S. District Court judge ordered Atlanta's segregated public schools to

integrate immediately. Governor Vandiver refusing to adhere to the order given by the U.S. District Court judge told the head of The Georgia General Assembly's Committee to stall for time (Harmon, 1996). The district court issued the Atlanta Board of Education a year delay in implementing an integration plan (Myrick-Harris, 2007). Unfortunately, during this time African American teachers were instructed to leave the NAACP or they could lose their teaching licenses (Carson, Clayborne, et al., 2003). During the period of integration 30,000 African American teachers lost their jobs due to the Brown decision (Jackson, 2001).

**Vanessa:** Mom and Aunt Natalie what were your elementary school years like?

**Carolyn:** You must remember while growing up we attended all black schools from elementary through high school. My early years at Florence Street Elementary seem to be a blur for several reasons. While attending Florence I did not particularly care to go to school because I was teased relentlessly about the color of my hair and being skinny with long narrow feet. I had red hair and you could see me coming a mile away and it seemed as though my feet out grew my body. I remember once while I was in school there were some 3<sup>rd</sup> grade girls being very mean; it seemed as though their ultimate goal was to make my existence in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade miserable. I didn't realize that they were around the corner and I overheard them talking about my red hair. They were making up rhymes about my hair so they could chant them on the playground during recess. When I heard the chant I was

gripped with a sense of fear. I did not want my other classmates to join the chant about my red hair. The girls didn't see me because I went the opposite direction and headed for the restroom to cry. I kept asking myself why are they being so mean. What have I done to them? The fear of being teased was keeping me from going to school, but my mother was not having that. So in order to ensure I made it to school, my mother walked me to school every day. It was not until my 3rd grade year that I felt as though I belonged. My 3rd grade teacher was Mrs. Curly and she helped me to realize I was unique and no one could make me feel any different. She wanted me to embrace my uniqueness. For example, Mrs. Curly pointed out that there was no one else in the class who looked like me and that made me unique because of my red hair. I remember her saying "Your red hair sets you apart from the other girls in the class and why would you want to look like the other girls?" She told me to think about her question and I should have an answer for her in a week. So, for a week I noticed all of my class mates and it finally hit me that even though we were all Black we were different. I shared my findings with Mrs. Curly and she agreed.

*As I hear my mother's story I cannot help but think of my elementary years when my parents enrolled me in our neighborhood elementary school for fifth grade. My fifth grade year was very hard socially for me because I was a "chubby" fifth grader. I realize a*

*mother's love surpasses all else when she wants to ensure that her daughter fits in no matter what. Since I was "pleasingly plump" in her eyes; she would shop at Sears for my clothes. In order to ensure that I would wear the clothes, my mother would cut the tags out because they stated "Pretty Plus." Of course at this pre-teen stage that was something a girl didn't want to see. Never the less starting a new school was hard enough for me since I was chubby. I had fears of my classmates teasing me regarding my weight. My fifth grade teacher Mrs. Teasley was someone who I truly admire to this day. Even though I knew some of my fellow classmates, the rest were cruel in their own way and my greatest fear came to light - I was being teased about my weight. Mrs. Teasley came to my rescue when she used her "eagle eye" realizing I was being teased about my weight one day while the class was at recess. On this particular day she noticed I was not playing with the other girls in our class. Instead of embarrassing me and those particular girls, Mrs. Teasley told a story when we were settled inside from recess. I remember the story like it was yesterday. Mrs. Teasley stood in front of the class and in a heartfelt tone told the class a story stating that we were all family. She reminded everyone that she was the mother and we were her children. We would treat each other with respect in all situations. To ensure everyone understood what Mrs. Teasley was saying she told the class stories but there was a catch to the stories. She would call on certain students to either complete the story or give their opinion about what had taken place in the story. To my surprise she called on several of those girls who had mistreated me during recess. Once she had proven her point, my days in fifth grade were pleasant. I made friends despite the fact I was "pleasingly plump." I was only at the*

*neighborhood school for my fifth grade year, but I will always remember Mrs. Teasley for being a caring and compassionate teacher.*

**Carolyn:** As I look back over that year Mrs. Curly wanted all of her students to embrace their exceptionalities. I was not the only one who was feeling awkward about themselves. Mrs. Curly reminded us that appearances weren't everything it was what we had to offer to others that mattered the most. To make us feel as though we all belonged Mrs. Curly shared with us her experiences growing up as a child. She was the tallest child in all her classes and that was brutal on her self-esteem as a child. But she learned to accept the challenges of being the tallest one in her classes. Mrs. Curly said her coping skills came from her elementary teacher. She was told if people could not accept her for who she was then they were not meant to be your friends. From that day forward I realized that Mrs. Curly was just like me in her own way and hearing her story inspired me to embrace my uniqueness because no one else would ever be like me.

In my eyes as a young 8 year old girl Mrs. Curly represented the epitome of what a teacher should be. She was a teacher who dressed the part; not like the teachers you see today. She was well dressed never sloppy always put together. The entire year I never saw her dressed in anything inappropriate. I wanted to be like Mrs. Curly when I grew up not necessarily a teacher but the way she carried

herself. Even though Mrs. Curly was sweet she was also stern. You knew she had your best interest at hand when she was scolding you about something. It did not seem as though we were being disciplined. Mrs. Curly had great rapport with the parents. She always made sure to make a connection at least twice a year or sometimes more than that. You knew to be on your best behavior or to give your best in the classroom because of the relationship she had with the parents. I truly enjoyed my 3rd grade year and I owe it all to Mrs. Curly.

**Natalie:** Mrs. Curly truly was an angel. I did not start Florence Street Elementary until I was in third grade. My educational career began at St. Mary's Catholic School which was the only African American private school at this time in Savannah. I only attended St. Mary's for two years but a positive impact on the rest of my educational journey. I struggled in elementary school because the students teased me about the way I talked. I thought I spoke like everyone else, but I was painfully reminded I did not. My classmates told me I sounded as though I was white. One day Mrs. Curly overheard some of my classmates talking about how I talked. So, during spelling she had me lead the spelling list roll call. Normally, during this activity Mrs. Curly would say the word; the students would repeat then spell the word out loud. I proceeded to lead the spelling list roll call and once I

was done Mrs. Curly praised me for such a good job. She then reminded the students that she would utilize a student at least once a week and that I had set a great example of what she was looking for in the student leader for this activity. Mrs. Curly diffused a negative situation into a positive one. The students started to come to me asking for help on how to pronounce a word or would I help them to work on another assignment they were struggling with.

Yes, I remember Mrs. Curly having a positive relationship with the parents. She called my parents to let them know I was being teased but the situation was under control. My father asked if there was anything he and my mother could do at home and she replied “Encourage Natalie to continue to stay true to herself.” She insisted to my parents that children would be children. My parents had an idea of what was going on and they felt comfortable enough to know that Mrs. Curly could handle the situation. Even though at times I did not like the relationship Mrs. Curly had with my parents...I felt at times she told everything. I was a pistol at times so needless to say she was either sending a note home, calling, or paying a visit to my house to speak with my parents. As I got older I realized Mrs. Curly had my best interest at hand.

*As I look back over the years when I attended Montessori they were filled with excitement, compassion from the teachers, and diversity. My years at Montessori ended*

*when I turned seven. My mother was reassigned to another area of the school district and therefore she would not be able to pick me up in the afternoons. So my parents decided to send me to public school. Since my mother worked for the school district she was able to send me to a school she felt had some of the characteristics of my Montessori experience. My second grade teacher at the time was a former Montessori teacher before teaching in the public school arena. Instead of being thrown to the wolves Ms. Pace was able to ease my transition from private to public school without missing a beat. I can vividly remember her incorporating methods from Montessori into the 2nd grade curriculum. I remember one day that I was not being a very cooperative student. For some odd reason I wanted to do my "own thing" and not follow the rules. Ms. Pace rang the bell which was an indication we were ending centers. Well, in my mind I wanted to continue in centers and not go to whole group. Ms. Pace with that calm but reaffirming voice asked me to put those things away and come to the group. Instead of following directions I headed under the table and Ms. Pace could not get me from under the table. This exchange went on for some time and not once did Ms. Pace raise her voice. She did however leave to go and find my mother and once my mother arrived then I decided to come from under the table. The other teachers more than likely would not have been so patient or tolerant of my "tantrum." They were not as nurturing as Ms. Pace. It seemed as though they were just trying to make it from one day to the next. They were not positive when speaking to the children of color. I attended this particular school until the end of my fourth grade year. I hated to leave because despite the teachers I did enjoy the friendships that had developed.*

**Vanessa:** Mom and Aunt Natalie tell me about what it was like when you attended high school.

**Carolyn:** Before telling you how it was in high school I should mention Jr. High. While in Jr. High I was starting to grow into my feet as my mother would say. My feet were not as big and I had accepted my red hair. I realized it was nothing I could do about that. I was fortunate to have Jr. High teachers that cared about their students. So I had that nurturing factor during what some called the acquired years. Career choices were a hot topic for the Jr. High teachers. They wanted the students to be aware of the numerous opportunities waiting for us once we completed high school and college. Incorporated into the lessons were items that would enrich our cultural identity as well as academic success.

*My parents felt that the middle school concept would suit my needs better during my "pleasingly plump" stage. So I was headed to middle school over weight but at least I had the self-confidence needed to tackle the scary middle school years. Once again I was the "new kid on the block" but I was not nervous about making new friends. The transition to middle school was a little easier because of one my mother's closest friend from college was the art teacher. She was affectionately known as Aunt Peggy.*

*Beginning middle school seemed to be a challenge because once again I was considered an outsider. I did not go to elementary school with my fellow classmates and the majority of them either lived in the same neighborhoods or attended the same elementary*

*school. Being in middle school is not an easy transition for any pre-teen navigating the world of becoming a teenager especially one who is "pleasingly plump." On the first day of school I stopped by to see my Aunt Peggy and I remember her saying that the students and the teachers would like me no matter my size; they would focus on my personality if they were truly genuine. So I had those comforting words to cling to during the day. I had the good fortune to be on Team B. The teachers on this team made the transition from elementary to middle school a smooth one. There were 4 dynamic teachers who represented Team B with the four C's that I have realized that helped the students to flourish in middle school. The teachers were caring, considerate, cooperative, and confident. During my awkward years I was able to witness the teachers practice the four C's. As I think back over the years in middle school the teachers exhibited those characteristics and much more especially during a very turbulent time in my life.*

*During 8<sup>th</sup> grade my father passed away and a sense of fear swept over me realizing things would never be the same and my life would forever be changed. It seemed as though time stood still, but I was fortunate to have my middle school family to make it through this challenging period of my life. Since I had been on Team B from the beginning of middle school we were like a family. My teachers and classmates attended my father's funeral and seeing my school family helped me to begin the healing process of losing my father.*

*Going back to school allowed me to be with my extended family. The teachers assured me things would be alright and if I needed someone to talk to they were there to listen. I truly felt as though they cared for me. They were in consent contact with my mother at least once a week. The teachers from the beginning demonstrated confidence when there was a*

*lesson to be taught. For example, the math teacher Mr. Jones would send home a letter informing the parents what the lessons would be for the next two weeks and he would include famous African American mathematicians. When entering math class there was a famous African American mathematician written on the board and that person was usually related to the lesson being taught. Those who enjoyed math looked forward to learning about mathematicians who were African American; it allowed us to see as a young African American female/male we could do anything when we put our minds to it. Math was not my strong suit but I enjoyed math with Mr. Jones because he made sure all of his students understood the concepts by providing instructional strategies for the different learning styles. As I reminisce over my middle school years I can honestly say all of the teachers of Team B incorporated famous African Americans that were related to the subject being taught; ensured there was a home and school connection; and we were always encouraged to embrace our culture. Unfortunately, when I left middle school the teachers in high school seemed to be "cut from a different cloth."*

**Carolyn:** Well, at the time when your Aunt and I attended Beach High School it was the only African American High School in Savannah at the time. One particular class period during my senior year was very challenging. This particular day during math class Mr. Wallace was reviewing a specific skill and wanted the class to open our textbooks. Well, as we started to open the books a number of my classmates realized the skill Mr. Wallace was teaching was not in the book. A fellow classmate brought that to his attention. Mr. Wallace took a

deep breath and told the class that we were using outdated books. To make things worse, the books were basically hand me downs from the white school, Savannah High School. As Mr. Wallace proceeded to tell the class this information, you could see the look of disgust on his face as well as on the faces of my fellow classmates. As I listened to Mr. Wallace explain why we used these books, a sense of rage swept over me. I felt what we were going through as students was “material injustice.” Were we to be denied a proper education solely because of our skin color? Mr. Wallace left the classroom to try and find books that were sufficient for our math lesson.

While we were waiting for Mr. Wallace to return, my childhood friend Shirley and other students decided we were going to take our education into our own hands. We wanted to be empowered and the “material injustice” seemed to light the fire needed to push that thirst of knowledge to the forefront. We made a plan to venture to the public library at least twice a week. By going to the library, we would gain the knowledge of what was lacking in our textbooks in all subjects, not only mathematical. Our goal was to be well prepared for college, and it was obvious the “powers that be” did not have that plan for the African American students at Beach High.

Now Mr. Wallace was a stern but fair teacher who wanted the best for his students. The following week Mr. Wallace felt compelled to

continue the discussion of what happened in class the previous week. He talked about the injustice of teaching while having to use outdated books. He wanted us to go on to college and to right the wrongs that had been thrust upon us. One of the characteristics students admired most about Mr. Wallace was his ability to find the positive in a bad situation. He reminded all of us that even though we had outdated textbooks we still had the ability to achieve no matter what obstacles were ahead of us. So from that point on, Mr. Wallace helped us to realize how important education was for us to succeed in the future. Also, he pointed us in the right direction when going to the public library regarding what books would be most beneficial for us to read.

*After middle school I left my friends and they went to the feeder high school, but my mother wanted me to attend a high school that represented what she and my father had envisioned when I first started school. They wanted a multicultural setting. So, my mother sent me to North Fulton High School for the diversity she did not experience at Beach High School. North Fulton was located in an area of Atlanta that was once known as Buckhead. Once again I was an outsider but I was beginning to have a little more confidence since I was not "pleasingly plump" anymore. I stretched out my last year in middle school and I actually grew a couple of inches. I was happy not to be chubby starting high school.*

*Well, the high school was everything my mother imagined for me but it did not meet my expectations at all. To begin with, I hated that I had to catch the bus early in the morning for a 45 minute ride. Next, I felt somewhat alienated. It seemed as though everyone*

*was in their own cliques. Being in those cliques at times seemed to have you labeled by the teachers. For example, my freshman year the Senior African American students wanted to begin a social club that would represent the variety of cultures present at the school. Well, the powers that be did not think this would be a good idea. So, the social club never came about. There were rumblings from some of the teachers saying this was handled the wrong way. I thought to myself if they felt that way why didn't they do something. A few teachers did go to the principal but he insisted it would not be good for the school or students. All the students wanted to do was bring the different cultures together and celebrate their differences and commonalities.*

*I stayed at North Fulton until the end of the year and transferred to Frederick Douglass High School the following year. I truly enjoyed going to the "Big D." I am not sure if I can actually put it in words but it was something going to an all Black high school where there were different socio-economic backgrounds represented, but that didn't seem to matter to the teachers or the students. We were truly like a family even though a lot of the students had been friends since elementary school. The teachers were caring and the lessons were geared towards our culture/heritage.*

**Natalie:** I realized very quickly that the teachers at Beach High wanted the best for their students. I excelled in high school. I was on the debate team, in the orator club and I ran track. My teachers would remind me that I could and would go very far because of the strides I had made on the debate team and in the orator club. My debate coach would push me to tackle topics that were affecting me in the African

American community. I remember it was my junior year and we were preparing for a debate match against a high school in Buford, South Carolina. This was turning out to be a very big match for both high schools. The night before the match the debate team met at Mrs. Smith's house. She called an emergency meeting. It was not uncommon to go to your teacher's house or they were at yours when I was growing up. While at Mrs. Smith's house she informed us that we would not be competing tomorrow afternoon. We were all in shock. Of course the students and the parents had a lot of questions. Mrs. Smith stated that the principal along with the school board decided the match would not take place. The powers that be really did not give a reason why the match was called off. Mrs. Smith tried to plead with the principal but he insisted the match was would not take place. Enraged some of my fellow teammates decided they were going to talk to the principal themselves. My parents over heard the conversation and pulled me aside and warned me not to go with my teammates. Well, of course that advice went in one ear and out the other. The next morning we met with the principal and it was obvious he was not going to give us the information we wanted. He stated that things had changed and we needed to deal with it. I felt as though we had been defeated. We worked hard to prepare for the debate and we couldn't understand why the debate had been cancelled. Needless to

say the team was heartbroken and this was a challenge that we learned to deal with.

### **The Middle Years**

In order for the voices of African Americans to be heard regarding the injustices taking place in the educational arena the civil rights movement took a stand in the 1950's -1960's. According to Joel Spring, "this was a grassroots protest against school segregation and discriminatory educational policies" (2004, p. 376). When the Supreme Court rendered its decision in 1954 that segregated education was unconstitutional, civil rights leaders were concerned with the lack of the quick response by the educational institutions (Spring, 2004).

African American parents felt as though that the city of Atlanta was neglecting the schools their children attended. So, in 1950 a lawsuit was filed stating that the school system had violated the constitutional rights of their children who attended these schools (Tuck, 2001). The parents claimed a lack of funding was not available to offer their children an equal opportunity to learn. The Atlanta school district was violating the Fourteenth Amendment. The case was known as Aaron v. Cook (Aaron v. Cook Civil Case 3923). Even though the case was dismissed in 1956 it the first of its kind in a major southern city. In order to keep the African American community content, taxes were raised and the plan was to use the money to enhance the black public schools (Tuck, 2001).

The Atlanta Public School system was evaluated in 1955 by the Atlanta School study council. The study concluded that the school system was practicing

segregation in regards to their public schools. The school system was advised to improve their administrative team; extra money was needed to improve the curriculum, and to pay their teachers more money (Harmon, 1996). The student per pupil pay should be raised to an extra one hundred dollars. Sadly, the school district decided to allocate the money to white schools and begin closing the integrated schools.

The fight to desegregate the Atlanta Public School system was not going to be easy but ten African American parents felt it was necessary that this lawsuit be filed. So, on January 11, 1958 the ten parents along with the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall filed their lawsuit which was known as *Calhoun v. Latimer* (Tuck, 2001). The Atlanta School District lost the lawsuit June 16, 1959. The presiding Judge Frank Hooper stated the district was segregated and a plan of desegregation was needed. Judge Hooper expressed his disagreement of the defenses claim that black students and their parents chose to attend segregated schools, stating this was incorrect (Tuck, 2001).

Desegregation was the plan for all segregated learning institutions and that included colleges and universities. On January 6, 1961, a federal district court Judge W.A. Bootle ordered that Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter be admitted to the University of Georgia to attend classes. The school ended its 160 years of segregation.

The main purpose of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) was to educate black Americans, especially during segregation, which they have

done since 1865 to the present. The first HBCUs were Cheney University (1837) and Wilberforce University (Ohio, 1856). A vast number of HBCUs were founded after the Plessy v. Ferguson decision. According to Jacqueline Fleming, “the majority of black public colleges, then, evolved out of state desires to avoid admitting blacks to existing white institutions” (1984, p.5).

**Vanessa:** How did you decide you wanted to attend Spelman?

**Carolyn:** I knew early on I would be attending Spelman College. My mother had discussed Spelman College for at least two years. I remember her telling the family she worked for “Carolyn will be attending the Vassar of the South.” So I was headed to Spelman College the fall of 1954.

*Growing up in the Sims household I was always told I would go to college. Where I was going was a different story. I guess it was an unwritten rule that I would attend Spelman College just like my mother and my aunt. To my mother’s surprise I did not want to attend Spelman College. I felt I would not have a “true college experience.” The “true college experience” to me was living on campus and not in the same city as your parents. The year I graduated from high school it seemed as though everyone wanted to attend Spelman and I felt as though it would be high school all over again. As a result, I chose Georgia Southern College. When my mother shared the news with my Grandfather (Grandpa Tucker) he was not pleased at all. I did not understand why he was not supportive of my decision. Hence, I had several questions that needed to be answered. Seeing the disappointment in my face my mother told me why Grandpa Tucker did not share my joy.*

*As a child my Grandfather remembers that Georgia Southern was opened to keep Africans Americans away. In his eyes he thought I was attending a school that did not support my educational endeavors. He felt I should go where African Americans were welcomed; where I could see the various shades of African American people and that was to attend a Historical Black College or University (HBCU). My mother and I convinced him that things had changed at Georgia Southern and I would flourish academically while there.*

**Vanessa:** Aunt Natalie was your decision made the same way regarding Spelman?

**Natalie:** Basically, before I entered my senior year of high school my parents told me I would be following my sister Carolyn to Spelman.

**Vanessa:** Was it Grandma Tucker's idea or did you really want to go to Spelman?

**Carolyn:** Oh, I really wanted to go to Spelman. Even though I had attended an all-black high school I was excited about going to Spelman College an all-women's institution. But I was somewhat surprised when I began taking classes to see the majority of the professors on campus were white.

**Vanessa:** Whaaaaat? White? You mean to tell me there were white professors at a Historically Black College? I just assumed that most of the professors at HBCUs were black or at least someone of color, especially back in your day. Okay. Finish your story.

**Carolyn:** This was a shock since I was use to an all-black staff from high school. I was not sure what to expect from my professors. I realize now that I had a difficult time making the transition from an all-black teaching staff to a white staff.

**Vanessa:** What was that experience like for you?

**Carolyn:** My freshman year I had to take biology and of course the professor was white. Dr. Tucker was firm and not very approachable. I struggled in this class for a number of reasons. The first seemed as though when he was lecturing I felt he was using terminology that was over my head. Even though his syllabus stated that he had an open door policy that was not true. When I went to his office for my scheduled appointment this sense of fear gripped me. He asked me to sit down and I proceeded to explain what I was having a problem with. I was utterly shocked to hear his reply. He told me that I needed to realize I was not in high school anymore and he was not going to hold my hand for the semester. Then he proceeded to say maybe my former school did not prepare me for college.

**Vanessa:** Who did he think he was?

**Carolyn:** Unfortunately, he was the professor who held my grade in his hands. Needless to say, I left his office very disappointed. I quickly realized that I had to adapt to my situation. Dr. Tucker by was by no means Mr. Wallace. He did not care whether I succeeded or failed in his

biology class. I was merely a number or a pay check. From that moment on, I truly missed the supportive teachers at Beach High School. Those teachers really had the best intentions for my future. I truly loved my mother but, in her mind, she thought having all white teachers meant I was receiving a quality education.

**Vanessa:** Boy was she wrong.

**Carolyn:** Yes.

**Vanessa:** But, other than the teachers, did you enjoy your time at Spelman?

**Carolyn:** Oh, yes. It was overall a good experience. Attending a historically Black women's college was truly what I needed. I enjoyed Spelman because I was not being ridiculed by the boys in my classes. It was all women and that fostered a sense of self confidence. It was empowering to be in the majority. The white professor thing even got better. I realized that not all of the white professors were not like Dr. Tucker; there were some who actually cared about the students. I felt secure as the years passed because the school started to hire more professors who were black. Being taught by blacks who had their doctorate gave me a sense of empowerment. I knew they would help me to navigate the "real" world with an emphasis on sharpening my communication skills such as speaking and writing. They were sensitive to the possible barriers I would encounter, and they supplied the tools to overcome those obstacles.

**Vanessa:** What was your major in college?

**Carolyn:** My junior year I declared my major in the field of home economics with an emphasis on art and design. I enjoyed this particular semester because this was the beginning of more black professors being on campus. Freddie Henderson was a force to be reckoned with if you were a home economics major. But she was a good force. She was a clothing expert and very knowledgeable in her field.

*Although my mother chose her major I was raised in a family of educators who assumed I would follow in their footsteps. I made a promise to myself that I would never be in the educational arena. So, when I headed off to college my ambition was to major in anything besides education. The first two years away from home were the roughest for me because I could not narrow down my major. I would sit in the required core classes thinking of what truly inspired me. In the beginning I wanted to be a nurse, but I quickly realized biology was not my favorite subject. As I recall I dropped the class right before the official drop day so I would not be penalized. I realized I needed some help so I ventured to the career center and to my surprise I was able to choose my career path. Georgia Southern was offering a new major – restaurant and hotel management. Actually, there was a professor in the career center who steered me in the direction of the new major. He told me there were endless possibilities in this field. Finally, I was able to have peace of mind when I went home for the summer.*

**Vanessa:** What did you like about her?

**Carolyn:** While in class she talked about the places she had gone and encouraged us to do so once we were established in our careers. Mrs. Henderson always said you must make time for yourself among the hustle and bustle. She was dressed professionally for every class and told us the importance of appearance no matter the audience. Our lessons were geared toward at times what was going on with our culture or world events. She inspired many of us that we could do whatever we wanted. That inspiration came because she was the first black owned travel agency in Atlanta – Henderson Travel Agency.

**Vanessa:** Did you ever take any of those trips Mrs. Henderson suggested?

**Carolyn:** After graduation I went to New York to attend workshops at the PRATT Institute of Art for the summer. This was a true learning experience for me because I had never left the state of Georgia. The instructors, at that time, embraced your individuality and were very personable as well as caring. Being at the art institute for the summer allowed me to embrace my culture and the cultures of others. Our assignments would focus on what we saw taking place in the world through our eyes. For example, one of the projects dealt with the racial inequality I saw as a child. I made a collage of the different negative and positive signs I saw growing up.

*I officially began my classes the fall quarter of my junior year and I felt content with my decision of working in the hospitality industry. I was especially intrigued with the idea*

*of maybe working for the number one vacation destination in the world for my internship - Disney World. Disney World would interview for the fall internships and excitement seemed to run rampant among my fellow classmates. Interviews did take place and I was chosen to intern the fall semester of my Senior year.*

*The summer following the end of my junior year I prepared for my internship in Orlando, Florida. I was required to report to Disney World the month of August to attend orientation, to be fitted for my uniform and other logistics required by the company. Once the house keeping items were taken care of I reported to work at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa. The first day I stepped foot into the hotel I thought of my favorite TV show from the 80's - Hotel. The show was about the elegant fictitious St. Gregory Hotel in San Francisco. The main character Christine Francis was the General Manager and this is who I wanted to immitate once I completed my internship. I would manage The Grand Floridian and live the glamorous life like Christine Francis. To my surprise that was not reality; I had to pay my dues first by starting at the bottom of the totem pole. That was a reality I was not ready to deal with. During my internship I realized I did not like working long hours, my off days were in the middle of the week and the pay would be significantly lower starting out after I graduated from college. Once the internship was complete I began to second guess my decision of going in the hospitality industry again.*

**Vanessa:** Aunt Natalie was there a hesitation in attending Spelman?

**Natalie:** Yes, I really wanted to go to Morris Brown since I received a scholarship, but my parents had other plans for my collegiate career. My parents wanted the tradition to continue; they really wanted me

to attend Spelman. I had reservations about attending an all-girls college. I felt as though it would be constant competition among the girls. That type of competition I felt when I was in high school and I wanted that put in the past. One of the major reasons I tried to embrace Spelman was because of your mother, my sister Carolyn.

**Vanessa:** What did my mom tell you about Spelman?

**Natalie:** Carolyn was very honest, she did not try to sugar coat anything about the school. She did say it was an adjustment going from a caring environment to one that seemed to be survival of the fittest. Also, she stated some of the professors were cold towards the students; it seemed as though it did not matter to them if you were successful or not. But she also stated that there were advantages of attending a woman's college. Carolyn felt one major benefit was being with all women fostered a sense of empowerment and self-confidence.

**Vanessa:** So was that the type of learning environment you wanted or needed?

**Natalie:** I did want one that was empowering but I also knew I needed professors that embraced who I was as a person and who would be encouraging. Unfortunately, that was not the case for me.

**Vanessa:** What do you mean?

**Natalie:** My second semester at Spelman I was enrolled in a freshman English class from the infamous professor Dr. Sanders. Dr. Sanders who was white was known around campus for talking down to the students

and she felt we were not capable of writing coherent papers. Well, I was not the norm in her eyes.

**Vanessa:** What do you mean you were not the norm in her eyes?

**Natalie:** Dr. Sanders often questioned if I wrote my assignments or she would comment and say that I was articulate to be from Savannah. I found it disturbing that a college professor would criticize the way a student spoke. In between those negative comments she would ask where did I go to school in Savannah? In the beginning I tried to keep my head held high but when someone is constantly being negative it will take a toll on you.

**Vanessa:** Why am I not surprised by the professors' comments considering the time period.

**Natalie:** The tension between us came to a boiling point when she questioned me regarding a paper I had written for class. While in the office she accused me of not writing the paper. She stated it was no way I could write like that since I was a graduate of Beach High School. Furious, I told her I did write the paper on my own and I proceeded to show her other papers I had written. After reviewing the papers she stated it was obvious someone had written the papers for me. I left her office feeling as though the world was against me.

*Hearing this story opened the flood gates to my own memories of what I experienced as a freshman. It was spring quarter and I was taking an English class. In this particular*

*class I was struggling with the assignments. I was earning low grades on my written papers. So I decided to make an appointment with the professor to see exactly what I was doing wrong. The anxiety level was high as I was waiting to see the professor. Once inside the office I showed the professors my papers and he began to give me in the beginning what I thought was constructive criticism. The constructive criticism quickly turned into a negative meeting. The professor told me that my writing seemed to be "black." I was so taken aback and shocked that I did not know what to say in the beginning. When the initial shock wore off I did ask the professor to explain himself. He said when I write I write black. Well, my initial thought was yes I am black but how do you write black were the thoughts that ran through my head. He stated that my papers lacked a flow, but still how was that writing black I thought. When I asked how I correct the problem he suggested I get help from the writing center. I left his office in tears and headed straight for my dorm room to call my mother. While on the phone with my mother she suggested I come home that weekend, but she did encourage me to visit the writing center. She wanted to see what those students would say.*

*I scheduled an appointment at the writing center with all of my papers in tow. As the student volunteer looked over my papers she did not see anything major that stood out to her that was so terribly wrong. She made some suggestions and encouraged me to correct those while she was around. Once the corrections were made I went back to the Professor to ask if my corrections could be counted for extra credit. He said yes but he reminded me that I needed to work on how my voice sounded when I wrote. Of course that statement led me to believe I still wrote "black." That particular quarter I felt defeated the entire time. I assumed*

*whatever I wrote was never really good enough for him. It was as though he was trying to silence who I truly was. Needless to say I believe I earned a C out of that course and I was very thankful for the grade.*

**Vanessa:** Just listening to your story I feel your pain. So, what happened next?

**Natalie:** I got myself together and proceeded to file a complaint against Dr. Sanders. Unfortunately, the Dean of Instruction was new to his position and being African American he did not want to test the waters. Meaning he felt since Dr. Sanders had been a professor longer so she probably knew what she was talking about regardless of the situation. To make things worse the Dean of Instruction did not schedule an appointment to hear my side of the story. I felt as though weight of the world was on my shoulders and no one was in my corner to give me the support I needed.

**Vanessa:** What was your final grade?

**Natalie:** Unfortunately, Dr. Sanders refused to give me a grade that I rightfully deserved. So, she gave me an incomplete.

**Vanessa:** How or what were you feeling when you saw your grade?

**Natalie:** I felt like the Dean of Instruction who was African American did not go to bat for me at all during this ordeal. Dr. Sanders didn't like that a student was willing to challenge her and wasn't afraid to back down. Being depressed I could not complete my freshman year so I dropped out.

**Vanessa:** I know Grandpa & Grandma Tucker were not too pleased when you dropped out of school?

**Natalie:** My parents were furious with my decision. My father made it perfectly clear since it was my decision to drop out that I could not move back home.

**Vanessa:** So where did you go?

**Natalie:** I moved in with Carolyn and worked as a waitress until 1963.

**Vanessa:** That's a long time to be out of school?

**Natalie:** Yes, it is but I had to figure out the next step in my life. So in the interim I was a waitress at La Carousel in Atlanta. But things changed for me one evening. Dr. C. Miles Smith decided to grab my bottom and before I knew it the dinks that were on my tray were in his face! The head hostess told me I was not allowed to do that and did I not realize who I had thrown a drink on. I replied yes I knew who he was but he had no right to touch my body. Well, needless to say I was fired.

*I graduated June of 1992 with no doubt in my mind about the major I had chosen. I interviewed for my first job with the Marriot Corporation and got the job. I was gainfully employed for 6 months and miserable. The long hours were a given but my fellow co-workers were rude and out for blood. They would do anything to move up in corporate America and if that meant stepping on or over you then so be it. Working in this type of environment was very different since I interned at Walt Disney World where everyone had*

*a smile on their face daily and I did not see that while working at Marriot. The breaking point came when I was asked to work at one of the restaurants in the hotel. The restaurant was short handed and they needed someone to take the hostesses' place for the evening. I would not have been so upset if my manager had come to me earlier in the day and not an hour before my shift was over. When I inquired how long I would have to work my manger responded "Just do it or you will be looking for another job by the end of the week." Being young and feeling as though I was invisible I decided to quit my job. Of course once I quit my job I realized being a hot head does not solve problems – it just creates other problems.*

**Vanessa:** Were you upset that you were fired?

**Natalie:** I think I was upset more because the head hostess expected me to accept that type of behavior from a customer. So, I went home that evening complaining to my sister and brother-in-law Horace and with that nonchalant attitude of his; he looked up from the newspaper and said to me I needed to go back to so I would not be in that type of situation again.

**Vanessa:** Even though my dad did not talk a lot he spoke volumes of wisdom. Did you take his advice?

**Natalie:** Yes, I think that was what I needed to hear. The next morning I applied to Fort Valley State College and I was headed back to school in 1963.

**Vanessa:** Did you feel different going back to school after a long break?

**Natalie:** Once I walked on the campus I knew this was a better educational setting for me. The professors black and white were nourishing and very positive. I did not have to defend who I was as a person especially in the area of my writing or how I talked. One professor in particular encouraged me to major in English because of the powerful but heartfelt assignments I wrote for his class. I really wasn't sure if I wanted to that but he said I had a gift and I could use this to do other things after graduation. Professor Thomas always encouraged his students to write about what they were familiar with and I often wrote about our culture and what we were going through as a group of people. I was reluctant in the beginning but Professor Thomas could read the passion that was detailed in the papers.

**Vanessa:** What was your major at Fort Valley?

**Natalie:** I majored in Journalism, but I went back to school to get my teacher certification in high school and a concentration in the areas of English and History.

**Vanessa:** Mom and Aunt Natalie so did you both go straight into the teaching field?

**Carolyn:** It was the fall of 1959, and I did not have a job in my field. So, I decided to apply for a job with the Atlanta Public School System. By the grace of God, they offered me a job.

*Even though I tried to resist the calling to teach I knew deep inside that was my true passion. How did I finally realize my true calling? I remember the day very clearly in 1995 – I took the day off to visit a friend who taught Kindergarten in the Dekalb County School District. She asked if I would come and read to her students and I thought this would be the perfect opportunity for me to confirm if teaching were my true calling. So, that day I read to twenty five year olds and to my surprise it was the beginning of my career as an educator. From that day forward I would visit her class twice a month to read to the class or to complete projects. Out of the blue the Assistant Principal mentioned to me that I was here so often that I should apply to become a Kindergarten paraprofessional. I was intrigued to learn about the paraprofessional position so we had an in-depth conversation regarding the details of the job. When I left the school I sensed this was something that I wanted to do but I needed to weigh all of my options. One of the major obstacles was leaving a job that paid very well compared to being paid \$500 dollars every two weeks and that was after taxes! The next obstacle was going back to school to get my certification in education. I did not want to take the position until I was accepted into a certification program. The process of choosing a school began and applying for a job as a paraprofessional began.*

**Vanessa:** So that's how you got into education. But, wait a minute...you didn't have a teaching certificate.

**Carolyn:** You are right. Since I did not have a teaching certificate, they issued me a provisional certificate. The provisional certificate was good for a year. The following summer I enrolled in take the 2 or 3 required courses needed to obtain my renewable teaching certification. They

were in need of an art teacher, and I was assigned to Pitts Elementary School. Pitts was the largest school in the system at that time. The school was located down the street from a public housing community, and the school had over 1,000 students.

*I was accepted into the certification program at Kennesaw State University and the same day I was hired as a Kindergarten paraprofessional. It seemed as though things were looking up for me in my decision to change careers and of course my mother would occasionally remind me I should have been an educator all along. Over the next year and half I took the required courses at KSU and learned to leave on \$1,000 dollars a month. To help supplement my income, I did continue to work for the catering department during football season.*

*When I began taking the required courses, I could not help but think about my teachers through my educational journey. I wanted to know who influenced them to become an educator. Are there differences in the classroom from when they started teaching until now? How has the curriculum influenced their teaching styles? These were questions I felt needed to be answered in order for me to become an affective educator.*

**Carolyn:** When I began teaching at Pitts to my surprise I felt somewhat overwhelmed. I was a new teacher with no education background. But, I had art experience and that was why I was hired to teach art. Working with the students, I realized that they were lacking self-confidence needed to complete their art assignments. When I asked them to use their imagination, they doubted themselves and their

abilities. So to encourage my students, I worked with each student on a regular basis, either before or after school. My art lessons were based on what they saw in their community or what was taken place in the African American community.

*The journey of completing my courses was coming to an end and I would have to venture into the wonderful world of student teaching. Entering into this segment of my life meant leaving my job as a paraprofessional and I thought to myself there was no way I could live on no income at all. I refused to take out another student loan – I would be in debt forever if that was the route I choose. I needed to talk to someone. So I decided to talk to the Assistant Principal and she informed me that I did not have to resign to complete my student teaching. She gave me the name of someone in personal that would be very helpful in pointing me in the right direction. To my surprise being a paraprofessional had its advantages. I was able to apply for a teaching position as a Pre-Kindergarten teacher. The school district was willing to provide me with a provisional certificate. I was able to keep my job and student-teach for an entire year.*

*I was finally able to begin my career as a teacher, but to my surprise it was nothing what I had imagined. The first two years of my career were spent navigating through the overwhelming responsibilities as a teacher. The first five years of my career were spent in a very diverse school. Even though the school was diverse I felt as though I was not capable of meeting the educational needs of my students. My first school had 21 nationalities represented and I was simply in awe at what I was a part of. Soon that astonishment turned to fear. I was fearful because I did not know if my co-workers were meeting the challenges*

*we faced on a daily bases with our diverse student population. I was able to share my thoughts with our Instructional Lead Teacher and she reassured me not to focus on my fears but to concentrate on the work shop I would be attending that addresses the “Cultural Diversity” within the school. This workshop was an eye opener for me. I learned things that I did not learn while in school studying to be a teacher. The students I was teaching did have a voice and that was through their cultures, customs, and backgrounds. The workshop provided me with the tools to meet the educational goals of my students.*

**Vanessa:** Did it remind you of your childhood in an all-black elementary school?

**Carolyn:** Well, sort of. While teaching at Pitts Elementary I was reminded of the positive teachers that influenced me and I wanted to be a positive influence for students’ educational path. I treated each student with respect and even though I was not a major subject during open house I would make myself available to meet their parents. Meeting their parents allowed me to have a connection with their home life which I felt was important.

**Vanessa:** Did Pitts Elementary undergo integration?

**Carolyn:** Integration of the elementary schools began in 1969 and during this time I moved from Pitts Elementary to become a traveling art teacher. I was between two elementary schools that currently do not exist anymore. Haygood Elementary and Harnett Elementary, the schools were both located in areas that were all white. The students who were

black happened to be the lucky ones to integrate these particular schools were very strong children. Their heads were always held high. They knew that they were there for a purpose.

**Vanessa:** What do you mean “they knew they were there for a purpose?”

**Carolyn:** During this time, the white students and some of the faculty did not agree about the integration of these schools. But to ease the transition, the principals, who were white at both schools, tried to make the transition a positive. The staff and students were not very welcoming of the new details that would be taking place. Meaning they were unsure about having black students and teachers at their school. To make this endeavor, easier, the principals spoke in a positive manner that was uplifting about the situation at hand.

**Vanessa:** So, you never had any real problems during this period of integration?

**Carolyn:** My greatest fear came true while teaching my art class at HayGood Elementary. There was one particular student who had given me problems earlier in the year, and I thought the administration had taken care of the problem. While explaining the lesson for that day and handing out the materials, this one student did not like his materials. When I explained to him that was what I had and he could not get anything else, he looked me right in the eyes and called me the “N” word. He did not flinch at all.

*Listening to my mother's story I couldn't help but remember my first year teaching at my current school. I can remember it like it was yesterday. When I started teaching at my school in 2002 I was the only African American teacher. Being the only adult of color did not bother me. My fear was not being accepted by the parents or the students. To my surprise that fear came true during Meet and Greet. There were several parents who thought I was not competent to teach their children. They walked in the room, looked around, asked me a couple of questions, and then headed to see the principal. While meeting with the principal one parent specifically stated I did not know how to teach her child. When the principal asked the parent to explain she had no explanation. The principal insisted that I knew how to teach. He assured her and the other parents that he had all the confidence in the world in my abilities as a teacher. The parents left and a few went to the personnel department to complain but they had no grounds for wanting their children moved into another classroom. I was glad my principal took a stand against those parents. Who knew why they wanted their children moved to another room and that was because I was Black. Needless to say those particular students turned out to be in one my favorite classes. I hear from those students every year as well as their parents.*

**Vanessa:** That little.....!?! What did you do?

**Carolyn:** The other students in the room sat in awe trying to figure out what just happened. The student was sent to the office, and his father was called to have a conference. During the conference, the father apologized and stated that the boy had no right to be disrespectful even though I was a nigger teacher.

**Vanessa:** What the father called you a nigger too!?!

**Carolyn:** Yes he did. But, in that moment I realized that the student's prejudice was a learned behavior even though this was something I already suspected. This incident was a reality check. Even though the schools were moving towards integration, it was obvious the parents and students were not ready for what was a head.

**Vanessa:** Wow! I'm not sure I could have handled that situation as calmly or as gracefully as you did. Way to go mom. What was the next big milestone in your career?

**Carolyn:** During the late 70's, the board of education decided to eliminate art from certain schools. Unfortunately, I was one of those who had to be reassigned. I did not want to teach middle or high school; so I headed to the classroom as a 3rd grade teacher. Remembering my 3rd grade teacher Mrs. Curly, I truly wanted to make a difference in my students' lives. I continued to do some of the same things as Mrs. Curly while also adding my own touch in the classroom. I made sure our classroom was a loving and caring environment. My students knew that our class was a safe haven from what they saw in their community.

*The teachers who attended the workshop with me felt as though they had not provided their students with the essential tools to be an effective student. Some talked as though they were not willing to meet the educational needs of our students with diverse*

*backgrounds. It seemed as though they wanted to silence their voices and sadly they were accomplishing this goal. They felt as though this was something else being added to their plates and they were not willing to attempt to tweak a small part of their instruction for the students.*

*The first half of my career was spent in this particular school for at least 7 years. Then I left to teach in the school system I grew up in. I took a job at an elementary school that was located on the north east side of Atlanta. Those who were familiar with this area knew I was teaching in the "hood." This was truly a new experience for me. When I began teaching at the school I had high expectations for my kindergarten students. I made the conscious decision to apply what I had learned from my previous job. I wanted these students to have a voice in what seemed to be a hopeless situation. In order for their voices to be heard I incorporated the cultures of the students in practically everything we did in the classroom. I wanted them to know that they were important and they could accomplish anything once they put their minds to it.*

**Vanessa:** How did you seek to build community in your classroom?

**Carolyn:** In order to make sure I was reaching the masses, I had a strong connection with their parents. So, if I needed to make a home visit I would go. I felt this was needed so the parents realized I had their child's best interest at hand. When planning my lessons, I made sure things did center on their community and then I related it the standard I was to teach.

*Listening to my mother I realized that she was a strong influential instrument in how I create community in my classroom. I try to build community in my room by reminding my students that we are a family. I am responsible for them while they are away from home. I insist to the students that I will be there for them no matter what so I always encourage them to tell the truth even when they know it may hurt. Even though I do not make home visits like my mother or her teachers did in the past I am in constant contact with my parents rather the students are being bad or good. This type of communication builds that strong sense of communication.*

**Vanessa:** Once you earned your teacher certification did you get a teaching job?

**Natalie:** My first teaching job was at an all black high school during the 70's. I taught a sophomore English and history class to juniors. I enjoyed both classes. The first day of class I introduced myself and gave my students background information and they were surprised to learn I was from the South. I knew where this conversation was headed and when I asked why the students were surprised they stated I sounded as though I was white.

**Vanessa:** It's the 70's and the students were hung up on how you sounded?

**Natalie:** Yes they were and I had to let them know I did attend an all-black high school growing up. I reminded the students there was nothing wrong with actually speaking the King's English. This was my cue to introduce them to the world of public speaking. This class also seemed to have identity issues. They did not appreciate the fact that

they were black and beautiful. In order for them to realize their inner and outer beauty; the classroom was inundated with magazines that represented the African American race. Our first writing activity entailed the student's looking through the magazines and writing down what they say. Once they completed their notes then I asked them to write a paragraph on what it meant to see pictures that looked liked them and how did it make them feel. When the assignment was complete they were asked to read their paragraph in front of the class. Half of the class enjoyed the assignment. The students were able to understand that they were beautiful despite the things they saw on television.

*Listening to the story off my Aunt's students not feeling as though they were beautiful brings one memory to mind. The wonderful world of reading has certainly changed since I was in school. I can recall being in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and we were reading the story of the week. I can't remember the exact name of the story but my closest childhood friend Nicole strayed from the story. As she was looking through the reading basal she made a very astute obseroation...there were no stories or pictures of people who looked like us. She raised her hand and asked the teacher why weren't there stories or pictures of us in the book. Mrs. Cox did answer the question truthfully by saying that books that were used in schools were not a true reflection of what was seen in the classroom. That response did not satisfy Nicole at all. From that day forward she wrote and illustrated her own stories. She was determined to see someone who looked like her and the rest of our classmates. Nicole told Mrs. Cox that*

*she couldn't understand why we were not represented in any of our textbooks. We were always told growing up we were beautiful and that we all come in different shades and to be proud of who we were. It's nice to know things have changed since I was in school. There are all races represented in the textbooks that are utilized in schools today.*

**Vanessa:** The assignment sounded very therapeutic?

**Natalie:** Yes, it was. It reminded the students to embrace their heritage and there was nothing wrong with articulating your words when you spoke. From that day forward my lessons in class involved the African American culture and their environment.

### **The Later Years**

The 1980's and 1990's were decades of significant debate and reform in the educational arena. For example, educational reform came in two waves during the 80's and 90's (Bacharach, 1990 & Passow, 1989). The first wave dealt with educational initiatives that directly responded primarily to the issues of accountability and achievement (Dougherty, 1990, p.3). In order to increase academic achievement many states increased graduation requirements, implemented rigorous curriculum mandates, and standardized testing came to the fore front to measure student achievement. Despite the efforts to raise student achievement and the accountability factor more was needed to change in the evaluation procedures. Hence the second wave of reform was introduced that focused on the structure and processes of the schools. It allowed the schools to have more control along with the teachers and communities. The first and second wave

of reform had three themes in common: “achievement, assessment, and accountability” (Bacharach, 1990, p.8). Unfortunately, by the end of the 90’s the two reforms began to overlap.

Goals 2000: Educate America Act was signed into law by President Clinton in 1994 (Spring, 2002). The Act was to provide resources to states and communities that would ensure that all students would reach their full potential. Goals 2000 was recognized as the nation standards detailed to increase high school graduation requirements in the areas of math and science, mandated statewide testing programs, more Advanced Placement courses, technology use in the classroom, and new teacher evaluation programs (Spring, 2002).

By the year 2000 all American children would be able to meet the national goals set forth for U.S. education: (1) all children will start school ready to learn, (2) the high school graduation rate will increase by 90 percent, (3) American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 will demonstrate proficient competency in English, math, science, history, and geography, and schools will ensure all students are productive citizens, (4) U.S. students will be first in the world in math and science, (5) every adult American will be literate possess the skills needed to compete in a global economy, and (6) every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and offer an environment that is conducive to learning (Spring, 2002).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed by President Bush January 8, 2002. NCLB is a standard based educational reform that requires states to define assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades. In the state

of Georgia the high state testing grades are 3, 5, & 8<sup>th</sup> ([www.ed.gov/nclb](http://www.ed.gov/nclb)). NCLB requires schools who receive federal funding to administer the state wide standardized test. If schools do make the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) a series of steps are taken to improve the school.

NCLB requires 100% of students even those in special education are required to reach the same state standards in reading and math by 2014. Many have argued that having all students take the same test means that some teachers will eventually “teach the test” in order to increase test performance instead of teaching the entire curriculum for greater understanding (<http://documents.latimes.com>). When teachers practice the “teach the test” method it often misinterprets the educational outcomes that the standardized test is there to measure.

As with every new administration there comes a new educational reform. President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced on July 24, 2009 the \$500 million grant competition called the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge. The funds will be awarded to states that “create well-rounded strategies to improve or implement new early education programs” (Flowers, 2011). According to Secretary Duncan, “The children of America need a strong start to win the future and that lies with The Race to the Top. Which encourages states to develop bold and comprehensive plans for raising the quality of early learning programs across America” ([www2.ed.gov/news](http://www2.ed.gov/news))

The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge will be awarded to states that create comprehensive plans that will meet the following criteria worth 500 points. The plans should consist of: (1) Great teachers and leaders, (2) State success factors, (3) Standards and assessments, (4) General selection criteria, (5) Turning around low achieving schools, and (6) Data systems to support instruction ([www2.ed.gov](http://www2.ed.gov)). The state of Georgia was awarded \$400 million to invest in educational reforms. There are 26 school districts who have signed on to partner with the state's Race to the Top plan. School districts will develop their own programs that will enable them to improve standards and test scores (Badertscher & McWhirter, 2010). The success of test scores will be measured by the collection of data through uniformed tests.

**Vanessa:** So how did your career in teaching end?

**Carolyn:** I completed my career as a classroom teacher in a poverty stricken area of Atlanta, GA. As I look back over those years, I realize there is not one thing I would change. Being at that school allowed me to touch many lives; and, to this very day, I do see my former students. They pulled themselves out of the situations they were in and are leading very productive lives. Did I make a difference in all of their lives? That is a question I often ask myself. But, at least, I was able to reach the ones that needed me the most.

**Vanessa:** As a retired educator, how do you feel about education now?

**Carolyn:** I was an educator for 36 years, and I have enjoyed being retired. I do not miss waking up early anymore, but I do miss the smile on a child's face when the light bulb comes on after making the connection of a concept. When I was in the classroom, we were not so test driven as the schools are today. In the beginning, I thought No Child Left Behind would expose children to educational concepts that they were missing, but it does not seem to guarantee those results. Instead, we as a nation have made inroads into awarding money to the state for educational empowerment. However, No Child Left Behind seems to have teachers doing things that were not very common when I taught school.

**Vanessa:** What do you mean?

**Carolyn:** When I was a teacher I taught the concepts and my goal was to ensure the students would be productive citizens in the future. It seems as though educators today are concerned with educating our youth, but test scores seem to reign supreme over the initial concept. Lately, in the news there has been more about how teachers, along with administrators, have cheated in order to look good for their school districts and to make sure they have meet the requirements set by No Child Left Behind. The times have certainly changed since I was in the classroom. It seems as though educators are so test-driven that they have forgotten how to care for the students or make the connections

with the family that are genuine. Today they only seem concerned with passing the test. I am not sure what the answer is but something needs to be done before the nations drop-out rate continues to rise.

*It seems as though I have the same mind frame as my mother when it comes to educating our youth of tomorrow. When I began my career as a teacher I wanted to make sure my students were well rounded. I was focused on making sure my students did meet the required standards. But to my dismay the joy of teaching quickly went away when the wonderful world of education became test driven. No Child Left Behind has become the nemesis for school districts who want to prove that even though they service inner city students that they are able to come out on top. Being on top has caused some to stoop to levels of cheating that have rocked many school districts across the nation. Unfortunately, the Atlanta Public School System fell prey to wanting to be on top. This has led to one of the nation's largest cheating scandal in the educational arena. It's unfortunate that 178 educators felt pressure to meet testing targets. The cheating behavior seemed to be reinforced by the district along with the culture of fear and intimidation directed at educators who were whistle blowers. I feel standardized tests should be used as a diagnostic tool and not as a means to be used as a tool to receive bonuses.*

**Vanessa:** So what are you doing now?

**Carolyn:** To continue to make a positive contribution to our students, I volunteer or tutor when I can at least four times a month. I try to go back to the school where I retired or other schools that have a student population where positive role models are needed. When I visit the

schools and I am working with the students, I first let them know that I do care about them as a person. Once those barriers were down, I emphasized the importance of studying and I made the connection of who they are. Some students would tell me it was not cool to be smart in their community, and I quickly reminded them it was okay to be an individual. Their community would accept them for who they were. I look forward to those times I could spend with the students because in the end it was all worth it.

**Vanessa:** What did you decide to do next?

**Natalie:** As time went on I decided I wanted to go back to school and earn a Master's in African American Studies and that is what I did. I utilized my Master's in the history classes I taught.

**Vanessa:** Did your Master's in African American Studies come in handy?

**Natalie:** Yes it did. Later I was transferred to a high school that was becoming very diverse. The students that entered my classroom enjoyed the class because I allowed my students to express themselves through their assignments. Whatever current event that was taking place the students related that event to how it could affect them as a student. I videotaped a variety of specials that discussed all cultures and issues. My students enjoyed the lessons I taught because I did not utilize the text book. I did not just focus on one culture when I taught; I wanted

the students to realize that we are all represented on this earth and we should get along with one another no matter who we are.

**Vanessa:** Did you retire from that school?

**Natalie:** Yes I did retire from that school, but it was not on a positive note.

**Vanessa:** What happened?

**Natalie:** I left the field of education in my opinion on a sour note. A parent did not agree with how I was teaching their child and went to the principal to complain. The principal listened to the parent complain about how I was teaching history to the students. The example she told the principal was about the Native Americans and how they were mistreated by white Americans. The principal called me to the office and asked me to explain my side of the story. I did admit that the Native Americans had been mistreated by white Americans.

**Vanessa:** I do not understand why she complained to the principal. You were telling the truth.

**Natalie:** She felt I was filling the students' heads with lies. The discussion went on for more than hour and when I would not change my lesson she asked for her child to be removed from my class and placed in another history class. Later that day the principal asked me back to the office and he wanted to know why I didn't I just change the lesson and move on to something else.

**Vanessa:** The principal wanted you to change what and how you were teaching. This is so true in many situations today.

**Natalie:** I told him it was the principal of the matter. He felt I was not teaching what needed to be taught; he wanted me to use the book and let the students act as robots. I could not continue to stay on as a history teacher. I felt as though he wanted me to teach what the parents wanted and not what the students needed. When my students would leave my class they all stated they looked at different cultures in a positive way and not negative. They begin to think of things on a global scale.

**Vanessa:** So, that's when you left the field of education?

**Natalie:** Yes, I retired at the end of the year. I felt the principal was targeting teachers who thought out of the box and he wanted them to retire. He wanted teachers that he and the parents could control.

**Vanessa:** What are your thoughts regarding education today?

**Natalie:** Teachers today want to do what is best for their students but it seems as though their hands are tied to meeting test score requirements. They have lost the true focus of education and that is to educate a student to be productive citizens once they complete their educational journey. I tried to accomplish this goal while teaching. I wanted my students to embrace their surroundings with an open mind.

Unfortunately, the principal and the school district wanted to silence me.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the oral history of the lives of my mother and aunt as black educators who taught during segregation and desegregation. It presented an in-depth analysis of their experiences as well as practices during segregation, integration, and post integration. Their oral history accounts revealed that teachers fostered a sense of caring in and out of the classroom, there were positive-teacher relationships, and the lessons taught were relevant to the students' daily lives. Also, oral histories gave a voice to the unheard and the paradox of feeling cared for while learning in a segregated classroom versus learning in a desegregated classroom.

Chapter 5 will provide a more in-depth discussion about the themes that emerged from the oral histories presented in this chapter. A detailed analysis and conclusion will be provided about the black educators who taught during segregation, integration, and post integration.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE INQUIRY

In this chapter, I summarize the findings which emerged from my dissertation: (1) Oral histories allow for the silent voices of black teachers to be heard. (2) Listening to and telling the stories of my mother, my aunt, and myself was an empowering and moving experience. (3) Fostering a sense of caring in and out of the classroom enhances positive teacher-student relationships and promotes active learning. (4) The paradox of feeling cared for and learning in segregated schools versus being schooled without learning in the absence of caring in today's desegregated schools engenders a demand for a curriculum of caring and justice. (5) There is a need for developing a culturally relevant pedagogy that engender "active learners, engaging learning content that is relevant to student's daily lives, inquiry oriented learning strategies, culturally inspiring learning environment, culturally responsive policy making, creative learning evaluation and assessment, caring and challenging teachers" (He et al, 2010, p. 100) where learners, teachers, educators, parents, community workers, administrators, and policy makers work together in to inspire all learners to reach their highest potential.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lives of my mother and aunt as black educators, who taught during segregation and desegregation. In keeping with the dialogue format of the previous chapter, I have decided to present these findings in the form of a conversation between three educators – my mother, my aunt, and myself. The idea of the dialogue format was first demonstrated in the

dissertation of Valerie Moss (2011). My mother, Carolyn T. Sims, began her teaching career in 1959 on a provisional certificate in the Atlanta Public School System during a time when public schools were under a court order to integrate the schools. My aunt, Natalie T. Woods, taught for 30 years and if given the opportunity would have taught longer. Both are important women in my life and their stories have been intertwined with my story as a student and teacher.

### **Oral History**

**Vanessa:** When deciding on my dissertation topic I struggled for a while and then I realized I wanted to learn more about you and Aunt Natalie as African American educators who taught during segregation and integration. According to Janesick (2007), "the recorded reminiscences of a person who has firsthand knowledge of any number of experiences" (p.111); so therefore I needed to hear your stories to have a better understanding of your experiences. I wanted your stories to be told and heard. What it was truly like to be a student and a teacher during a part of history where some would have us to forget about.

**Carolyn:** Yes, talking to you allowed for my voice to finally be heard. It was nice to share those memories with you.

**Vanessa:** While listening to your stories I was shocked to learn that the books that were issued to the students happened to be "hand me downs" from the white high school. That was truly an injustice. There is a benefit of knowing this type of information. I assumed since you were

in school all of your textbooks were new. Oral history allows for others to experience what you went through during this time.

**Natalie:** Telling our stories has allowed us to focus on the experiences over time so you are able to see how we have developed as persons.  
(Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Braxton, 1989).

**Vanessa:** One benefit of telling your story (oral history) it focuses on the experiences of you and Aunt Natalie over time to capture how you both evolved during that time period (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

**Carolyn:** For so long African American women's stories have not been told because of a number of reasons. We have been a group that has been marginalized and by telling our stories my hope is we gain acceptance among other groups of people.

**Natalie:** Hopefully, by telling our stories as African American women we will be viewed as part of a culture and others will learn from our experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Baldwin, 2005).

**Vanessa:** There are many benefits to telling your stories and I hope that we were able to capture the true essence of your lived experiences for the reader. My hope is that your stories will be used as a tool to create "Memories shared in oral histories create a picture of the narrator's life: the culture, food, eccentricities, opinions, thoughts, idiosyncrasies, joys, sorrows, passions-the rich substance that gives color and texture to this individual life" (Cavett, 2005, p. xi). So, by

hearing your voices I am able to capture the stories that have been lost due to the unimportance seen by the majority of the population.

### **Emotional Findings**

**Vanessa:** When I began this inquiry I had hopes of understanding why the voices of African American educators have not been heard. Once I started the interviews I did not realize how emotional I would become hearing your stories and those of Aunt Natalie.

**Carolyn:** Talking to you did bring up memories I thought were suppressed, but apparently I was wrong. Telling my story gave me the opportunity to be myself, expressing things about our culture, and to know our voices are actually being heard (Johnson, 1987).

**Natalie:** While telling my story I could not help but think of the African American women who came before us. Dorothy Height was the first person to come to mind. She was an African American woman who was a pillar in the 60's during the black civil rights movement. Unfortunately, she was not given the opportunity to speak at the crowd during the March on Washington. During that time women were not taken serious (Height, 2003). They had plenty to say but it was apparent that being an African American woman caused you not to be taken serious at all.

**Vanessa:** Listening to your stories at times I felt as though the emotions were very raw. Especially when you told your story of the professor at

Spelman who accused you of cheating...saying you did not write that particular essay. I felt as though I was in the classroom with you that day.

**Natalie:** They say over time you need to let things go, but at times I still can feel the anger of being accused of something that wasn't true. Especially since I really did not have an opportunity to tell my side of the story; telling that story has allowed me to heal.

**Carolyn:** There are times when I was telling you my story I could not help but think of other African American women who have been denied the right to be heard. Their stories may never be told.

**Vanessa:** When I think of America's history I realize that we have contributed a lot to shape this nation but we are still underappreciated and devalued (Jones & Shorten-Gooden, 2003). That is why I felt so compelled to tell your stories to show you are valued and appreciated.

**Carolyn:** As I discussed my experience at Spelman I thought of your Aunt Sadie and the struggles she encountered while working as a professor and an administrator. Being a woman in the academic field during the 60's even at an HBCU was very hard. Those in the academia field have not welcomed the voices of African American women (Pollard & Welch, 2006).

**Natalie:** These stories have allowed me to reflect on my years as a teacher and how I was silenced when I wanted to speak out against a policy or procedure that was not in the best interest of the student.

**Vanessa:** I can't help but reflect on my own stories listening to you and mom. When I began my teaching career in my current school system I felt the powers to be did not want to hear my story. Even though they were trying to bring more minorities in the school system; the African American women truly had no voice.

**Carolyn:** Telling my story helps me to know that someone will be able to gain a better understanding of how things were during segregation and integration.

**Vanessa:** For me telling my story was very eye opening. There were certain parts of my life I have not shared with my closest friends especially pertaining to my father's death. I do realize I have opened myself up to be critique or exposed to others (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). Listening to your stories allowed me into your world during segregation as well as a turbulent integration period. If your stories are ignored how I'm I to learn from the past? Though it was not easy at times to hear the stories it did make me stop and think how some things have not changed at all pertaining to our voices being heard. We are still silenced and our voices need to be heard. I am reminded of what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) said "Black daughters [who]

identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives” (p. 102). I realize that your stories have inspired me to reach my highest potential in the classroom for all children but especially African American children.

### **Caring**

**Vanessa:** Mom it seems as though you had the same experience in school with teachers who cared like bell hooks (1994):

They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers...We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act...black children were deemed exceptional, gifted, and were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. I loved being a student. I loved learning (p.2).

**Carolyn:** Yes, that is what I experienced when I was in school. My school career was filled with teachers who wanted to cultivate our minds. They felt we were the future; and, in order to succeed, we had to believe in ourselves and our race. We were encouraged to inquire and be active learners not only in the classroom but in the world as well.

**Vanessa:** Aunt Natalie, do you think that the teachers exhibited caring through their “direct attention...with meeting the psychological, sociological, and academic needs” of their students (Walker, 1993, p.65)?

**Natalie:** The teachers during this time period exhibited signs of caring by their positive attitudes, high expectations of our scholarly capabilities, they took into account our value as a human and performance responsibilities. This was a combination that allowed us to thrive in a segregated school setting. (Gay, 2000) The teaching and instruction that we were given was relevant to our daily lives.

**Vanessa:** This sounds very similar to what the students of Caswell County Training School (CCTS) in North Carolina stated about their teachers who cared. It resulted in them reaching “their highest potential” (Siddle-Walker, 1996, p.169).

The task of teaching as the Caswell teachers saw it was to make sure that other Negro children had opportunities similar to those they had had...Teaching was more than the imparting of subject matter, it was the task of molding children to be successful. Theirs was a job of collective racial uplift (Siddle-Walker, 1996, p.149).

Also, in a study conducted by Morris and Morris (2005), the demonstration of care was a major component identified by African American teachers. These teachers who taught in segregated

classrooms, exhibited behaviors that fostered caring in the classroom and outside of the classroom.

**Carolyn:** I remember my teachers showed they cared by forming positive relationships with us in and outside the classroom. I remember my 4<sup>th</sup> grade year Mrs. Curly attended Easter service to hear me recite my Easter speech. When I stood up to say my speech, I was nervous. But when I looked into the congregation and saw Mrs. Curly sitting by my parents, I felt a sense of relief. Seeing her at church made me feel as though Mrs. Curly really did care about me.

**Natalie:** When the teachers showed that they genuinely cared for us that contributed to our academic success (Siddle-Walker, 1996 & Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Vanessa:** Some scholars note that caring teachers are distinguished by their high performance expectations, advocacy, and empowerment of students as well as by their use of pedagogical practices that facilitate success (Gay, 2000).

**Carolyn:** Working in an integrated school I saw at times how the other teachers talked to our students you could see the lack of caring and compassion in their voices. It was as though they were mad because the schools were under a court order to integrate. I could see the African American children losing that zest to learn.

**Vanessa:** I am convinced that caring is the first battle to conquer if African American students are to truly thrive in the educational arena. Gay (2000) states that “caring is a foundational pillar of effective teaching and learning, the lack of it produces inequities in educational opportunities and achievement outcomes for ethnically different children” (p.62).

**Natalie:** Once a teacher has shown to the students that they care it allows for trusting relationships to develop and in turn it allowed us to embrace the love of learning (Sanacore, 2004).

**Vanessa:** Caring was also viewed by African American students when the parents and teachers both took a united front in their expectations of the students. For instance, one student from the CCTS described the relationship as: “My mommy and daddy are pushing me and my teachers are pushing me...oh well, I got to do good” (Siddle-Walker, 1996, p. 81).

### Paradox of Segregation vs. Desegregation

- Vanessa:** Listening to the stories of when you were in school seems as though the teachers during segregation truly cared and wanted the students to learn.
- Carolyn:** Yes, when I was in elementary school all of my teachers were of course African American women but their commitment was to nurture intellect so we could become the future scholars of the world (hooks, 1994, 1996).
- Natalie:** Also, I feel the teachers during segregation showed that they cared by knowing our parents, our family background, our home church, and even the family economic status (hooks, 1994). This sense of knowing every facet of our lives was very enriching for us as students. It told us the teachers truly care about us a person and our families.
- Vanessa:** I believe that knowing the student beyond the classroom truly makes a difference when it comes to educating the student. When educators show that they care about the student beyond the classroom it does send a powerful message. The message that is being sent is I care about you as a person and I want you to meet your educational goals. Has there been a disconnect since desegregation in education pertaining to caring and learning in the educational arena?
- Carolyn:** Unfortunately, things changed when the schools were desegregated. Many of the white teachers never taught African American students

until desegregation and were prejudiced against them and school life for them was very difficult (Haskins, 1998 & Fairclough, 2007).

**Natalie:** During integration it was as though the white teachers didn't put forth the effort to modify their teaching methods to teach the African American students. They were not involving the students in the lesson but giving them a lecture (Fairclough, 2007).

**Vanessa:** What were some of the changes you saw during integration?

**Carolyn:** First, I saw parental involvement drop off drastically compared to parental involvement during segregation when I was growing up as I child. We were eager to absorb the knowledge of our teachers, but the students during segregation lacked the motivation to learn (Fairclough, 2007).

**Natalie:** As time went on things did seem to get better for African American students, but things started to decline when our students began to have more office referrals than white students, received lower grades, and passed fewer classes (Morris & Morris, 2005; Saddler, 2005; Lewis, 2003).

**Vanessa:** What you and mom have said is aligned with what James Hanely (1978, as cited in Irvine, 1990) stated about school desegregation:

With more and more black educators leaving the classroom because of demotion, reassignment, or firing, black students will more than likely receive most if not all of their instruction

from teachers who are not familiar with their culture patterns as they should be; or as sympathetic in helping them obtain their educational objectives; or worse, who are actually prejudiced against their race (p.36).

Do you think we should go back to segregated education? At least then our kids might perform because they would have educators who truly believed in and cared for them? There seems to be a paradox here. African Americans wanted equality in the educational process and thought that would occur with desegregation, but it seems that our students are fairing far worse in this integrated system of education. What do you think?

**Carolyn:** My father always stated that integration was the worst thing that happened for the African American race. He felt that African American children would be treated unfairly by the white teachers; they would face dislike for being in the schools with white students and racism in the classroom. So, the students felt alienation, dissension, and separation and this was not experienced when the schools were segregated (Powell, 1973).

**Natalie:** When the schools were integrated the bond of love, caring, and support for African American students was broken and this was something they were use to experiencing during segregation (hooks, 1994; 1996).

**Vanessa:** Since I teach in a predominately white school district I often feel as though the African American students' needs are not being met in that same since you have mentioned Aunt Natalie. It reminds me of what bell hooks (1994) experienced during segregation:

Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived or behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require political commitment. Now we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school (p.3).

bell hooks represents what I feel is taking place in the classroom today. Our children seem to be to be losing in the classroom when the teacher is not willing to embrace what makes them unique in terms of their culture.

**Carolyn:** Even though we have come a long way within the educational arena, I often wonder is desegregation working for us today.

**Natalie:** I often ask myself the same question. Unfortunately, no one wants to have an honest conversation concerning desegregation. But we are willing to segregate the schools once again. It seems as though there is

a resurgence in segregated schools. Segregation in today's society is seen as magnet programs, charter schools, or at one time M to M programs (Caldas & Bankston, 2007; Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007). These types of initiatives are very popular. The M to M program was popular when your brother Kyle attended an elementary school out of his district.

**Vanessa:** Unfortunately, segregation has crept back in the schools in other ways. Public schools depend on local property taxes, state funds, and federal taxes and this affects inner city schools greatly. Kozol (1991) believes that "the property tax is the decisive force...shaping inequality" (p. 54). Without proper funding especially in low economic African American communities they are unable to provide the students with the appropriate materials to be successful in school.

**Carolyn:** It seems as though we are going backwards instead of forward. To think we still have inner city schools that have inadequate buildings, are overcrowded, behind in the latest technology, libraries are not up to date, and the most damaging not enough books for the student (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). That is a constant reminder of my educational journey.

**Natalie:** To think there were African Americans who had high hopes that integration would improve the educational outcomes for the students (Zirkel, 2004).

**Vanessa:** Hopefully, we can move in the direction of quality education for our children regardless of the situation. We have been a race in search of stability despite the denial of education and the separate and unequal educational conditions that we have faced (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

### **Lessons of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

**Vanessa:** When I first began my teaching career I had the opportunity to teach at a very diverse school. Unfortunately, I did not feel equipped to teach my students. Mommy, we talked nightly in regards to my fears. But it was something you said that inspired me to make a difference in their lives; do you remember what you said?

**Carolyn:** Yes, I told you it was your responsibility to pay attention to their culture while tweaking the curriculum to meet their needs, as well as what you taught. What you teach should be relevant to their lives. (Howard, 1999)

**Natalie:** My main goal when I taught was to emphasize that all my students were entitled to educational equality and they were all exceptional regardless of their race, ethnic groups or social class (Jones, 2004).

**Vanessa:** Aunt Natalie, as I continue my journey as a teacher I want to enable my students to be empowered where they are capable of examining the educational content that is presented to them whether it is me or another educator. They should be able to question is this creating a

democratic or multicultural society (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Howard, 2003).

**Carolyn:** I remember when I was in school the teachers made sure we were ready intellectually and emotionally to tackle the world when we graduated. So, it was my duty to do the same thing when I taught especially during integration. It was important to me and I believe for the students' success to engage students by using pedagogy that was relevant to the students. This task was accomplished by embracing their culture.

**Vanessa:** Listening to you and Aunt Natalie on what your goals were when you taught truly sounds like culturally relevant pedagogy. Even though there was no label when you were in school and the earlier years of your career; culturally relevant pedagogy is an endeavor to connect the students' home culture and school culture. Unfortunately, there are not many educators trying to embrace this endeavor.

**Carolyn:** Yes, I felt it was my duty to encourage the students to embrace their culture during a time where there was so much negativity surrounding them (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard, 2003; Irvine, 2001).

**Natalie:** In order to reach my students when I taught in the inner city, I wanted my students to become critical thinkers in regards to the connections of their educational foundations and the community (Lane, 2006).

- Vanessa:** I believe African American teachers during segregation were successful while teaching during this time period because they were aware of the students' strengths and culture.
- Carolyn:** Yes, I would agree. Even though there was no term for what we were doing we made sure our lessons were pertinent and that they embodied the cultures of our students (Ladson-Billings, 1992).
- Vanessa:** Teaching lessons that are relevant create learning structures that are grounded in familiar culture context to the students. This allows the student to potentially have the educational realm enhanced (Howard, 1999). When culturally relevant instructional strategies are combined with home and community this allows for effective classroom practices to take place.
- Natalie:** I have always thought in order for teachers to be effective in a diverse classroom setting they should embrace the curriculum and pedagogy that fosters cultural multiplicity (Irvine, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000).
- Vanessa:** Ladson-Billings (1994) has proposed that teachers use culturally relevant instruction to teach African American children to expand their academic success in school.
- Carolyn:** When I stopped teaching art and I taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; my lessons focused on someone in the community who was famous and the students could relate too. For instance, one year I invited Evander

Holyfield to come and speak to the 3<sup>rd</sup> classes. This made a profound impact on the students for several reasons. The students were able to see that he had made something of himself and was able to get out of the “ghetto.” When he left my students were on cloud nine ready to write their stories and act out his life. That year my students thought I was the best teacher in the world and they were willing to go beyond when I asked them to do something. My students knew I cared for them. The students were inspired by a man of their own culture. It reminded me of my math teacher who inspired us by posting the pictures of black mathematicians on our classroom walls.

**Vanessa:** In order for academic success to be achieved in the diverse classroom teachers should be willing to discover their inner cultural responsiveness by “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 383).

**Carolyn:** Since you work in a predominately white school, have you noticed any of your colleagues willing to make that connection with your students?

**Vanessa:** It seems as though it is a work in progress. My teammates are willing to help students to “maintain their culturally integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.476). Some are actual allowing the African American and Latino students to assume academic leadership roles this helps to affirm their cultural values

and personal styles. Normally these types of roles were predominately held by the white students. This allows other students to see the African American and Latino students as themselves whether it be their language, dress or any other characteristic that represents them and they can be seen in the academic area as cool. (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

**Natalie:** What I feel is valuable tool in the classroom is how teachers interact with their students in the classroom. There were times when I felt to make a meaningful connection I would allow my students to become the teacher. Once the students were the teacher for a day we discussed their successes and failures. I also shared my successes and failures as a teacher. I could also use these types of role exchanges as an informal assessment, an alternative to pencil and paper testing.

**Carolyn:** While working in the inner city my students who were 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders at the time, were very aware of the differences of their school compared to other surrounding schools. I wanted the students to “recognize, understand, and critique current social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.476). To do this the students wrote letters to the Superintendent listing what was wrong with their school compared to the other schools. Some of the complaints were the electrical system needed to be renovated, some of the books were old and outdated, and the building was not at its best. Those were a few

of the things some of the students wrote to the Superintendent. The students applied “their community circumstances as official knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.477) and their learning “became a form of culture critique” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.477).

**Vanessa:** I feel African American students will be successful in the educational arena if more teachers are willing to apply a culturally relevant pedagogy. This will “eliminate or minimize the disconnect between African-Americans and education by making learning life applicable, educating students about the social inequalities (unjust educational, political, and public policies) that exist in society, and teaching them that it is their duty and responsibility to eradicate them” (Tennial, 2008, p.55). Policy makers must take into consideration the cultural difference present within the integrated classrooms.

### **Implications of Study**

“By failing to tell our stories, we in the black community have abetted white scholars who, in much the same way that they have promoted the myth of the culturally disadvantaged black child, have by omission, distortion, and misinterpretation created the myth of the inadequate black teacher” (Moore, 2002, p. 633). As an educator this has been an eye opening experience for me especially as an African American educator. I realize in a world that is changing, educators

should be prepared to meet the needs of all their students who represent a variety of diverse and cultural backgrounds

. Listening to my mother and aunt tell their stories I realized that culturally relevant pedagogy was not in their vocabulary as teachers and definitely not when they were students. African American teachers met the needs of their students by implementing the three main dimensions of culturally relevant teaching as defined by Gay (2000): (a) academic achievement – learning is demanding, but stimulating, and equitable with high standards; (b) cultural competence – facilitate the learning process by offering the various range of students' cultural and linguistic groups; and (c) sociopolitical consciousness – recognize and assist students to question the structure of education and society as an instrument for social change. My mother, aunt and other African American educators embraced these dimensions and in order to meet the needs of students in today's society educators should accept them as well. By incorporating these dimensions educators are willing to learn about the student as a whole person.

When you think of today's classroom, the makeup of that room is rapidly changing and that change is having a profound effect on education. To meet that change, multicultural education should be implemented that will allow educational equality for all students from a variety of races, ethnic groups and social classes (Jones, 2004). Implementing this allows minority students to develop the ability to navigate within the dominant culture; and to develop a positive identity that is fostered upon their home cultures (Hidalgo, McDowell, & Siddle, 1990). As a result,

it is the responsibility of the educational leaders to provide educators with the knowledge and ability to become culturally relevant educators. I have provided this insight for those in the educational arena and for those who are willing to search for ways to successfully educate African American students.

As my mother, aunt, and I told and retold our stories, we allow those who will read these lived experiences a glimpse into culturally relevant education. It is my hope that it will allow other African American educators, educators, administrators, and educational policy makers to reflect on what has shaped them as a person and formed their identities. Nieto (2003) posits, "A way for teachers to think about how, through a clearer understanding of their lives, they can become more effective with their students" (p.26). When teaching African American students it is my hope that the educators will enhance the curriculum from the perspective of African American students so they can see themselves in a positive way. African American students need to see that their culture is respected. "Every person ought, on some level, to cherish her or his culture" and have "a feeling of ownership of one's personal history" (Greene, 1995, p. 163), students do not see this in the curriculums that are found in the majority of public schools. I hope that these oral histories will inspire educators to seek out the resources to help them reach the potential needed to inspire African American students in the classroom to reach their maximum potential.



### EPILOGUE: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

My mother, Carolyn, retired in 1994 and since then has continued to stay involved in the educational arena. Her continued involvement has consisted of tutoring, starting with working at Sylvan Learning Center. This kept her busy until the center started to cut back her hours. Once she stopped working at Sylvan, she began to tutor at several inner city schools. I guess you can say she went back to where she started her teaching career in the Atlanta Public School System. When my mother started tutoring, the students were full of enthusiasm and wanted to absorb what she had to offer. She continues to enjoy the role of tutor.

Carolyn also started working with the Alzheimer's care group at the church. Working with the group brought satisfaction to her life knowing she was helping families who needed support during this difficult period of their lives. The care group continued for three years. When the group disbanded, she decided to go back to tutoring.

Her return to tutoring seemed to be greeted with some different attitudes. In the beginning, she could not figure it out and students seemed as though they were going through the motions during their tutoring session. It seemed as though the motivation to learn was gone. That lack of motivation was the fear of failing in school, at home, and life in general. Instead of tutoring three or more students her energy was focused on a particular student instead. She tried to change the fear of failure into being confident about their abilities. So, she is now a tutor/mentor and is enjoying a new role. This new role allows her to instill pride in the mentee's life.

Carolyn continues to be a supporter of her alma mater...Spelman College. Support is needed because the current state of Historically Black Colleges/Universities seems to be losing its ground among African American students. Students are not aware of the history of HBCU's. HBCU's at one time represented great minds because we could not attend the white universities and colleges. There are some HBCU'S that are struggling financially and that is why continued support to Spelman is important to Carolyn. When Carolyn celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion each of her classmates pledged to each give a thousand dollars in honor of their 50<sup>th</sup>. That year her class gave the most money to Spelman. In order for HBCU's to thrive those who have attended must contribute financially and encourage African American students to attend.

The current state of education plainly put, is in a mess especially in the Atlanta Public School System. In the beginning, she felt No Child Left Behind would help all students, but when APS put bonuses attached to the test that is when the flood gates opened. When teachers felt or were encouraged to cheat in order to get a bonus what does that say about the administrators who allow this type of behavior? What is unfortunate is this cheating scandal went on for at least five or more years. Students were promoted not on their merit but from those who wanted the bonuses or the school recognition for meeting AYP. So, therefore you have African American students who have graduated or will graduate who are not able to read. Carolyn has stated that she thinks it is a shame we have become so test

driven and have lost the true meaning of educating our children to be productive citizens.

Overall, she enjoys life and looks forward to every school year helping me set up my classroom and helping me throughout the year. In a way being in the classroom allows her to still have that commitment to education.

Unfortunately, my aunt, Natalie, died earlier in the dissertation process. She was always a true believer in education and was very proud of my endeavors. My only disappointment at this moment she will not be able to witness my defense. What I have written below is what she has told me about how she has felt over the years.

My Aunt Natalie's career ended on a sour note and that was not the way she would have wanted it to end. I thought "I would be teaching for at least 30 to 35 years enriching the youth of tomorrow" she often said this from time to time. Even though her career ended earlier than she had wanted, it did not affect the love she had for teaching. Upon her retirement, she volunteered with the adult literacy group and worked with young adults to help them earn their GED. If she had it her way she would have continued to be in some type of educational setting until she was physically unable to do what she loved.

She had often asked herself if the educational system had failed African American students. Having taught in high school for over 15 years she saw students who she knew were not prepared to be in their current grade. Some students who had been in her history class could not read and that was shocking

when it seemed to be a trend several years back to back. She felt that a band aid was being placed over the true problem with education and every time we try to remove that band aid the higher ups cover the wound back up. She also felt as if parts of the curriculum in elementary, middle and high school were not pushing the students to the best of their abilities especially in the inner cities. My aunt often stated that we are so test driven that teachers have forgotten the basics that are needed for the students to be successful in school. African American students are slighted since it has been proven that there are higher numbers represented in special education and in some instances our students are placed on the vocational track when they enter high school. She felt there needed to be a common goal for all students whether the teacher was black or white.

Currently I, Vanessa, am in my 18<sup>th</sup> year of teaching and for the most part I still enjoy teaching. I teach third grade in a predominately white school district and enjoy teaching this age group because they love you unconditionally. My school's ethnic population is 78% White, 12%, Latino, and 8% Black. Admittedly there are times when I am overwhelmed by the bureaucracy of the paper work that is needed in the educational arena, but overall I have not lost the real reason I teach. I teach to mold the minds of our future.

I feel personnel satisfaction knowing that for the past three years all of my students have passed the Georgia CRCT. I pride myself on not teaching to the test but teaching what is needed to allow them to grow as students. It also brings me joy

when I am able to help students who lack motivation and zeal for school and learning.

I am a product of the Atlanta Public School System and when the cheating scandal made national headlines a part of me was saddened, but also angry. I was sad to know all the alleged cheating took place at African American schools. Those who did inform their principals about the cheating found that information was swept under the carpet or they were dismissed at the end of the school year.

According to the 800 page investigative report, teachers felt their principals were intimidating them to cheat, or erasers parties were held at someone's house. While reading the document I could not believe some of the things that took place all most over a 10 year period. I could not help but think, out of the 179 teachers involved in the scandal how many were graduates of the Atlanta Public School System. There was no sense of community in this situation. Did they know the families or the community in which they taught? Why would you do your own race wrong? These teachers cheated for a variety of reasons from wanting the bonuses offered for improving the scores, allegedly being told to change the answers, and the fear of losing their jobs.

Even though I teach in an all-white school district I take pride in myself when there are African American students in my class. I believe it is important that they see someone that looks like them in front of the classroom. Currently, there are 4 African American students in my class. I remember two of the students as babies and I swore to myself that I would not be around by the time they entered 3<sup>rd</sup>

grade. Well, that turned out to be a false vow. When I do have African American students in my room it reminds me that I need to continue to encourage them to go beyond what is expected. I've learned through the experiences of the ones who have gone before me the importance of incorporating culture into the lessons that I teach. I strive to make learning meaningful by addressing their cultural identity.

My zest for learning has continued by obtaining ESOL and gifted certifications. Obtaining the gifted certification has allowed me to reach those who truly need a voice in this changing world where politicians feel as though non speaking students do not belong in the melting pot that we live in. Continuing the quest of learning has motivated me to take advantage of workshops that are offered by the county that allow me to stay on top of current trends and concepts in education.

When I am not teaching, I continue to stay surrounded by the world of education. I am very active in my sorority and currently am co-chair of the college prep program. This program is geared towards high school age young African American ladies. This group offers seminars that range from high school graduation requirements, applying for college, financial aid, choosing a career, and a host of other topics.

No matter what, I am motivated to stay in the educational arena to carry on the traditions of the women that have gone before me who gave of themselves to ensure equality in education for all children but especially for African American children.



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