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May I Walk Beside You? Exploring the Journey into the Careers of African American Women in Childcare Through Their Stories

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MAY I WALK BESIDE YOU?
EXPLORING THE JOURNEY INTO THE CAREERS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
IN CHILDCARE THROUGH THEIR STORIES

by

LISA HEUSEL

(Under the Direction of Grigory Dmitriyev)

ABSTRACT

In this study the African American childcare provider's life experiences are heard through the use of narrative inquiry and oral history. Often perceived as individuals who could not become teachers in the K-12 system, the women presented tell the reader in their own words what factors lead them to becoming childcare providers. By focusing on oral history, the stories told solidify the idea of the past creating the present. Education, religion, socioeconomic, culture and racial issues play an important part in each person's life. Therefore, these factors were the main focus when participants were asked to describe their lives. The results were cross-referenced in order to gain a sense of similarities or differences among those questioned. Interviews and dialogue with each participant resulted in similarities across all factors. Hearing the participants words in the form of a fictional narrative, begs the reader to become better prepared to understand what leads African American women into childcare.

Educators and students of education normally focus on children's needs once they enter kindergarten. There is an abundance of research on teachers and students in the K-12 system. Few results on childcare providers or their children are found in the literature. Therefore the present inquiry was conducted to investigate the hypothesis that education of children begins

with the childcare provider. Due to this supposition, her reasons for caring for young children was researched in order to further the field of early childcare.

The study resulted in the conclusion that African American women are in childcare due to their strong beliefs in religion and the desire to help further educate and care for their own race. Further conclusions were seen as to the fact that these women feel the need to become successful business entrepreneurs. Entering the field of childcare provided easier access to this goal. Other determinations identified were that African American women want to help the families within their communities obtain the fundamentals of early education while in a safe, loving environment. Therefore, beginning in early childcare, their placement in a career with young children extends the families' strength. Cultural identification also presented itself as a strong condition for working within the field. Finally, results showed a deep love for children, including, but not limited to, wishing to prepare them for success in life. These results were seen by all those who participated in this research despite obstacles such as low socioeconomics, stereotyping, or lack of higher education.

INDEX WORDS: Narrative Inquiry, Oral history, African American women, Childcare, Providers, Race, Culture, Education, Religion.

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

How can I even begin to tell my husband, Jeff Heusel, that I could never have made it without him? Jeff, you are my rock, my steadfast companion, my best friend, but most of all, you are the reason I have come this far in life. Your words of encouragement, your back rubs, your leaving me alone when needed, have all made it possible to say “WE DID IT”!!!

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To the childcare providers who made all of this possible. Thank you for sharing your lives with me. Thank you for helping me complete this journey.

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A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled.

A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiates his experience.

James Baldwin, 2001.

Producing caring and competent persons ought to be the principal goal of education.

Nell Noddings, 1995.

Activities such as child rearing, literally without which society would disintegrate are classified as outside the intellectual realm.

Stephen J. Thornton, 2001.

CHAPTER I

GLOSSARY

1. Family Childcare Home, licensed by the State of Georgia, is a provider who usually works alone and may only care for six children. The childcare is established in the personal home of the licensee. The governing body, named the Department of Early Child Care and Learning (DECAL), demands the family childcare to be in a residential location only.
2. Group Childcare Home, licensed by the State of Georgia, is a provider who may care for seven to seventeen children depending on the size of the location and the amount of employees. Most often found in larger homes or additions that have been added to accommodate children. Still considered residential by the governing body.
3. Childcare Center, licensed by the State of Georgia, is an establishment that may have eighteen children, or a hundred plus, depending on the capacity of the building site. A center is overseen by a director or owner and has several providers for each age group of children in their care. The governing body demands a center be commercially zoned, normally found outside of residential areas.
4. A.W.A.R.E. Training Services, Inc. is a training and consulting service based out of Savannah, Georgia. Lisa Heusel, sole proprietor, writes curriculum to teach childcare providers. The trainings take place throughout Georgia, involve subject matters concerning children, and are a requirement of the State in order to work in the childcare system.

Introduction

In the world of education, particularly within the kindergarten to high school years, those who educate are called teachers. However, those who have the daily responsibility to feed, care, and educate our youngest citizens, newborn to four years of age, are called providers. This accepted terminology within the field of early childcare may not seem to fit the literal definition of the word. According Webster's dictionary, a provider is defined as a "purveyor" or a "reluctant subsidy", "a man who provides for his family" (Babcock-Gove, 2002, p. 1827). The provider than is the "breadwinner" of a family, providing the means for subsistence. Subsistence is food, clothing, and shelter. However, education, a main component of a childcare providers work is not mentioned. Providers, when working with children do not typically provide clothing. Though the children attending a childcare facility are fed and housed while present, the same can be said for children in the public or private school system, where teachers work.

Providers are also viewed as the person who "brings home the bacon", a slang term often used to describe the person in the household who brings home a paycheck. This situates providers as the main adult in a household to "provide" for their family. Many providers in childcare are as young as eighteen, attending college, living at home, not necessarily the main "breadwinner". Yet, the term is widely accepted within the industry regardless of the age of the employee or their place within the home.

Some would argue that not addressing a childcare worker as a teacher is devaluing their position. Others might argue that childcare providers, who typically do not hold a four year degree in education, do not deserve the title given to those in K through 12 or above. Providing for children in the childcare industry denotes an entirely different meaning. The women who

work with young children are “providing” in a different manner than the accepted terminology, especially within the realm of education. It is my belief that education, like food, is essential to human survival. Educating children begins at birth and is more than learning to read and write. Childcare providers seem to embrace this notion. They may not “provide” in the dictionary sense of the word, but the responsibility of teaching our youngest children everything from self-feeding to language, math, and more, entitles them to be addressed as providers or teachers, whichever term is preferred.

The African American women in childcare are working to supply both subsistence and education to the children in their care. Questions as to why they work in this particular system, such as are they driven by their culture, religion, socioeconomics, or history is the focus of this research. Their life experiences tell us that it is these factors that affected their career decision. Those involved are African Americans, living and working in South Georgia. These women often work long hours, at a fairly low income, lacking the benefits of sick time or vacation pay. Why do they devote their lives to working with predominately African American children? Nieto (2003) asks a similar question in her text, *What Keeps Teachers Going?* "The profession of teaching, although enormously significant,... is terribly undervalued, undercompensated, and under respected" (p. 128). This seems apparent in the childcare system of South Georgia where lack of benefits and fair wages are the norm. Nieto goes on to say, "the urge to live a life of service" motivates teachers and commits them to "the ideals of democracy, fair play, and equity" in educating our children (p. 91). The women who work in childcare may not have the title of "teacher", but they also choose to "keep going".

Autobiographical Roots

My work within the childcare industry places me in a unique position. I am usually the only white female in the classroom, and I am the instructor. My students are African American females, yet feelings of acceptance, not power or racial issues permeate my training rooms. I agree with Delpit (1995), "it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility" (p. 46). I believe this to be a privilege, one I accept with honor. The knowledge that I may be seen as one with power created the desire to learn all I can about my students lives, their culture, their likes, and their reasons for teaching young children. Rothenberg (2000) asks her readers, "under what conditions it was appropriate for me, a white woman, to teach about race?" (p. 154). I have re-worded this question to ask how I, a white woman, can teach another race?

According to Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2000) one cannot be effective in the classroom without knowing their students. While I am confident that I know the subject matter my students require, I view myself as an outsider looking in, not fully aware of why those I teach work in the childcare system of Georgia. A lens through which to gain this knowledge occurs within this research. This study provided further cognition about my student's career paths, and thus enhances my curriculum within the classroom.

"As with any project, especially one filled with stories and narratives, there are always possibilities for multiple introductions, varied beginnings" (Kinloch, 2010, p. 9). Stories and narratives, as told from African American childcare providers, are examined for the purpose of furthering knowledge in the field of education. In the words of Delpit (1995), "learn to listen to and respect the words of people of color...they have much more to tell us" (p. 127). The Curriculum Studies Program at Georgia Southern University teaches students that everyone

experiences life differently; therefore, it was by listening to each of my students that an introduction into their lives began. Not sharing the same skin color or life experiences, it was important that I opened my ears as well as my mind to the words of my participants. In carefully writing their stories, all those in education who wish to understand the African American childcare provider will become better at serving their educational needs.

My family and colleagues question where my passion for African American childcare providers and their African American children originates. I am slow to answer, not sure I have the answers myself. Nieto (2003) helps as she writes, "Teaching is not my profession; it is my calling; it is my mission" (p. 128). Seeking further understanding during my studies, the goal in helping educators to understand the clients I serve strengthened with each passing year. Understanding their culture, their perspectives on teaching young children and the issues they face in doing so, motivated this inquiry. I did not consciously choose to teach African American childcare providers; however, my desire to teach within the field of early childcare throughout Georgia has led me to their doorsteps.

Statement of the Problem

There are no easy answers when a researcher is looking at a particular group of people and their cultures. Unfair treatment has occurred for centuries when we read of African Americans, especially women. From the "heartless inhumanity of slavery" to "questions of fair and equitable compensation", African American women have been oppressed throughout history (Rothenberg, 2000, p. 13). Rothenberg continues in this vein as she writes, "mainstream culture will do anything it can to avoid addressing their legitimate grievances" (p. 177). As educators it is important to seek an understanding as to whether or not African American women feel

oppressed in their careers as providers. One cannot jump to conclusions that all African American childcare providers are oppressed due to their work conditions. The research herein showed that the providers had no such feelings.

In addressing the African American childcare providers journey, a pathway was presented into the lives of these women to help understand who they are, and why they are in childcare. This problem is of concern due to lack of knowledge as to what these women do within their childcares once they are in place. Do they choose working or owning a childcare so they may help further their culture? Are they caring for predominately African American children out of a sense of pride, duty, or special attachment? Do they work in childcare because they are unable to locate other forms of employment? These unknown answers are brought to light within the research results.

Purpose of Research

Given that our past creates our future, acknowledging African American childcare providers' lived experiences and their personal history created an insiders' perspective into understanding their career choice in the field of childcare. We are all products of our family beliefs, culture and religions. However, certain circumstances, such as poverty, race, and socioeconomics may hamper our choices in life. This is not to say that anyone can aspire to higher education, better careers, or a more professional status. Obstacles could be thicker for some than others; however, some choose to work where needed, despite low income and low status. Educators, like me, and those in the future, need to understand why this is so. The purpose in completing an investigation into the African American women in childcare is to unfold the "hidden curriculum" within their careers.

Insight into the lives of African American childcare providers “offers us the opportunity to inform ourselves further and move forward to change situations” (Burnaford, et al, 2001, p. 14). An inquiry into the experiences of persons different from ourselves illuminates our own work, thus creating opportunities for change within the field of childcare and education. Educators must open their minds and listen to all people: their needs, their struggles, and their experiences. Only then can our educational system, beginning with early childcare, become an equal and equitable establishment for all students.

To gain a perspective into the current positions of the participants involved within this query, it was necessary to learn as much as is possible about their early years of life up to present day. This included, but was not be limited to, their educational experiences, childhood upbringing, religious beliefs, and cultural heritage. When teachers do research, especially narrative studies, their words “become an avenue for constructive change” (Burnaford, 2001, p. 15). By listening to the African American childcare providers’ stories, a vision for future childcare workers was written. A new curriculum for the position of these women was created so that students of education who desire teaching African American childcare providers may be better prepared.

The great majority of the women I teach only hold a high school diploma or G.E.D. Very few have obtained a higher level of education. The State of Georgia, only since 2012, has required the childcare provider to secure a technical certificate in early childhood, only one hundred and twenty hours of class time. Most have not complied. Due to their own lack of higher education, are these women dedicated to the children to ensure a better future, educationally, for those in their care? Gaining insight into their positions in the system of childcare was invaluable to furthering knowledge in the field of early care, thereby better serving

the provider in her quest to teach our youngest children. This field of inquiry also increases the likelihood of other studies within early childcare with the African American provider as its main focus. At the time of this inquiry, the year 2014, other research exists with minimal frameworks of similarity.

Research Question

The overarching research question was:

1. How did life experiences, racial, historical, cultural, and socioeconomics of the African American women affect their current placement as childcare providers in South Georgia?

Authors such as Noddings (2003), Sudarkasa (1996), and Walker (1983) speak of the "motherly" instinct of the African American culture. Sudarkasa writes from the perspective of the African culture when she refers to the role of "co-mother" (1996, p. 83). Responsible for many children, not just those within their own nuclear family, African women worked together to raise the community in which they lived. Is this perhaps the reason African American providers are working with predominantly African American children? Do they choose the work because, as Ladson-Billings (1994) writes, "the important thing was that the teachers were not strangers in the community" (p. 7)? Is it their belief that our educational system is not tailored to the children of color? Could this be due to fear, historically attributed to racism? Is it as simple as a belief that their life experiences as African Americans will help the children as they move into an educational system? Are they preparing these children to succeed throughout life? Do they wish to teach by example because of their own upbringing? How strong do they believe in

education? These questions, as well as those found in Appendix A are answered within the research conclusions.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Childcare: Where Does Education Fit?

Many adults if questioned would refer to their child's care as a structured form of babysitting. The state of Georgia has worked for years to rectify this perspective through the establishment of the licensed childcare provider. Education in any format is by no means perfect, the field involving our youngest citizens, those in the system, lags behind significantly. Pedagogy is the manner in which we teach children and classroom instruction is seen as formal and structured, controlled by teachers. Childcare is often viewed as playtime, and, while play is essential to the development of the young child, it is formal education that is valued by society.

The study presented by Henward & Macgillivray (2012), conducted in a childcare facility in the Southern United States, concurs with the position that children are not in childcare for formal education. The authors observed teachers, usually addressed in the field as providers, as being silenced in both the approach they take with the children and in their voice on how to teach. This study addressed many issues that pertain to the research planned, including cultural aspects and understandings of the providers. The focus was on children as much as it was on the providers and the participants were African Americans. Henward and Macgillivray seemed to have trouble leaving their own perspectives on teaching at the door, but did make note of this difficulty. Statements such as "sharp tones" and "spoke to in a direct manner" seem to have prejudiced this study. Entering another person's world brings many difficulties, especially when trying to understand "Southern cultures and traditions" (p. 91). This challenge is important to the discourse of education in order to further our knowledge of the African American childcare provider's position.

Issues of power and religion within a “Southern culture” were seen within the above study as formulating the pedagogy of the children. Providers were deeply “conservative Christians”, and the authors viewed this attachment to a higher being as the reason for their actions. The researchers concluded that characteristics of providers such as a strong voice when addressing children, separating boys and girls during reading time, or the correction of “sinful behavior”, are viewed as valuable practices within the African American community. This becomes an item of concern as it relates to placing all African American childcare providers in a “stereotyped” position. Though the author’s conclusions are explained, not all readers can adhere to their theories. Some, myself included, choose to investigate through those interviewed this aspect of “strength” and its relative importance to the education of African American children. Is the myth of strength another reason the women of this study are working in this particular field? The long hours involved and the care of those so young would certainly require a type of strength. Research on aspects of humanity different from those providing the information stands on shaky ground without placing those studied in a particular “box”. It is of utmost concern to any inquiry that the voice of those involved either dissuades or influences the above-mentioned author’s theory.

It is interesting to note that other research has shown that children who attend a childcare center as opposed to a family home have increased cognitive abilities, yet they fare worse in health and social behavior (Abner, et al, 2013). Personal experience and common sense speak to these issues, as centers normally hire providers with a higher level of education and home providers, until recently in Georgia, qualified with a high school diploma or G.E.D. This could account for better outcomes in cognitive abilities, while the increased amount of enrollment in centers as opposed to homes exposes children to more health issues. Socialization and behavior

issues are also the responsibility of providers, making teaching appropriate skills easier when attending to fewer children. The research examined the differences between the two facility types and hypothesized that type of care is directly related to quality. Assuming that quality of care is equal in each home and center, children of similar age could be determined to have equal outcomes.

The Abner, et al study (2013) focused on the link of quality to cognitive abilities in children, bringing to light the question of who determines “quality”? Though many assessments determining a “quality education” are in place in education for the K-12 field, childcare providers in the State of Georgia have only recently been assigned levels of “quality”. The program called “Quality Assurance” was finalized in 2013 by the government agency, Bright From The Start, responsible for licensed childcares and is still in its initial stages. The program is one hundred percent voluntary at the present time (2014). Linking quality to any stage of development in young children is perhaps a leap in the right direction, but yet to be defined in measurable ways. It is important to note that the research cited, though interesting to the field, lacks any focus on differences in cultural backgrounds of centers or homes accessed or on the provider’s experiences. Quality must be assessed in a manner that includes all providers, and it is my contention that the programs in place currently are written from a “metanarrative” perspective. If we understand this to be true of the No Child Left Behind system in our schools, it is easy to believe the same holds true for the “Quality Assurance” program now in place for childcares. However, the study mentioned developed its own measurement of quality scale when performing their research. This format proved useful to their particular hypothesis but, generalization to the industry as a whole, would be harder to prove, and not necessarily a focus of this study.

Literature in the area of quality childcare is extended in findings presented by Vesely (2013). In an article presented in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vesely provides an in-depth analysis of low-income African and Latina immigrant mothers choose their child's care structure based on cultural, social, and financial aspects. The research presented was based on the quality of care being given to the children as the determining factor in choosing a facility. Additional studies by Fram and Kim (2008) related choice of childcare placement to socioeconomics, education of parent, and ethnicity. Differences in education, level of income, and race of adults involved seemed to have a strong influence on choice. Neighborhoods where families seemed to agree on parental skills strongly influenced which type of facility their children attended. Their research indicated informal communication between parents and "socially related beliefs", as a manner in which placement for children was discussed (p. 577). To frame choice of placement for a child in one specific arena would be impossible, as well as unreliable information. Families have a great deal to consider for their children's care and education outside the home. Factors mentioned can heavily sway a decision, as well as those not reported. Consensus among studies read, state that "disadvantaged" Hispanic and African American families choose childcare facilities based more on socioeconomic needs, or lack of resources.

According to Vesely (2013), cultural beliefs and traditions often found within immigrant Latino and African American families, led to their choosing individual family childcare placement more often than centers. Multigenerational levels of immigrants are often found living together once in the United States. This cultural understanding begs us to the perspective of why the Latino and African American seem to situate the value of educating their children with family; in this case, family childcare. Vesely also alludes to the financial situation of the

groups studied and family care is often less of an expense than centers. As questioned previously, the determining factor in quality should not be based on the size of the facility and how it is structured. The families studied by Vesely place more importance on similar cultural aspects of care. Are those represented in this study working in the childcare system due to some aspect of cultural affiliation? It is research such as Vesely's that could help us understand the connection between why African American childcare providers work with predominantly African American children.

Understanding of Culture: How?

More children, ages newborn to four, spend the majority of their daytime hours in a childcare facility than ever before in the history of the United States. The State of Georgia has over six thousand licensed facilities, some are only caring for six children at a time, while others are licensed for as many as two hundred children daily (Bright From The Start, 2014). Those who choose to work with these children have a tremendous responsibility. Their positions do not just entail feeding, diapering, and rocking a child. Young children today are expected to mature at faster rates than previous generations, making their education a part of a provider's workday. Providers come from all lifestyles, making the care and education of these children non-consistent. However, just what is "consistent" care and education? The authors in the study, *The Cultural Context of Infant Caregiving*, address the universal development of children, as a need "to prepare professionals for culturally consistent caregiving" (Bhavnagri & Gonzalez-Mena, 1997, p. 3). Childcare development practices written for educators of young children are normally generalized to the dominant society within the United States. Authors such as Bennett (1999), Schickedanz (2001), Sheehy (2010), and Vukelich (2008) write curriculum textbooks for

early childcare education students whereby the European formulated “universal” education in our States is predominant. If this viewpoint is to be adhered to by providers in childcare, where does that leave their individuality, their particular culture, and their life experiences?

The study cited, though perhaps related to cultural responsibility, becomes confusing as the authors speak of conflicts between providers and children; yet offer no suggestions other than to be “culturally aware”. The dilemma now becomes whose culture are they to be aware of, and how do they go about this? The majority of studies found within the literature are on how to correct this absence in teachers, not providers (Foster, 1990; Freire, 1998; Kozol, 1991; Nieto, 2002; Noddings, 2006; and Seymour, 2004). The investigation at hand suggests teacher educators spend more time and effort on multicultural education in their classrooms. While this is a worthwhile suggestion, formal education does not apply to the majority of childcare providers. Those who choose to attend classes will find information on “childcare development”, as described by the work of such scientists as Piaget, but multicultural instruction is left out of the curriculum. This absence in understanding other cultures must be rectified if educators, both presently and in the future, are to create unbiased curriculum. If African American women choose to work with predominately African American children, is it because of a lack of cultural awareness for children other than those “most” like them?

One other salient point in the study described is important to note. The authors did subscribe to the fact that the majority of the United States frowns upon certain habits that children from “other” countries bring into the childcare. The study focused on the sleeping habits of infants and toddlers to “prove” this point. The study found that one hundred and sixty seven societies outside the United States believe in the parents sleeping with their young children. Only five other countries besides ours prescribe to having their children sleep in a

separate room. This is just one example of the myriad problems that young children bring with them to a United States childcare facility. Imagine the problems that ensue when trying to nap an infant in a single crib amongst thirty other cribs in a well-lit room when that child is accustomed to sleeping in their mother's arms. Understanding this cultural difference would alleviate distress for both the child and the provider, yet, how does one ensure this knowledge? Perhaps the African American provider is working with a culture she understands how to care for because she was raised in the same manner. By seeking to understand their life experiences within the interview process, this becomes recognized as an answer in the affirmative.

Gillen, et al (2007) reminds us that a conscientious teacher considers respect for each culture when dealing with children, no matter their origins. The focus of their study questioned how each community defined "growing up well" when teaching children (p. 210). Though the study did not involve the United States, an applicable link regarding children's habits enlightened the reader's intention to studying cultural dimensions. Realizing the many variances across how children learn, socialize, and develop is essential to any study involving teachers and children.

African American Culture: Children and Education

In a study entitled *Cultural Differences and the Education of Black Children: An Alternative Model for Program Development*, scholars Henderson and Washington propose that to educate Black "youngsters" a teacher must be willing to accept that "these children are culturally different from White children" (2013, p. 353). Agreeable to the pursuance of this study is the preconceived idea of similar beliefs. Though the statement by both the authors and me could be construed as stereotypical, or "unpopular", one must be accountable to the

possibility. Delpit (1988) agrees when she suggests, “appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture” (p. 296). *Black on Black Education*, written by Berry in 2005, acknowledges the same premise as those mentioned. The title alone speaks volumes, as the relationship between teachers and children of African American descent is studied. Berry encourages all African American women educators to study theories devoted to their heritage in order to gain a better understanding of their students. Though similar in skin color or upbringing, the author recognizes the importance of both the teacher and the student bringing their life experiences and knowledge to the classroom. The importance of this understanding is paramount to the success of both teacher and child.

If the authors are right, then it stands to reason why some African American women would feel the need to take care of African American children. However, a research study does not stand on reasoning alone, therefore the ideas presented by Henderson and Washington, Delpit and Berry only open the mind to possibilities. Obviously, more exploration needs to be completed within this framework.

African American Women as Symbols: Disadvantaged or Strong?

Studies on African American women and children are found in abundance (Dotson, 2009; Fram, 2008; Isaacs, 2012; Lareau, 2002; Roberts, 2010; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Siddle-Walker, 2004). Such a copious amount is not found when probing scientific inquiry on African American women as it pertains to their strengths, especially in the classroom. Securing knowledge of African American women needs to be broadened to include history, socioeconomics, religion and feminist viewpoints among other perspectives.

There are those who ascribe to the notion that African American women are seen as “disadvantaged” and hold a lower status in America (Rothenberg, 2004; Siddle-Walker, 2004; Takaki, 1993; Vaz, 1997; West, 1993; Williams, 1998). Each author posits his or her work in areas such as genetic inferiority, their ancestral past of slavery, or placing blame on the culture of the group as a whole. While there will always be those who acknowledge our social system, particularly within education, as the culprit, a few subscribe to each culture holding itself accountable. One such scholar is McWhorter (2001) whose interesting theories of blaming the African American for his or her own oppression in his work *Losing the Race* is at the very least a thought provoking conversation. His ideas of keeping the African American ideal separate from European thought are to belittle a culture just for its differences. Accusing African American women as a race and expecting change just because it is not the “white” way is a smoke screen at best. Worse is the assumption that anyone’s race is superior to any others.

Roseboro and Ross (2009) introduced an important concept when referring to the “pedagogy of the soul” (p. 1). Their theory is based on the historical aspects of African American women as a race that was “worked too hard”, knew “exhaustion as the norm”; yet, in spite of it all, a “persona of strength” was observed (p. 1). Strength is often viewed in women as unattractive as opposed to a desirable asset as seen in males. The strength of African American women has been deeply indoctrinated since slavery, demanding they live up to the myth. Roberts (2010) describes this burden as “care-sickness” (p. 10). He asks us to question whether it is possible to care too much. Expressing views on African American women educators as being committed to social justice, community and living in a “permanent state of resistance”, Roberts theorizes that health issues, even early death is related to their zealous behavior. Are the strengths of African American women a deterrent to their own lives?

African American single female households account for over seventy-two percent of all African American households according to a study performed in April 2011 by the National Bureau of Economic Research. One out of every four African American children in the United States lives with a single parent; higher than any other developed country. The African American child being raised without a male presence rose from twenty-five to twenty-seven percent of all United States households from 2007 to 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, p. 13). According to the Census Bureau, as of 2012, African American two parent households fell from forty percent to only twenty percent. It is important to note that mother-only families are disadvantaged, not only economically, but also educationally, putting the children at further risk. Statistics such as these are placing more children in childcare and preschools than ever before in United States history.

If we are to consider a mother and father as the desirable manner in which to raise children, then single mothers must be at a grave disadvantage. This erroneous conclusion puts more strain on the African American female raising her child or children alone. It therefore makes sense that these women must be strong, independent, and hard workers; otherwise, how could one raise children alone? Thankfully, authors such as Collins (1991), Davis (1983), Sudarkasa (1996), and Thompkins (2004) have written to the strengths of African American women, their cultural aspects highlighted as positive attributes to single motherhood.

Strong African American women have been portrayed in movies such as *The Color Purple* and *Roots*. Though social media is not the focus of this review, many young children are watching films and other forms of media for positive representations of themselves. The African American child is looking for immediate proof that the female(s) in their lives continue to teach them the values of their culture. Hale (2001) clarifies this idea as she describes the role of the

African American woman in a child's life. The African American woman is fundamental to the African American child. Hale's belief that it is critical for parents and teachers of young African American children to understand African American culture and continue traditions by transmitting their knowledge to the children is key to the child's success in school and to their self-esteem. The passage of traditions such as proverbs, stories, songs, and fables from African American adults to children is invaluable to their existence. If one is to concur with these statements, then African American women with similar childhoods, once grown, are a natural choice for placement as caregivers for predominantly African American children.

De Vos (1975) studied individuals on the basis that a "sense of belonging" is paramount to the well-being of children and is essential to their development. His work centers on ethnicity, which is unique to each culture. He supports the need for a "collective community", whereby a unit of people is responsible for their cultural survival. This idea is reflected in the African American female household as she seeks to teach her children about their world. This "sense of belonging" could be one reason why so many African American women work in childcare facilities with predominately African American children.

Dominating the household is often cited as a positive attribute when referring to African American men, women are a different story. Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) write about the matriarchal position of African American women as contributing to the "emasculatation" of the African American male. "Definitions of Black manhood often depended in part on the subjugation of Black women" (p. 45). Many Black men according to Cole justified being "oppressive and sexist" to their wives and daughters in order to control the strong personalities of the females in the household (p. 45).

The thought of holding power is seen as positive, however, nothing could be further from the truth when discussing the African American women from the days of slavery to the present (Hurstun, 2000; Lerner, 1992; Morrison, 1992; Takaki, 1993; Toomer, 1993). Knowledge of how the African American was treated in history helps us to understand her position currently. Childcare providers, the majority of whom are African Americans in South Georgia, are considered unworthy of a decent salary or benefits. These statements beg us to study why African American women work in childcare if it is considered such a lowly position.

Strength comes in many formats, for the African American woman it is found in her position of taking care of her own family and helping to raise other children of the same skin color and cultural background. This station in life gives her the fortitude to face the struggles inherent in the childcare system. The idea of strength can be traced historically from slavery. According to Lerner (1992), “slave women took part in all aspects of resistance” (p. 27). They have faced much adversary and the daily struggle against racism; hatred and oppression for many still prevails in our country. Obstacles such as those mentioned have led many educators to study and write of this particular group as an unassailable individual (Anzaldua, 1990; Collins, 1991; Jones, 1986; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Morrison, 2008; Walker, 1983; White, 1999). Scholars write from historical triumphs to personal experiences, but the story is the same, for these females, throughout history, they have had to be strong in the face of adversity.

Culturally Responsive Critical Teacher Care

Roberts (2010) developed a theory of pedagogy she refers to as “culturally relevant critical teacher care” (p. 449). Focusing upon the connection between teachers and the African American student affirmed that when teachers respect their students and care about them, higher

achievement, as well as improving attendance, attitudes and self-esteem occurs. Robert's study concentrates on giving voice to the perspectives of the African American teacher and her definition of caring for students. In accordance with the author, the fact that respect goes a long way in teaching, one must also take into account the relevance to knowledge of one's students. Roberts does acknowledge teachers from other cultures and races may care for African American children. She contends the African American teacher who knows her student, and due to this, is the best teacher for the position.

Though deeply held convictions point to this connection between adult and child as positive, I find myself conflicted. Yes, knowledge of one's student is of utmost importance, but does that necessarily mean student and teacher must come from the same neighborhood? This question drives my research. Personally, I have no conflict with African American students. Is this because I have dedicated my studies to understanding them as fully as possible? I would have to say yes. Becoming culturally responsive to those we teach bridges the potential gap between our differences and strengthens our effectiveness in the classroom, whether born "alike" or not.

The most important aspect among all culturally relevant teaching is that the teacher assesses the needs of his or her students. Individuals, as well as families, must be considered, in order for student success. Anyone teaching within the realm of a culturally responsive classroom ascribes to the incorporation of "lived sociocultural realities" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Gay agrees that terminology is not what is important; it is the bottom line, the success of one's students that matters. "Although called by many different names...it is important to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students (2000, p. 29).

Just as cultural analysis subscribes to many issues, an ethic of care when seen from a theoretical framework has many perspectives. Several theorists have extended our knowledge by contributions to a theory of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003, 2006; Siddle-Walker, 2004). Noddings theoretical ideals include care as a “particular kind of relational encounter between two people” (2006, p. 313). The author interprets her “phenomenology of care” as an understanding of a people who look upon one another in a conscious manner (p. 316). A discussion goes forth on the difference between one who genuinely cares as opposed to a fake type of care. As Noddings asserts, “deplorable results” could occur (p. 316). In the sense that true care must be relational, the act itself changes depending on cultural aspects such as geographical place, time and even language differences. Teachers and providers should have a caring relationship with all children under their instruction; however, we have seen this fallacy at work in many educational environments.

A noteworthy aspect of a study by Roberts is her views on the unique cultural aspects of pedagogy when involving African American teachers. She reveals they are “largely single-minded”, held unrelentingly high expectations, lived in the surrounding community and served as role models (Roberts, 2010, p. 453). She cites other scholars such as Foster (1997), Noblit (1993), and Ware (2006) reporting almost identical findings on African American teachers’ form of pedagogy. Thus, there is a trend in the literature that confirms African American teachers are vigilant in their fight to educate African American children. Nonconformity to the pedagogy common to today’s schools, African American instructors reach beyond the present scope in order to succeed, both professionally, and for their students.

Perspectives aside, no one could adequately care and educate any child without an appreciation for cultural awareness. Roberts, as well as theorists mentioned above, use their

work to begin the conversation of what care and cultural relevance means to African American teachers. Though all authors state in one fashion or another that there is more work to be completed, the viewpoints of those involved are beginning to be heard.

Noddings and Roberts hold but two theories of care found within the literature. As with any discipline, multiple theories abound. Butler (2012) opens his discussion with the idea of three necessary roles of care, “the care worker, the care recipient, and the economic provider who makes the materially possible” (p. 391). Rationally, these three directly influence the childcare provider, her children, and the facility itself. Though Butler proposes a fourth unit of care, he terms the “care claimant”, which he connects to political aspects, the first three features of care express a more lineal approach to the current inquiry. Care must include from whom, for whom, and how, which describes Butler. His theory, in essence, provides the steps necessary to an inside view of the meaning of care. Focus on these aspects when interviewing participants will provide answers to their career placement, a perspective being sought in this study.

Butler’s theory of political connections does provide one interesting measure for thought. In the case of care workers, such as childcare providers, power is in their control of children who then mature into adults, thus providing the economy with labor. Labor issues can become extremely political in nature, thus the theorist link to care. Another association to the care claimant is the argument that caring for children is “unproductive labor” (Butler, 2012, p. 394). The productions of a labor force such as stated above forms the discussion that a care provider could not possibly be viewed as “unproductive”. The difference between the terminologies arises from Smith’s book *The Wealth of Nations* (2011); to belabor the politics involved from Smith’s text would not be advised within the scope of this review. However, considerations to the origins of the terminology involved are worthy to note.

To gain yet one last perspective on care, the mention of Bubeck (1995) must be included. He differentiates the notion of care from one that is performed on behalf of someone incapable of doing the work, as opposed to those who are able. Childcare provides a perfect example to this distinction. Young children are dependent on their caregivers, thus Butler's view of power begins to blur. It is difficult to place an African American childcare worker in a position of power, especially from a political aspect when one agrees with Bubeck. Bubeck agrees with Noddings that the notion of care is dyadic. This is particularly true in the case of infants to young preschoolers whose very lives depend on proper care from adults. Dependency is of prime importance when referring to Noddings dyadic care. Association between all theories mentioned are important to the work pursued, though arguments have been made against inclusion in the case of political views. To broaden the topic to include all would be exhaustive to the work at hand, yet certainly worthy of future consideration.

Social Class, Race, and Children

A review of the literature would not be complete if the aspect of social class as it relates to childrearing were not included. Due to all the literature that speaks to African American's as poor, disadvantaged and oppressed, social class is an important consideration (Dotson, 2009; Fram, 2008; Hare, 1987; Tate, 2008; Winsler, et al, 2008). One often hears unconfirmed statements as to the lower social class having children who are harder to educate, not motivated to attend school, or failures in our society. This is quite apparent in popular culture, including television, films, and music. To ascribe to this notion without clearly understanding the myriad of problems associated with being from a lower socioeconomic status is ignorant. In order to become educated in matters of social class as they pertain to families and their children, it is

necessary to do the research to consider whether judgment of an African American student can be blamed on factors mentioned above.

A pattern found within the literature suggests on conceptualizing the social patterns of the lower socially economic family, which is not satisfactorily explained yet. One particular review of families from upper, middle and lower social classes, both White and African American, sought to demonstrate that childrearing differences exist between classes, as well as between races. Lareau (2002) observed families from all three economic levels twenty times during a three-month period to compare childrearing practices. Though findings were interesting, they seemed to correspond to stereotypical considerations between social class and race. The author contradicted herself many times within the study, enough to confuse the readers understanding.

While several authors work on understanding socioeconomic and racial effects on education, it is important to note a few. Besides the aforementioned Lareau, scholars from many areas have studied socioeconomic status effects on education, especially within the poorer segments. This list includes Dotson, et al, (2009), who researched cognitive functioning as it is related to race and socioeconomics. Results were similar to all that has been seen in this arena; lower socioeconomic neighborhoods and especially African American children tend to have lower cognitive functioning. The research points to the lower quality of education, not to the race or economics themselves.

Literacy and education go hand in hand. Experience has shown us that the ability to read well and at or above age level will lead one further into a successful education. Previous research has determined that African American children score far lower in reading skills, comprehension, and retention than children of other races (Dotson, et al., 2009). The disadvantages of living in poverty have far-reaching consequences, the lack of reading skills

being just one of many. Perhaps, given the same opportunities, the lower socioeconomic family would have higher success rates. This theory is worthy of consideration, though additional studies are needed to connect the confines of poverty to the African American provider and the lessons she is able to provide her young charges. Her abilities to teach the skills of reading are obviously of utmost importance to the children who may already start life at disadvantages due to race and family income.

An article by Issacs (2012) subscribes to local preschool programs as, “the most promise for increasing children’s school readiness” (p. 1). Findings within the present research contend that the African American childcare provider, beginning with children younger than preschool age, is helping increase the likelihood of school success for the lower socioeconomic class.

Gaps within the Literature

The main limitations of the literature involved finding subject matter specifically about African American women in the childcare system in South Georgia. The few studies pertaining to the field were statistical in nature. These limitations showed promise for the purposes of this review because they were extremely encouraging to the study at hand in order to further the dialogue between African Americans and educators. The study showed an unfermented approach to a wide-open area of research not previously studied by others.

Having now looked specifically for work pertaining to the research purpose, I feel exhilaration in the fact that I am not “beating a dead horse”. While this literature has helped define African American women throughout history as caregivers, it does not tell the reader why they are

predominant in the lives of children, or why that makes a difference. Though studies were found relating to race, culture, and socioeconomics of the African American female, they are not sufficient in relation to childcare givers in particular; again providing room for improvement in the field. Theories of care for family and children were seen in the research; however, there too, an absence of explanation as to why they are working with young children is apparent. As to why society has placed the African American women at the “bottom”, as far as human contributions are concerned, is another area of research that should prove useful in determining her station in life as a childcare provider.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

The present study lends itself to the use of a grounded theory framework due to the fact that the researcher, while having a goal in mind, quite often finds his or her answers from the observation process itself. Grounded theory is “inductively generated from fieldwork” (Patton, 2002, p. 11). Approaching the subject within the investigation with an open mind allowed the research to obtain its own natural conclusions. This form of inquiry allowed the research to approach the audience with open-ended questions to investigate certain areas of interest within the participants’ lives. In the case of this project, the lives of the African American childcare provider and her career path was a phenomenon needing answers. Grounded theory provides this pathway into the lives of others. Systematically observing, questioning, listening, and evaluating the participant kept the data true to the process.

By focusing on the theoretical approach of a “grounded” perspective lens, the research becomes more “meaningful and relevant” to those being studied (Patton, 2002, p. 67). The use of this theory allows for a complete flow of conversation between interviewee and interviewer without obstacles obscuring the view. This is due to the fact that all answers are neither absolute nor fixed due to interpretation by the researcher. In other words, grounded theory builds upon the investigations outcome as it unfolds. A set hypothesis, while in the mind of the researcher, does not always come to fruition. In the present study, the goal in mind was to connect aspects of the participants’ life such as culture, race, and religion to their career choice. However, using a grounded theory methodology allowed other factors to come forward without barring them from the results.

There are many characteristics of this theory according to Patton (2002) that blended well with this research process. An example is the ability to recognize bias, yet stay true to the inquiry. Grounded theory demands the researcher stay on track as to the purpose without deviation and not allowing other data to cloud the ultimate goal. In this project for instance, when questioning a participant, a story emerged that was inappropriate to the study. Though of extreme interest, staying “grounded” to the task at hand demanded subjectivity on the researcher. Though objectivity is the main goal of any research project, in this particular case, data collected needed to be ignored.

A grounded theory perspective helps us understand the particulars within the African American female childcare provider. By using “a naturalistic approach” with the participants, visits to their childcare facilities and homes, theories immerse within the constructs of both a “formal and informal” construct (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 329). Theories do not stand alone, yet they provide thoughts, which create discussions and begin to deconstruct previously held beliefs. As Stovall (2005) will agree, “it is to engage in the process of developing systems by which to address these concerns” (p. 96). Theorists such as Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rothenberg, 2000; Sudarkasa, 1996; Tileston & Darling, 2008; Williams, 1998, and numerous others, all hold theories on African American women. Through the use of a grounded theory perspective, this inquiry adds to those named above and continues the conversation on African American women.

Oral History

In order to examine the life experiences of African American women it is necessary to listen to their stories. The journey of African American women into their careers as childcare

providers, the focus of this inquiry, uses oral history as the method of research. Oral history has recently become a predominant form of social science research and though beginning on shaky ground, has gained respect in the field and seems to blend naturally within the designs of qualitative work. Oral history helps the writer to explore and study people who are in essence the “bearers of their own history and that of their culture” (Charlton, 2007, p. 46). This methodology is conducive to forming connections between the interview and the interviewee. In the past, oral history was used to preserve stories and phenomena passed down through generations. It is useful in preserving documents and records that are necessary to one’s culture or society in general. The use of oral history fills in areas where stories may lapse in facts or figures. There is more to the story of the African American childcare provider than is currently on record, and therefore, oral history is necessary to fill the void. “Oral history is not meant to serve as a substitute for the documentary record” (Charlton, 2007, p. 21). Instead, it is viewed as adding to information previously known or recorded.

There are many characteristics that define an oral historian, especially referring to those who consider their work as falling under this particular methodology. According to Janesick (2010) the list includes qualities such as, “good listeners”, “sensitive to ethical concerns”, and “expect the unexpected”, among many others (p. 106). These qualities define how they work within this research. Janesick also defines the method itself as seeking to “tell a story as it is”, “by virtue of telling a story, looks at relationships”, and “gaining knowledge and insight into the human condition by understanding some aspect of someone else’s lived experiences” (p. 105). All of these aspects and many more create the perfect marriage between this investigation’s purpose and choice of method.

Oral history and the narrative stories of people's lived experiences become useful in understanding a culture unlike one's own. As stated in *The Oral History Reader*, oral history can result in "the opening up of important new areas of inquiry" (Perks & Thomson, 1998, p. 25). Cultural influences greatly shape who we are and how we live our lives. Culture, as well as race, ethnicity, religion and other factors, such as social and political position, also affects our stories. Therefore, as culture is a focal point within this study, a space is created for the participants to tell their experiences from a particular place and time, one unique to their upbringing. We must remember then that oral history is not objective. Always subjective to the factors stated above, as well as other life events, each narrative becomes a source of knowledge to the reader. Each story becomes "an expression and representation of culture" (Perks & Thomson, 1998, p. 54).

Researcher versus Storyteller

Due to the nature of the research project and the differences between us, the relationship between researcher and storyteller has to be one of respect and mutual agreement. Having taught African American women within the field of childcare for over twenty-four years, personal relationships have formed, thus giving confidence that the stories heard were openly forthcoming. The experts in the writings of oral history (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Perks & Thomson, 1998; and Vaz, 1997) warn us that many experiences change over time due to memories being affected by circumstances, both past and present. Due to the nature of time potentially changing one's recollections, the researcher must be careful in judging what her participants may relate. Having no prior knowledge of the life experiences of the participant however, makes the work of the researcher less problematic. In other words, whether or not the actual stories told changed over time is not, in essence, helpful or hurtful to the results. This is

due to the purpose of the research, to connect those experiences to the present position of a career in childcare, not to judge whether the stories were fabricated, embellished, or truthful. The narratives must stand as told because there is no other alternative story or reason to cogitate within the confines of this work.

Open Mind and Open Ears

The research goal in listening to the participants is to hear their life experiences and connect their personal histories to their present careers as childcare providers in order to develop curriculum for other students of education. Fully cognizant that emotional outbursts, personal histories, as well as unnecessary information will unfold, data collection will take careful preparation and dedication to detail. Oral historians (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Perk & Thomson, 1998; and Vaz, 1997) speak of interviewees who play to their audience, enhancing stories for personal benefit. Though it is understood why someone may feel the need to do so, it is not the intention of this study to determine whether this phenomenon occurs within those interviewed. It is implicit however, to allow the participants enough leeway to answer all questions and embellish on their stories without placing judgment. The stories told are their lives as remembered, without having lived the lives of the participants; there is no room for personal interference in their recollections.

The Oral History Interview Process

The process of selecting the interviewees was based on those I instruct and on their willingness to tell their stories. Each of the women involved has received training in the classrooms across Georgia between the years of 2007 and 2014 where I teach. They became

very familiar with my graduate interests while pursuing my doctorate as we have spoken about the process many times over the years. They expressed excitement in working with me to complete this study. I have chosen the participants based on the mutual respect we have for one another and the feeling that they will be open and forthcoming in the interview process. The women involved are all childcare providers of African American descent. The cities or towns in which the providers work are Savannah, Brunswick, Waynesboro, and Guyton. Those that participated were carefully selected after creating a list that included providers that were well known to me due to the many classes they have taken over the years. Needing a cross section of women for purposes of validity, the list was narrowed by certain factors such as age and years of experience. Individuals chosen range from as young as twenty-eight to the age of seventy-four. They also are differentiated by the years they have worked in the childcare industry. One has worked in the field for only two years, up to the oldest participant who has cared for children for forty-six years.

The participants' are diversified by the size and classification of the facility for the purpose of a wider perspective on similarities or differences in type of care given. There are two providers each from family childcare facilities, group facilities, and childcare centers. Each interview was conducted privately. The conversations took place either at the interviewer's or interviewee's office, childcare facility, or home.

Multiple interviews were held with the six individuals selected, until all predetermined questions were exhausted or the stories related became redundant. Examples of research questions are contained within as Appendix A. Having each question answered to the satisfaction of the purpose of the study required listening, note taking, and recording of each interviewee. Cognizant of the fact that discourse is of upmost importance between the

interviewee and interviewer, immediate recall was extremely important as not everyone allowed recording, and writing detailed notes proved difficult as the conversation moved between us.

Making Meaning from the Research

The study of African American women working in the childcare field was constructed in a qualitative manner and written using fiction. Fiction is a form of narratives or story telling; both are linked to case studies and are often seen describing African American text. Scholars such as Delgado develop fictional characters to help us understand Critical Race Theory. His use of "Rodrigo", the main character in *The Rodrigo Chronicles* (1995) becomes our storyteller and "give(s) our lives that richness and depth which only stories can provide" (xv). As Wolcott (2009) explains, the telling of one's findings in this format provides "rich examples" from fieldwork experience (p. 87). Morrison, in both *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970), used fiction to teach her readers African American culture, racism, and history. "Figures take shape, form patterns, and play about the pages", the words of Morrison paint a picture of the results narrated after research was completed. (p. ix)

There are several alternatives to arriving at a form of inquiry when using qualitative analysis. Wolcott (2009) supports one descriptor as he states, "nobody insists that dissertations must read like dissertations" (p. 89). Saye (2002) reinforces the idea of a dissertation as fiction in *More Than "Once Upon a Time": Fiction as a Bridge to Knowing*. A former graduate of Georgia Southern University, his work affirms the format I chose. Saye writes, "fiction can be qualitative educational research" and then proceeds to prove it within his text, thankfully paving the way for others to do the same.

Another format, which supports fictional writing, was found at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. A session, entitled “Yes, But is it Research?” was presented in order to debate the use of writing fiction as a dissertation. The debate between Dr. Eisner and Dr. Gardner encouraged those interested in another format for research results. Though no conclusions were made that day, breakthroughs occurred that formulated the foundation of fictional writing as an acceptable means of work within the educational field. Dr. Eisner, the scholar in support of writing novels as dissertations, tried his best to convince those listening that no matter the final work published, the fieldwork is just as “exhaustive, systematic, and exacting” as any other investigation in the social sciences. These statements, and many others have opened up doors that did not previously exist for students and researchers (Saks, 1996, p. 407).

Fiction, along with its use of characters, settings, and plots, makes the story “come alive”. Belief that the use of fictionalizing my participant’s stories allowed them to speak freely without fear of repercussion also sustained the extremely personal inquiry. As each participant being interviewed was allowed the freedom to remember what was important in their lives, stories came forward that revealed the inner most reflections of each person’s experiences. As Rowland writes, “we live our lives steeped in stories” (1990, p. 291). We are surrounded by stories in the media, in print, in film, but also in our daily lives. Our parents told us bedtime stories, tales about our ancestors, and encouraged us to read fiction. Our teachers throughout our formative years made us write to help us gain both language skills and experience our creative side. We learn about our world through stories.

The beauty of writing fiction is there is never just one interpretation. Truth is in the eyes of the storyteller, to be related in a manner for all who read to choose their own “reality”.

Readers may find themselves empathic to the characters in the narrative if certain parts of the story seem familiar to their own lives. On the other hand, those who want to learn of people unlike themselves may find more within the fictional work than within the reading of charts, tables, and statistics. Fictional characters based on life stories come from someone's heart and soul, not from a computer lab or calculator. The emotional connection is felt between storyteller, interpreter, and those who choose to read the text.

The fictional story in Chapter IV adhered to certain principles of writing within this format. Each person interviewed was assigned a fictional name. However, their words were their own, and no attempt was made to change their verbiage. Settings, such as place of birth, schools attended, or things such as church affiliations were fictionalized for the protection of those interviewed. Plots were also fictionalized to enhance the reader's experience. One important plot used was the "Book Club" meeting in Chapter IV where the ladies met to discuss the book, *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 1991). The insertion of this plot held dual meaning to the story and the research. First, the book itself signified a special place in the experience I had while in the Curriculum Studies Program at Georgia Southern University. It was the reading of Collins' work that immediately spoke to the research pursued. *Black Feminist Thought* took the author of this study on a journey that opened the door to observing just who the strong African American female is within our society. It was a natural enhancement to the questioning pursued within the work presented here. The second reason it held meaning within the fictional account is that it presented a text that some of the actual participants of this work have read, and truly spoke to how they feel about their race.

Finding the Connections

Kilbourn (1999) coined the term, “structural corroboration”, when speaking of the strength of writing fiction from interviews within research (p. 27). In analysis of data from stories told, the main focus must reside in the original purpose of the thesis.

Each experience must be reviewed for connections to the ultimate research goal. If interviewees relate stories not pertinent to the investigation, those particulars must be disregarded. Answers by participants may sound unbelievable to the investigator, but need to be cross-referenced for similarities and differences to all other participants regardless. It becomes extremely important to a work of fiction to ensure the core of the story includes as much “fact” as possible.

A coding process was constructed in order to identify each aspect of the interviewee’s answers. A hand coding process was created to connect the data. Qualitative research requires the interviewer to find connections within the analysis in order to make conclusions based on the study. “Reporting research interviews does not simply mean re-presenting the views of the interviewees” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 267). Rather, it requires careful consideration of all conversations along with the use of an unbiased perspective, an aspect of this type of inquiry often criticized in the field.

In order to determine if answers provided showed overlap, each interview question was labeled with a number and letter and then each participant’s answer was placed beneath the question. It became clear, once written in this manner, which answers coincided with one another. Collection of each interviewee’s response was written in their exact words and language use to also observe whether or not this had any bearing on culture.

Once the researcher felt no new data had been obtained, continued questioning was concluded. However, upon further investigation into the participant's life, such as home visits, more data was entered under the appropriate interview question if new information was provided.

Reliability

Many researchers are seen as outsiders who want to write about a person or group that they do not understand. I am not an outsider in the sense that I have taught African American childcare providers for twenty-four years. However, being from a different race, culture, religion and perhaps, socioeconomic background, I consider myself an outsider. Oral history as a methodology acknowledges these differences between researcher and participant, as does the title of this dissertation, "May I Walk Beside You"? I listened, heard, and wrote their stories, but I can never "walk in their shoes".

Though I believe the participants and I have close relationships, my questions could be construed as invasive and become problematic to the results. Allowing the participants confidentiality and the knowledge of protecting their names and actual locations reassured them and opened the interview up for full disclosure. This protection was twofold: the first being Internal Review Board approval from the University, which includes informed consent, and the second, the results of the inquiry written as a fictional depiction of the life of a childcare provider, protecting names and places.

An additional barrier to the success of this inquiry was to prove reliability. This was accomplished by using multiple interviews and visits to the childcare facilities. The establishment of creditability was already in place between investigator and participant due to

their history in the classroom. The characteristics from all interviewees also enhanced reliability as all participants had similar, if not identical beliefs.

Acknowledging Those Involved

Another plus to hearing the stories of the participants and writing their experiences was that oral history methods often provide closure or a sense of self-assurance to those involved. Whether there are benefits or risks, the participant's chosen were fully aware that their responses are for the purpose of public research at a university and educational advancement as to their place as African American childcare providers.

Previously accomplished work with oral history as a methodology has allowed those often not heard to be acknowledged in their importance (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Kincaid, 1985; Kinloch, 2010; Witherell, 1991). Groups seen as suppressed, such as women, homosexuals, and African Americans are often studied through the lens of oral history. These voices, often underrepresented, strengthen those in favor of oral history methodologies. The capacity for “change, especially from the perspective of minorities and women”, is central to the use of oral history (Frisch, 1990, p. 2). African American women working in childcare in South Georgia definitely fit within these confines, which solidifies another reason for choosing oral history methods.

Storytelling Formats

Oral history also likens itself to the use of folktales, fiction and proverbs. Reading historical accounts of African Americans teaches us that their use was typical of preserving the history of the culture. An example such as “our people have always known how to season a

pot”, speaks to the proverb of the African American (Jones, 1986, p. 196). These narrative formats, while not exclusive to African Americans, make the use of oral history as a methodology natural to studying the lived experiences of the participants. Narrative inquiry connects interviewee to interviewer. Authors Clandinin and Connelly (2000) teach us that narrative inquiry must be understood as a context and “context is ever present” and “necessary for making sense of any person” (p. 32). The context of the life experiences of the participants within this study will help the reader make sense of a world unlike the one presently known. This is due to each story reshaping present history. As He (2003) describes, “such inquiry enables researchers to develop understandings, compassion, and empathy” (p. 145). Although there are infinite stories to be told in a variety of ways, listening for a folktale or proverb was an important part of the interview process.

Taking on the responsibility of oral historian, opened a pathway to listen and interpret the words of the African American childcare provider. The story written allows readers to see these women for who they are and to understand their career placement. There is no finer way to become socially responsible to our students than to try to understand their lives as fully as possible.

CHAPTER IV THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDCARE PROVIDERS

Introducing the Ladies

It is 4:00 a.m., the sun not yet replacing the moon as Yvonne stokes the wood embers in the small brick fireplace to generate heat. The house creaks and moans as winter makes its way between the weather beaten crevices of hundred-year-old timber. Though it is the year 2014, this old house has not been remodeled in over two decades, and Lord knows it needs it. The floors are warped, the paint is peeling, and the curtains could use replacing, but Yvonne has neither the extra funds nor the time. Careful not to wake her only child she quietly moves around the small living room to the kitchen, cold floors awaiting her bare feet. Setting a pot of water to boil for tea, hoping she remembered to buy bread, she begins to prepare her meager breakfast. Luckily, once she arrives at the childcare center, she will be treated to the cook's leftovers, if there are any once all the children are fed. For now, toast, a smidgen of jam, and tea will have to suffice. Being the end of the month and winter, it will not be the first time in her thirty-six years she has started her day hungry.

Yvonne goes to wake her son, though she hates to disturb him due to his late night of studying. He must not miss classes before his afternoon job. Education means a better future for him and the possibility to start a career that pays well with benefits. She will do anything she can to help her child graduate college, no matter what. Raising him alone has not been easy, even harder are the "knowing looks" from those who judge when hearing she is a single mother trying to raise a son. Well, never mind the looks and sounds of fake compassion, those are easily ignored, it is the look she sees in her son's eyes when other young men his age talk of their fathers. That hurts the most. Mother and son have made it for twenty years together, and if God

has any say, which Yvonne knows he will, she will watch her son receive his Bachelors degree next Spring; the first one to do so in their family. Perhaps she thinks, starting to save a few pennies a week might be a good idea, as a new dress and hat will be needed for that occasion. More toast and tea mornings it will be then!

Jerome's father is nothing more than a bad memory, unfortunate, but just one more horrifying experience in Yvonne's life to create the empowered female she has become. Lucky to be alive, and living with the scars is tolerable because the good Lord did see his way in allowing the injustice to at least give her Jerome. Pregnant at sixteen, just one more reason for the White people who saw her to roll their eyes and bring down judge and jury without any information in their so-called privileged lives! That's fine, Yvonne knew she made bad choices back then, she had the scars both inside and out to prove it. Not that it was anyone's business, but she still viewed racism as alive and well where she and her son lived.

As Yvonne dresses in the bright scrubs her workplace considers a uniform, she wonders for the millionth time what it might feel like to be putting them on to work as a nurse or doctor, knowing that time will never come for her. Not because she isn't smart enough to attend college, but because of the children in the center; the ones she is not willing to leave, the babies who have no one else to hold them, soothe them, or kiss them.

Having nowhere else to turn twenty years ago, alone, pregnant, high school drop out, the childcare industry was willing to give her work, and she has been there ever since. Thank God for that one bright light at that time in her life. All Yvonne had ever known in her neighborhood were the caring, loving hands of mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and friends who watched out for all the children in the projects. They may not have had the big fancy play yards, the designer

childcares, nor the State licensing that ensured safety measures, but they had each other, and love, plenty for any child who wanted it; need was a given.

Being raised in the South as a Black woman from a poor family created the love and compassion forever set in Yvonne's heart. She realized at a very young age, experience makes you who you are, and Yvonne may only hold a G.E.D., but education did not always come from within the walls of a brick building. In her experience, most of it came from the streets, some of it horrible to see and experience, but like the loving, caring mothers, she too, learned compassion, and "right from wrong". Unfortunately, she was too head strong to listen to that advice as a young teen, but thankfully, instilled at a young age, positive aspects won out eventually, leading her to the life she now had; not a rich one in terms of money in her pocket, but one where she knew she was making a difference.

Refusing to allow the discrimination, downtrodden neighborhood, or poor education to discourage her, she set her mind at an early age to do everything possible to keep future generations from falling through the cracks. Cracks that seem to never get filled when you are born an African American in the South. Sometimes Yvonne would stop and wonder why that was, why was it so hard for children of color in America? Not just Black children, but all "Others". She knew about slavery, she could trace her roots back to actual family members living beneath its whips and chains. She had read about Civil War times in her hometown of Littleneck, Georgia. She was familiar with the history of Jim Crow, Brown versus the Board of Education Act of 1954, and of course, Martin Luther King Jr., and his March for Freedom. Yvonne read all she could about African American history. She felt the knowledge gained from her readings would help the children she worked with know their past. She understood this

because the more she read about her own people, the better she felt about herself and her path in life.

Yet, even with her quest for knowledge particular to the history of the African American raised in the South, this was the 21st century, so why the racism, the injustice of the school system, the "White supremacy" still alive and well? This question, she knew, was not just in her mind, but thankfully in the minds of many other people of color; those who studied it both informally as she did, and formally, as Jerome was currently doing in his college. In fact, she was anxious for today's workday to begin and end as it was her Book Club night. The current title, *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins (1991) was not one of her favorites. She had already read it twice, but it was the discussions with her "sista's" that made it worth every moment. They might all be African American childcare providers, but they were more like family. Amazing, she thinks, as she sat finishing her tea, how wonderful it is to have friends like Carrie...

Carrie

The alarm clock started ringing just as Carrie was reaching to stop it. Another week begins before the sun rises in the morning sky. Fine by her, she has always been an early bird, ever since the days back on the farm. No sleeping in then either, as chores were expected to be finished before breakfast, no matter the time of year. Thankfully she was raised in the Deep South of Georgia where winters were mild, most of the time. "Stop daydreaming of yesteryear Carrie and get yourself up," the voice in the back of her head rang loud and clear! Amazingly enough it sounds like her mother, who the Lord felt he needed many years before Carrie was willing to let her go. Her very core, the person she is today, the childcare owner, director, teacher, nurturer, and a million other attributes, all because of Mom.

Carrie never realized as a child she was “privileged”, as for most African Americans in South Georgia in the 1960s rural life in a very small town was common. Her parents owned their land, uncommon to her race, and, it was over one hundred acres, a property like one she had never lived on since. It had grassy meadows and large oak trees as far as the eye could see. Flowering plants of every variety lined the walkways, surrounding the house, and blooming with a fragrance Carrie could still smell. The horses, cows, and other livestock roaming free as farm workers tended to the tall, perfectly planted corn, cotton, and soy. A garden so large it’s produce could feed the entire town. There were fresh tomatoes, onions, potatoes, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, and the greens, oh Lord, the greens! Collards, bitters, kale, and more, covered the rich soil from spring to winter. Then there was the fruit, apples, pears, and blueberries. Children came from all parts of town to pick the sweet and juicy richness that grew from the land. As far back as Carrie could remember, her mother never stopped children from taking what they could carry off on their own. She probably would have fed the whole county if she had the time. Perhaps it is due to growing up in a place, not only prosperous with food and soil, but also rich in heart and love for children, that set Carrie on her chosen path.

Life never seemed a hardship as it seemed to be for so many other African Americans both back then and now. Besides living off the land, Dad was a longshoreman and Mom taught at a prestigious college in New York before marriage and six children. Strength came to her mother like the mules that pulled the hay wagons of yesteryear. Mere weeks after birthing each child, Mom would go back to the factory where she worked for twenty-two years. She choose not to retire until the factory forced her hand by closing up shop. Her mother would say to her, as well as her siblings, “The good Lord made Black folk strong so that we could further our

race.” “Laziness is not tolerable, and following God’s path, loving family, and education are what life is meant to be.”

Those words created the motto for Carrie’s childcare facilities. “Live for God, love thy family, and education for life”. Carrie lived her life in this manner. She had it inscribed on all her company letterheads and childcare walls. More importantly, she tried her best each day to instill it into the hearts and minds of the children she took care of in each of her centers. In fact, all her staff lived by the same expression, why else stay in such a difficult business?

Her mother would kick her right out of this bed if she could right now! Lying around thinking about the “good ole days” when there was work to be done. Did she think the childcares she owned were going to open on their own? There were families depending on her, she needed to get moving! Oh, sure, a few more minutes would be lovely, but too much had to be attended to before she could even begin to think about Book Club tonight. Discussing the strength of African American females was tonight’s topic, and she would not miss it for the world. Besides, young ladies just starting in the same field of work, like Ida, would be there. Carrie was anxious to see what Ida’s brilliant mind had to offer to the conversation...

Ida

The smell of bacon and eggs wafted through her kitchen as Ida began breakfast for the six little ones soon to be running into her arms. Sizzling bacon and coffee smelled like home to her. Sounds of eggs cracking and frying, while fresh baked bread sprang from the toaster, spoke of comfort and love. Ida remembered all of these sights and sounds growing up and she was determined that the children in her care knew the same. A handful of cold cereal and a small cup of milk were all most of them knew before attending her childcare home. She did not really

blame the parents for not cooking; they had deadlines, traffic, and “bad” hair days to attend to before dropping off their children. Not to mention dealing with a toddler who did not understand why Mommy left him at Ms. Ida’s everyday, yet knew the signs of getting ready. Ida realized how important she was in the lives of the families she took in, but in a child’s eye, no matter how much fun Ms. Ida’s place was, Mommy always came first. It was a hard pill to swallow sometimes as a childcare provider, especially when you knew a parent was not “doing right” by their child.

“Oh Lord, don’t let my mind go there right now,” Ida said out loud. The parents she dealt with were difficult to say the least. It almost seemed like most were still children themselves. Single parents, young as eighteen, high school dropouts, menial labor employment, all the “stereotypes” of living as an African American in Georgia. She tried hard to understand the culture, her childhood experience in a large metropolitan city being so different. Sometimes she wondered how her race was going to overcome the oppression she saw and felt since moving to this “city”. People looked the same as she did, complexion, hair texture, but speech, education, mannerisms, that was a different story! Ida, let it go, you do not have the time to let it worry you this morning, as the bacon began to smoke and the doorbell began to ring. But mind you, she said to herself, “I will have to contend with some of the issues later,” as she ran towards the stove and yelled towards the door, “ Come in”.

Finally, everyone was settled, parents were out the door, and the children were busy eating. It was a moment to sit down, take a breath, and watch their eager, cherubic faces gobble up breakfast. Utensils were ignored by most, fingers dropping just as much on the floor, as well as in their mouths, but they were happy. As Ida watched her small brood she came to another realization, she was making a difference. Besides a hot breakfast, these children were learning

self-esteem, independence, and more. A floor could be swept and mopped, a hundred times a day if necessary, but children learning to feed themselves were a task her parents left to her, and she knew it was important. Sure, she thinks, “I have an undergraduate degree and a Master’s of Business Administration. Who says owning my own family daycare is not putting all that education to work?”

Ida was aware that her success in such a short time came from that education. Both she and her husband had advanced degrees. Her husband’s degree had made a career placement with enough income for them to choose a home in a middle class neighborhood. Though all African American, her neighbors were successful in the eyes of “European Americans”. No one outside the area was aware that two to three generations lived within a household to create the “impression” of being middle class, everyone helping make ends meet. But, there was one thing every family she met so far had in common, the idea of putting religion and education right beside family. Knowing that her childcare was run like a private school, but one the neighbors could afford, Ida believed led to her full house.

Before having any more time to relax and think about her career choice, the children were squirming to get down from their highchairs and play. It was going to be another busy day of teaching, changing diapers, potty training, cooking, and more, before Ida would even see naptime! Hopefully all six would sleep today at the same time because she still needed to finish the Collin’s book if she were going to add anything intellectual to tonight’s Book Club conversation. Ida could not wait to see her mentor, Leah. If not for her experience in this business, Ida might not be such a success. Plus, Leah promised to bring her some home cooked chitlins, something Ida never did learn how to prepare, but loved! Time to teach the children the

color green. After all, St. Patrick's Day was just a few months way, and an important part of the culture in this town, whether you were Irish or not...

Leah

Leah really needed to stop watching her "fight movies" late into the night. She was obsessed with Bruce Lee, "The Rock", and all the others, but it was not conducive to rising at 5:00 a.m. in the morning. But, Lord, forgive her, her irrational desire for fight films was almost as ferocious as her passion for operating her childcare business. One had nothing to do with the other, and those who knew her could not understand her choice in movies, but that is who she is, and nothing, not even her deeply held faith in the Lord was going to change that fact. Fighting was in her blood; perhaps that was the attraction.

Leah attributed her fighting spirit to her parents. They fought through thick and thin to put food on the table for her brothers and sisters, all six of them. Yet, looking back at how they struggled never seemed important to her as a child. In fact, in the deepest parts of Georgia, where she grew up, that is how most African Americans lived, day-to-day, week-to-week, and paycheck-to-paycheck. Asked now to describe her life as a child she would have to say, "good". If you grew up with a mother and a father, had food on the table, clothes on your back, a large, loving family, and the Lord in your presence, you "was rich". "Poor was reserved for the Blacks who did not have a place to call their own", her momma always told her.

Yawning loudly, as nothing was quiet about her, Leah stretched her body to its limits. "Lord, give me the strength," she prayed, as another day begins and the promise of non-stop activity from children surrounds her. "Was she getting too old for this business?" she asked herself. Never! Not as long as the good Lord helps her to see the sun rise and set each day. She

might have her health issues, and she may have had to stop her exercise routine temporarily, but faith would see her through this trial, as well as any others thrown her way, it always has, and it always will.

Knees creaking, back breaking, and legs wobbling, Leah pulled herself upright to face the day. “I am ancient,” Leah groans to her bedroom walls. “Maybe childcare takes more out of one’s body than other professions?” It did not matter, because she was certain taking care of children was what the Lord had planned for her, and this is what she would do until he showed her another path. As she was taught, no complaints are worth voicing that God cannot hear, as living heavenly while on Earth, will take you as far as you want to go. Leah believed that with every fiber in her body and soul. Painful steps or otherwise, there were families waiting on her to open her doors.

Moving slowly down her newly decorated hallway, Leah took the time to admire the beautiful molding her husband had installed. He was the handiest man she had ever met, and thankfully, not lazy at all, like some of the others she knew. Lazy men in her eyes were an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, and set a horrible example for the struggling young men she was helping to raise. From all her reading, all she saw were African American men filling up jail cells. Well, if her husband set any example to the children in her childcare, they would grow up strong, self-sufficient, honest, hard working and educated. Leah and her husband would see to it that all the children, Black, White, Latino, or any other race, would succeed under her roof.

Leah let her mind wander as she began to set up the day’s activities. It was still only 5:30 a.m., her first child not due to be dropped off for an hour. Time for her daily meditation and first reading of her Bible, the Lord’s Prayer starting every morning for her without fail. “The Lord is my Shepherd...” the words from her mouth as natural as breathing itself. It did not matter if she

was alone in her infrequently silent home, or it was filled with the sounds of children, the Lord always heard her. Once done, she set her Bible aside, though never far from her reach. Taking care of other people's children was a task she took seriously, not always easy, but the ability to open her Bible at any moment is what set her mind at ease.

Ms. Leah, Ms. Leah, Ms. Leah...mine, mine, mine, no, no, no, these were the words most often heard once her childcare was in full swing each day. None of the repetition, refusal to cooperate, or wanting everything immediately bothered her. They were babies after all, under the age of four, and their very lives depended on her abilities to take care of their everyday needs, as well as prepare them for the future. Some of the people she knew could not understand how she came to choose operating a childcare for the last eighteen years. It was hard to explain, especially to people who did not take the time to get to know her; strangers really. Other folks, like new members at her church would carelessly voice their opinion, saying that taking in children was her only choice due to being African American. Well, ignorance was hard to ignore, but she did her best. Did she choose childcare, or did it choose her? If forced to explain, she would say the good Lord chose her to nurture and teach children, and he placed her where she needed to be when she needed to be there. In her eyes, there was no other explanation.

“On my Lord, Help me today,” thought Leah as she walked towards her brightly lit, though small, kitchen. Not only was it time to start cooking breakfast, but she had to finish the chitlins, Ida was counting on her bringing them to Book Club tonight. Funny how White folk thought every Black person ate those things, her husband could not even stand being in the house when a pot was simmering on the stove. She sure hoped she could teach the children in her care to think for themselves, and to make choices based on their own ideas, not to “follow the crowd”, or “act White”, but to just accept what the good Lord gave them. That is how her best friend

Rose thought, too; no wonder they both ran successful childcare businesses and got together as often as possible. Leah hoped Rose would attend tonight as well; she had not seen her since Bible study last Wednesday...

Rose

Watching the sunrise with a steaming cup of coffee was Rose's favorite way to begin the morning, especially in the winter. Living her whole life in hot, humid weather, whatever winter brought was all right with her. Though the stickiness of summer never fully left her mind, the welcomed cool air was something she'd never get enough of, no matter how long she lived. Building on the sunroom to her home was a bit costly, but because it doubled as an indoor playground for the childcare, it was tax deductible. This space had replaced her tiny kitchen as the place to congregate. Whether it was the children, their parents, her girlfriends, or a family event, everyone seemed to love the sunroom. Rose had designed it herself, and with Leah's handy-dandy husband, it was built in no time and within her budget. Floor to ceiling glass panels allowed the sun to stream in, casting shadows in different locations throughout the day. Rose loved plants, and even though she could not have some of her favorites around the children due to their potential danger, she had managed to fill the room with strategically placed greenery and flowers to catch each ray of light. The children loved naming the plants and helping to water them. Rose knew these were life skills important to the children's growth and development, so even though her husband joked and called it "child labor", she understood that even the smallest chore like watering her plants helped children learn responsibility. As Rose sat musing over her special room, clouds began to roll in and cover the sun. Even shadows were interesting to watch as they caused the light to change, reflecting off her prisms, hung in every window just for that

purpose. She wasn't complaining, even if it rained all day, she had plenty of activities planned to keep the children busy.

Taking a few more minutes to enjoy God's creation was fine because the pancake batter was resting in the refrigerator and her daughter was cooking breakfast today. They took turns at making the meals for the children, which was just another reason Rose loved having her daughter back home. Rose had learned years ago when first starting her business that preparation ahead of time was necessary to get through the day with very young children, especially all those years when she worked by herself. The joy of having her youngest daughter by her side was too wonderful to describe. It not only helped as Rose was getting along in age, but passing the business down to her own kin was going to make a lasting impression on the whole community.

Rose never encouraged her daughters to become childcare providers. In fact, she pushed them to go as far in education as they desired, knowing that twenty years ago this business was looked at unfavorably in the community as "babysitting". Plus, no one was ever going to get rich! "You had to be the kind of person that believed the families and children needed you," Rose told anyone who was willing to listen. She knew deep in her heart, she was that person. She had plenty of love to give to children, plus she knew the families counted on her to take good care of their offspring so they could work without worry.

Of course, both children were raised in her childcare since birth. Mary, her eldest went on to become a nurse, and Rose could not be prouder of the work she is doing at the local hospital. The small South Georgia community they lived in needed to see African American women succeed in both higher education and in the workplace. Her daughters were accomplishing just that. Rachel, her youngest, achieved her undergraduate degree in early childhood education last year and could have taught in the school system; yet, she decided to

come home and work with Rose. Still amazed at her daughter's dedication to the children and their education, the parents of her childcare children could not be happier. Side by side, Rose and Rachel prepare African American children for their future by teaching them about their race, instilling a love for the Lord, and giving them the life skills they feel are necessary for success. The ideas her daughter develops for their daily curriculum makes Rose's job even easier, not to mention the physical and mental strength of her youngest.

Still watching the sun and clouds mix in the sky, Rose takes a moment to open her Bible. Her best friend, Leah would be ashamed of her if she thought Rose was not praying daily. They met in church over twenty-two years ago when they were both thinking of opening a childcare. "Too bad they didn't have the money to go into business together. They would have made a great team," she said to herself out loud. Instead, they both started their businesses in their homes, not just due to lack of funds, but because that was what parents wanted back then, a small, home-like environment. Family childcare in the early 1970s was thought of as an extension of the family, as if the child's grandmother was babysitting for the week. There were no pressures from State licensing to write curriculum, daily activity charts, and weekly menu lists. There was just nurturing, feeding, and loving a child. The business had certainly changed over the years. Rose was glad for the differences initiated by the Georgia ruling body known as Bright From The Start. Their consultants could wreak havoc on her day when popping in unannounced, but she knew it was for the protection of the children. Unfortunately, there were many women out there keeping children without proper licensing and making it hard on her and her friends who did it by the law. Her childcare group home was licensed for eighteen children, the maximum amount allowed unless she built a center. "Too late in life for her, but there was always that chance for Rachel," she said to a nearby plant. Now, both Rose and Leah had

established childcares with a long waiting list, so why move to a building? Not to mention both had homes that were fully paid for and they both had invested a lot of time and money into making them beautiful.

Thinking about her present home now motivated her to get up and move. Today was one of her favorite days of the week; the children brought something special from their homes to share. “Show and Tell” had been around since she attended kindergarten over fifty years ago. She and Rachel believed it helped the children stay connected to their own culture, improved their language skills, and increased their self-esteem. In fact, now that she had culture on her mind, she would have to suggest the next book for her Book Club when she saw everyone tonight. Rose had picked it up at a garage sale last week, *Why Culture Counts: Teaching Children of Poverty* by an author new to her, Donna Tileston. Her group was always looking for interesting books about African American women, children, issues relating to their race or history; plus anything that might help them teach the children in their care. One thing Rose could count on besides the Lord was her Book Club. Forming the group years ago with other African American childcare providers was one of her best ideas. That reminded her, she promised to bring her new recipe for macaroni and cheese to Lillian tonight; she’d better go pull it right now before the little ones hit her door...

Lillian

Dreaming of her parents, always left Lillian with a funny feeling in the morning. She was not really sure why because she loved her parents. Maybe it was because she missed them so much. Lying here now, the dream kept going through her mind, as if she watched a movie at the theater. She saw her mother in her work clothes, getting ready to walk the mile or so to the

hotel where she cleaned rooms all week. Her father smiled and whistled tunes as he buttoned up his greasy coveralls to go to the gas station. Her parents worked six days a week and sometimes even had to skip church to work on Sunday. That is all they ever knew in the remote little Georgia town where Lillian was born, raised, and still lived. Littleneck had grown quite a lot in the fifty-seven years she had been here, but some things never seemed to change, such as, which side of the railroad tracks one lived on, which was based solely on skin color. Sure, a few African Americans lived in “White” neighborhoods these days, but no one she personally knew. In fact, the ones Lillian heard about or saw at church were transplants; this neck of the woods was not their birthplace.

Remembering her childhood felt necessary to Lillian, otherwise, how else does one pass along family culture, stories, and the like, to their children? Even left over feelings from the dream were all right because it reminded Lillian who she was today and why she cared so much for children. Her mother and father might have been considered poor by today’s standards, but never in her eyes. They always lived with grandpa, never owned a car, worked all the time to feed her and her seven siblings, but if a child needed something, her parents were there to give. Lillian could even recall the time her father told her to share her sandwich with the little girl next door because she looked hungry. Never mind that Lillian had waited all week for her mom to buy bologna, her favorite! Well, as a child that was a difficult command to follow, but she realized now why her parents acted that way. Placing a child’s needs in front of your own was how God intended the world to be, and she lives by that rule as an adult, thanks to her parents.

Thinking of that sandwich made her stomach start to rumble, better go see what her husband was making for breakfast. Besides, she only had a few more minutes to lie in bed before she had to set up everything for her first child of the day.

“Lillian,” her husband roared, “ARE YOU STILL IN THAT BED??”

“Bye for now, mom and dad,” she silently whispers, “Take care of each other, I miss you both.”

Dressed for the day and ready for her first cup of coffee, Lillian limps into the kitchen, kissing her husband on the cheek as he hands her a steaming cup. Knowing just how she likes her “joe”, this second husband was a gift from God. If Morty had not drowned when her son was only eight years old, she would still be happily married to her childhood sweetheart. Why he thought he could save a child that was being pulled down river by that strong current, she would never know. He was not that strong of a swimmer, so they both got swept away. Though painful as those years were following the tragedy, knowing he risked his life for another man’s child made it a little easier to handle. Her son, now twenty-four, seemed to understand why his father died and considers him a hero to this day. Belief in God, family, and then meeting Buddy, helped save her and her son from drowning themselves, not in the river, but in sorrow.

This knee of hers was going to end her career if she did not find time to see a doctor soon. She was surely going to get cited on her record if the State consultant came to inspect and saw her sitting down, especially outside while the children ran around. In a childcare one was expected to always be on the move with the children, but the pain she was feeling was making that harder each day. Lillian had no idea how she first hurt her knee, but the extra weight she had recently put on was not helping. “Do not beat yourself up,” she said to herself. “I cannot help it if my African American genes keep me on the heavy side. Not to mention Buddy and his cooking!” She has never known a man in her entire family to cook like her husband. No one that knew him passed on an invitation to sit down and have a meal at her house, or to ask to take the leftovers home. Just like her daddy, Buddy obliged anyone, child or adult who wanted or

needed food. Come to think of it, her good friend, Leah's husband was a great cook, too. Maybe their African American mamma's taught them how to find their way around a kitchen. Whatever the reason, she and Leah were enjoying the benefits, because after cooking and cleaning all day for all those kids, who wanted to make dinner for their family? Certainly not her!

Breakfast consumed, Lillian, second cup of coffee in hand, proceeded to her enclosed garage, which had been converted to a childcare room years ago. After Morty died, the only option available to her at the time was using every small room in her home. Now, thankfully, she had a separate space. When she opened, her son was only eight, so teaching him to share his toys and space with other children was her first challenge. Being an only child, with few friends, and having just lost his father, the other children helped him acclimate quickly, taking his mind off his loss. He was a natural at being a big brother to the infants and toddlers she took into their home. Once he was accustomed to sharing not only his toys, but his mother, everything fell into place. Thankfully, her son was already school age when she first started in childcare, so she only had to deal with him along with all the others for a few hours each day. Thinking back on it now, she probably had more to adjust to than he did. Every moment was worth it, though she might not have believed so then. Now, after sixteen years of opening her home from Monday to Friday from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., she would start all over again without a second thought. Lillian believed children born these days were going to need her more than ones of previous generations. Yes, the smallest ones were often difficult and some days all she longed for was Saturday and Sunday. However, when she thinks about the results, the children who were now grown, with families of their own, in college, in successful careers of their choice, she would do it all over again. Lillian was sure about continuing to operate her childcare, in spite of her physical ailments. In fact, bad knee or no bad knee, it was the "success of the African American

children”, she said out loud, that helped her ignore the pain and limp into the extension to her home to set up the first lesson for the day.

Looking around her childcare, Lillian made a mental note to tell Leah tonight at Book Club she wanted to hire her husband to repaint. Lord! How those “youngins” could mess up walls in no time at all. She was always cleaning, wiping down toys and tables, using Clorox on the floors and highchairs; for people with tiny little fingers; they sure made a big mess! A bright new color, perhaps yellow would brighten up the often-gloomy days of winter. Thinking of Leah and her handy dandy hubby made her think of Book Club tonight, she could not wait! Sharing her thoughts with women, who seemed to totally “get” her, and never judge her, was a blessing. She had a lot to say, too, because the Collins book really made her think. She hoped the newest member, Yvonne, would be there. She heard Yvonne had read the current title three times and Lillian was anxious to learn from her interpretations. Lillian was also counting on Cecelia to be there because she has to know when her son’s wedding will be so she could get started on the gift bags she promised...

Cecelia

Even after a year, Cecelia still expected to hear her mother calling out to her each morning. It felt odd living alone again after all the years of caring for her mother, who lived to be ninety-three years of age. Her father had died at eighty-nine years old, leaving her with the sole responsibility of her mothers’ remaining years. I guess after caring for her mother for six years, she still needed more time to adjust. In fact, now that she was thinking about it, her paternal grandmother had lived to be ninety-six. Living a very long life seemed to be genetic on both sides of her family. Since Cecelia was “only” going to celebrate her fifty-eighth birthday

come January, she better get used to living alone. Maybe that was one of the reasons she did not mind being the first to arrive at the childcare center each day, as well as the last to leave. The sound of happy children filling her days was exactly the right medicine for helping fill the lonely nights.

“Funny,” she mused, “Silence was always welcome before her mother passed.” Now, it seemed to linger forever, like the wind chimes she could hear tinkling outside. Their sound, though faint, dissipated slowly once the wind stopped blowing. Wind chimes outside and music in the house were her salvation, that and reading her Bible. She often read it aloud to herself, just to hear an adult voice. It was not that Cecelia minded being a loner. In fact, most of her friends would have described her that way, even before she lost her mom. But, there was a distinct difference between being a loner and being alone. One would think she would be happy for her solitude after twelve hours a day with small children; but even their cries felt right to her. Oh, how she missed those days with her own son; all grown up at the age of twenty-four, living in the big city, and about to become a husband next summer. “What ever happened to the days of changing his diaper?” she asked herself. Maybe that was another reason she continued to work at the same childcare center for the last thirty years. She knew there were more reasons, such as wanting to see African American children learn and the satisfied smiles on their faces after eating or having a good nap. Cecelia could not change who she was just because she lived alone now. In fact, she thought out loud, “what would I do with myself all day if I retired from childcare”?

Picturing her son as a toddler, brought tears to her eyes. “Wow!” Cecelia said out loud again to the four walls. Anyone listening to her thoughts might think she was losing it! She needed to pull herself together if she was going to get to the center on time. Time to gather her

wits about her, get a quick shower, eat a little something, and go. The current director, the fourth since she started, did not tolerate tardiness; even from a dedicated provider such as her. Maybe she should drive today instead of taking the bus. Cutting expenses by not using her car was great, plus everyone knew she hated driving, but she would be late if she had to wait for this town's transport system. It was definitely not the most reliable operation.

Book Club Night: Discussing *Black Feminist Thought*

As much as each childcare provider liked working with children, hearing nothing but the sounds of their immature voices and cries created a need to talk with adults. Therefore, an evening together as adults was always welcome. Not to mention the lovely accommodations where they met and could put one's feet up! Every member loved Book Club, and even if Oprah Winfrey had not made the term and the idea famous, the ladies attending tonight probably would have started one eventually. All were avid readers of both fiction and nonfiction, whether educated above high school or not, the group knew that learning for life was the most important way to further their race. "Read for Life – Succeed in Life", was the motto for their Book Club. Each of the seven women currently meeting monthly lived and breathed those words to anyone else that would listen. Though they did not have too much luck in encouraging other childcare providers to join, the women believed they would grow with time. They all shared in the hope that they could lead by example and get more African American women to read and converse with them soon. Also, they had just found each other within the last six months, so spreading the word that reading and discussing books was a wonderful experience had not been a priority just yet. Each had only told the other women they worked with, and all had met with resistance, the most often used excuse was being too tired after caring for children all day.

Yvonne was the first to arrive, so she set about putting up the coffee, careful to only use what she knew her group would drink; the church never allowed them to pay to use the meeting room or drink their coffee. The ladies all chipped in as often as possible and brought more coffee, sugar, creamer, and cups to try and replace what they used each time. That was only right in their eyes, even if, sometimes they brought their own soft drinks or water. It always felt good to return a favor, so for Yvonne, as much as each dime counted, if she could contribute, she did so. She really was not sure where she would be right now in her life if it were not for the church. The women were coming through the door, as she plugged in the pot and flipped the switch.

Carrie, Cecelia, and Ida arrived at the same time and Yvonne hurried across the room to hug and kiss her friends. Though some of the women, like Yvonne, did not grow up with hugs and kisses. When this group got together, it was automatic. Solidarity with these other African American women is what all felt. The word “sisterhood”, often used to describe African American women who were close friends, came to Yvonne’s mind as she greeted the ladies. They may not have all been raised in the same place, but they saw “eye to eye” on many points, as Leah often pointed out.

Before those already present could even put their handbags on a chair, the others arrived. Leah and Rose were carrying boxes of homemade goodies and helping Lillian through the door. Lillian was using a cane and, those present noticed immediately. Anxious to see how she was doing, they gathered around her before her coat was even off. “Sit, sit, sit,” an overly protective Carrie said as she pulled a chair closer to Lillian. More hugs and kisses were placed on her shoulders and cheeks before anyone could ask her about her health.

“Stop all the fussin, silly women. The cane just makes it easier after a long day with the children,” Lillian said as she gently pushed their overbearing kindness away with a flip of her hand. “Having physical problems is the least of my concerns tonight. I had to be here to discuss Collin’s book, some of her theories have had me up for nights.”

“Me too,” the others chorused in unison as if practiced.

“So let us all get our coffee, and ya’all know my hubby made us a fresh apple pie to go with it!”

Ida sat down, took a sip of her coffee, and asked, “Shall we begin with a discussion about ‘safe spaces’?”

Everyone shook their heads in total agreement as they were eating pie or drinking.

“I would think that’s an easy one, as we are in a space just like that right now,” says Rose. “Does the author mean that if all of us African American ladies are together we can say whatever we want to say to each other without hesitation? Do we all agree? I might be pretty comfortable among White folk, but I find myself telling them what they want to hear, not always what I should be saying, especially some of my childcare parents, on the odd chance I take in a white child.”

“I disagree with that Rose,” exclaims Cecelia. “Why should we guard our words around people from other races?”

“No one said we should,” piped in Carrie. “But to really speak freely is to know our particular culture, according to Collins. Is that what the rest of you understood her ‘safe spaces’ theory to mean, or is it just me?”

The rest of the group shook their heads again.

“Yes, we agree,” they chorus.

“Well, that was easy, I suggest we move on to the authors discussion on all us women being seen as matriarchs,” Leah says to the group. “That is one blatant statement, if I ever read one! Does that mean we do not have men to care for us, or bring home a paycheck? Even if we do work hard in the childcare field, and portray the ‘mammy’ myth, as the author says, it does not necessarily mean we emasculate our men. I am sorry if some of you disagree, but those words bothered me, especially from an author who is African American like us.”

“I am with you, Leah,” agrees Lillian. “I am way to quiet of a woman to ever be taken as one who lords over her husband. It is stereotypes and myths such as those that keep us oppressed. That kind of thinking will never get us anywhere. In fact, the one word that kept me up nights and caused my blood pressure to rise, was ‘mule’! I am not a donkey, and I was highly offended when reading that word in the book.”

“Being described as a mule was not the only offense I found while reading,” pipes in Carrie. How about the section on sexual aggression? Sounded to me like all our men were rapists, and all us women were prostitutes!”

“We are hard-working business owners and providers, all of us sitting in this room, and walking the streets is not what I am teaching the children in my center,” Rose said at the top of her voice.

“We need to calm down for a moment,” Cecelia said quietly, forcing the others to listen. “I think you may have all interpreted Ms. Collins incorrectly. I believe she was trying to show that it is myths such as those in her book that lead people to stereotype African American women. Similar to the way we are thought of because we work in childcare. We do not believe any of that to be true of ourselves. Do you all agree?”

Heads began to shake in the affirmative, as Cecelia’s quiet demeanor took over the room.

“The author wants us to stand up and face anyone who tries to put us in a certain category. That is how I interpreted her words.” “I think we should keep her words in mind as we teach the next generation of African American women, who are currently the children we care about, that they do not have to live with these myths either.”

Yvonne, who had not said a word thus far, began to cry.

“But, I fit her mold,” she whispers through her tears. “I was raped, I am the sole provider in my family, I do work in a field where a lot of people see me as a mammy figure, and most days I feel like a mule!”

All the other women, even Lillian, who was struggling to get up without her cane, rushed to Yvonne’s side to wrap their arms around her. Ida pulled several tissues from her pocket, while Rose went to get Yvonne a glass of water.

“There, there,” they all say. “Just because you see yourself in the reading, does not mean you have become that person.”

“Just look at all you have done for the children where you work,” Leah tells her. “AND, what about that wonderful boy of yours attending college?”

“I think what we all have to remember here, is that it is books like *Black Feminist Thought* that make us better people,” Rose tells the women.

Everyone gave one last pat on the back to Yvonne and returned to their seats.

Rose continues, “We can allow her words to make us angry, we can agree or disagree, but, the one thing we can not allow it to do is keep us pigeonholed, like the many she alluded to within our race. We, including you, Yvonne, are NOT mammies, mules, or prostitutes. We are hard working, proud, African American childcare providers; let’s not ever forget that. We are proving everyday by the success stories of the children we previously kept, and by the smiles on

those we have now, that our career choice is important, and we are making a difference. Some of us, like you, Yvonne, may have started life in a rough way, but you have turned yourself into a self-sufficient, caring, childcare provider and wonderful mother. I would say you should take pride in that. I suggest we move on to next month's agenda," says Leah. "I know we were thinking of reading and discussing *Why Culture Counts* or *Teaching Diversity* because both books have titles that sound like they would help us in our childcares. However, if you all are willing to table reading them until next month I have a unique idea, are you ready?"

"Sure, tell us," says Ida.

"I think we should all tell our lived experiences, like writing our own stories? We could each write as much as we want to describe who we are, and what we believe motivated us to become childcare providers."

"WOW! I love that idea!" roars Carrie.

"Then it is settled. Is a month enough time for everyone?" asked Rose. "We are very busy women."

"Sure, after all, if so many out there view us as hard-working mules, surely we can write our own memoirs in a month," laughs Carrie.

The meeting ends with more hugs and kisses all around as the women begin to put on their coats and get ready to leave.

Shouts across the parking lot of "See you in church Sunday," resounded around the small area.

"One thing was certain," Yvonne says to herself, as she climbs into her old clunker and prays it will start, "The group may have all interpreted the Collin's book differently, but the 'safe

space' they discussed was one of the main reasons for the Book Club." Once more, she thanks the good Lord for guiding her into the hands of these women.

Rose gently maneuvered her minivan into the garage just as it begins to rain. Praying she will wake up to sunshine tomorrow for the children's sake, her mind was already thinking about how she would begin her life's story. Well, the only way to describe one's life was to begin with the earliest memories, so she would start there. Anxious to get started, she wondered if she would get any sleep tonight.

The Providers Write Their Stories

Rose Talks to Us

Born in South Florida, the only female, and the youngest of five children, Rose felt blessed to have both a mother and a father. Not to mention, four older brothers to protect her. As early as she could recall, she never went hungry or without a proper house and clothes. Both her parents worked hard, her father in construction, and her mother in a factory. Rose was a happy child and did well in school; education was seen as being extremely important in her family. Then, the year she turned nine her whole world turned upside down. She recalls, years later with the help of a therapist that she was molested by a family member. She remembers going from hardly any freedom, to none whatsoever. Her parents were already very strict, religious people. Once Rose was hurt, her mother and father, as well as her brothers, watched her every moment. Never questioning their reasons, she felt loved until she grew into a teenager, then the love began to feel more like a prison.

Looking back on her life now, it seems strange that her parents actually gave her permission to marry a thirty-two year old man when she turned fourteen. They told her it was

for the best, and that he would teach her about life. The first three years were total bliss. Rose and her husband lived near her parents and she finished high school. Rose is not sure why the violence started, but suddenly the marriage was like living in a nightmare. Being young, and not knowing what else to do, Rose kept herself busy by staying pregnant. She believed that giving her husband children would keep him happy and would change how he treated her. Six years went by before Rose realized the abuse was not going to stop. Unable to tolerate the torture any more, she decided to ask her father for help. He gave her a one-way ticket to Georgia, to a small town where her Aunt lived. Her heart breaking, knowing she could not take her children, but unknowingly pregnant again, Rose left Florida. Thinking about that day as she writes, leaving her children with her first husband was the most difficult day of her life.

“Time for a break, maybe a cup of coffee, anything to get her mind off of that awful time in her life,” Rose thought to herself. Walking quietly into her kitchen, she decides tea would be a better choice at this time of night, chamomile; the one she read helps you sleep.

“Rose, Rose, Rose,” she said to herself, “What were you thinking when you agreed with the Book Club ladies that writing your life experiences was a good idea?” Having to relive those days was painful, but concentrating on the accomplishments and the end results of all that happened was worth telling the story. After all, if her first husband had not turned out to be the complete opposite of the person she married, she would not be where she is today. She was as sure of that, as she was of the whistling kettle she had better pull off the stovetop before her whole family woke up!

Taking her steaming mug back to her favorite place, the sunroom, she sits back down at her laptop to continue. Funny, she should not call it a sunroom now, as Rose sat in a moon-lit room, surrounded by her beautiful plants, casting shadows never seen before, since she is usually

asleep at this time of night. The sun may even rise before she finishes her thoughts. Her childcare parents might be knocking at her door before she gets a wink of sleep. However, her friends need to know why she became a childcare provider to begin with, so she will write until either her eyes shut or the new day begins.

At first, her life in the small town in Georgia was appalling. All the Blacks she ran into spoke in a dialect she could not understand. Plus, it seemed to be hotter than Florida, as she remembers back then.

“How could that be possible?” she asked herself. Florida was hot too, but the ocean breezes seemed to cool the evenings off, not so in this Southern Georgia town, where the only water ever seen was a massive rain puddle or a manmade pond.

The people were so different. Yes, their skin color was the same, but not their speech, their mannerisms, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, or even the churches they attended. Why her aunt moved to Georgia was a question she asked herself everyday for the first year. At the beginning, all Rose wanted was a job, a safe place to sleep, and her children, so all the other “stuff” did not faze her at the time. God, Oh God, how she missed her children. Worrying everyday if they were being abused like she had been. Knowing she had no choice, she took a job at a fast food restaurant, the only place that would hire a seventeen year old with a high school diploma. Saving every dime, thankful for her aunt providing food and shelter, Rose still remembers the first time she ever heard about government subsidy.

Several months after arriving at her aunt’s house, Rose could not deny the fact that she was expecting another child. Having only fifteen dollars at the end of each month to save for her other children, she knew she would have to ask for help. Not wanting her aunt, who was already generous enough, to worry about the baby, Rose filed for food stamps and whatever else her

position in life allowed her. Not proud of her decision, and vowing to NEVER allow it to happen again, Rose remembered the exact place she was when she swore to herself she would become free of her husband, self-employed, and have all her children together.

Going on welfare was not her first choice, though it seemed all the African Americans back then were, so Rose took on a second job. Working two jobs, giving birth, and attending night school was by no means easy. Rose though, was never a quitter, and within three years she had saved enough money, graduated technical school, and found a way to divorce her husband and get full custody of her first three children. He never knew about her youngest, and she would go to her grave with that knowledge.

“Come on Rose,” she said to the moonlit night. “What good are you going to be to the children tomorrow if you do not get some sleep?”

Rising from her chair, looking around and smelling the sweetness of her flowers, Rose could not help but say a prayer in her mind, “Lord, thank you, my life has certainly had its rough spots, but look at me now.” Writing about her life was starting to paint a picture as to her current station in life. Perhaps turning her life around was behind her choice to open a childcare? She would have to continue her story later, but she would bet her last dollar that Cecelia was up writing too...

Cecelia Starts at the Beginning

The east side of Putney, Georgia in 1957 was considered the poorest, most poverty stricken area of the entire town. In fact, the last time Cecelia went to that area, it seemed like the only living creature left were rats and snakes. Houses where she had played as a child were either boarded up, left to rot and caved in, burned, or overgrown with enough weeds to make

them unrecognizable. Even the high school Cecelia remembered attending had been destroyed years ago by a local developer who said he was going to revitalize the neighborhood, and never got further than knocking down the school.

Sad as those memories were to Cecelia, not having to go back was actually a relief in many ways. Though she had lived here all her life, and hated to travel, at least the part of town she has been in for the last twenty years was clean and thriving. The thing that bothered her most now about writing her “memoirs” was that, as poor as she was growing up, it never occurred to her that she had been poor until she became an adult. Talking to many others she knew in the African American community, where she had been since birth, most everyone felt the same way. Not so with the children today, but she admonished herself not to go there now!

Cecelia had more friends than she could count. Growing up playing in the streets until dark, free as a bird after homework and chores, Cecelia fondly remembered her childhood. Everyone trusted one another, watched out for one another, and took care of each other. She could remember one time a neighborhood child was so sick she had to stay home from school for days. Her mother, who did not work outside their home, cared for the child as if she were family. Perhaps, memories like those, as well as many others, caused Cecelia to become a childcare provider.

Living the first eighteen years of her life with two brothers and two sisters, plus her mother and father, made for a crowded existence in the tiny house they rented. Close knit might be a better descriptive, because though space for being alone was always an issue, no one in her family seemed to care. Her father, she recalls, worked two jobs to feed his family. All week in the heat of South Georgia in the shipyards, and on weekends at the famous old hotel that was downtown, the name escaping her memory at the moment. Even though he usually worked

seven days a week, he always seemed to find time to play, read, laugh, eat, and tuck his kids in bed each night. The only thing her father did not have time for was church, which did not make her mother, a devout Baptist, happy, but putting food on the table was more important than attending services. Even her mother understood that when it came right down to it.

Church, ahhh, yes! Cecelia's mother instilled the word of the Lord into her children from the time they were born. Sundays were reserved for attending services and rest. Thinking back on those days now made Cecelia long for her mother's way of respecting the Lord. She and her siblings were not allowed to turn on the iron. Work was forbidden in her mother's house on the day of rest. But, if your school clothes had not been properly attended to before sunset on Saturday, you had better believe you would be up before the sun on Monday to iron them. No child in her mother's household was going to school looking "ill kempt"; her mother always told her and her siblings. Those words still rang loud and clear in Cecelia's ears when she did her laundry. In fact, those who do not believe that one's life experiences help shape who you are just had to read these words and then look at Cecelia's sharply pressed uniforms to know otherwise.

"Thanks, mom," she said, looking up, as she remembered the uniforms she wore while working in her childcare that still needed ironing!

The other memory that came flooding back was the silence. Music, especially that loud stuff called "rock and roll" of the sixties and seventies, was not allowed in her childhood home. Cecelia could not understand what the young people were listening to today. The only music she ever heard was gospel, and even that was reserved for church. Another reason she liked to play quiet music in the background while the children slept, loud sounds tended to make her very nervous. She assumed being a quiet person and liking silence was not only due to her mother, but after all the years of childcare, one grows very appreciative of quiet!

This assignment of writing about her life was exhausting in her mind. It was difficult to remember one's life, especially when it concerned who you were as an adult; something Cecelia never gave much thought to before beginning this task. Were they all crazy when they agreed it would only take a month? Cecelia was determined to put down everything she could remember because she already understood the reasons. People liked to look down at her race and her profession. Even people who knew her at her church could not understand why she stayed at a childcare center in the "projects." Completing four years of college, but never passing the Regents exam was her excuse; but others pretended they knew better. She often overheard someone in the ladies room at the church telling another that she was a quitter, and what good could she be to children if she was not a "certified" teacher? She ignored most of what she heard because she knew God had assigned her the position she held for the last thirty years; now writing about her life made her even more positive she belonged in childcare. It was not just God, but her upbringing, her family, and her neighborhood, that demanded she stay and help the children in the same way as those who did so for her.

Enough memories and writing for the first night, it was getting very late and she was due at the center at 6:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. She was always the first to arrive and prepare for the children, plus check the playground for safety. Before retiring for the night Cecelia knelt beside her bed to talk to the Lord.

"Bring only happiness and good health to all those I love please Lord," she prays. "Keep the children safe and allow me to teach them to be productive citizens in our world. Amen." Turning off the light and settling down for the night Cecelia hardly remembered closing her eyes before her 4:30 a.m. alarm rang...

Lillian's First Memories

Too tired after the Book Club meeting last night to begin writing then, Lillian sat down the moment the children were gone and began typing. Her ever present diet drink by her side, she leaned back in her favorite recliner, put her feet up, and opened her laptop.

“Thank God,” she thinks. “Today’s technology certainly made one’s life easier.”

Planning for the childcare, looking up menus, and now writing her memoirs, was sure easier on the computer. She could remember having to make time every Saturday to go down to the local library to find new ideas for the children. Now, “Google” was her friend. Taking a sip of her drink, Lillian began to think of her childhood.

Born in a small town in South Georgia and still living within the same town limits to this day, memories came easily. There was hardly a week gone by that Lillian did not either see someone she knew since childhood, or drive by a place she remembered as her favorite hang out. The people had changed little, but the locations of her earlier years had changed a lot. The church she grew up in, and still attended, had grown in leaps and bounds. In 1960, the congregation was around fifty people, now she believed their latest membership totaled over two hundred. Maybe in some towns that did not seem like a lot of growth, but for this neck of the woods, it meant a bigger building and more. Lillian also remembers how hard her parents worked on increasing the size of her church. Even though both of her parents worked and held down a household of eight children, they always found time for the church. Her father was a mechanic at the local garage; back then, the only garage. His knowledge and handling of tools came in really handy when the church began to expand. People were amazed that someone who held a monkey wrench all day could hammer nails like a big time construction worker in the evenings.

The Black folks back then were considered very poor. Lillian did not think that way until she grew up and could actually see the difference between middle and poor classes as an adult. Like all her current friends, especially the childcare providers in her Book Club, being “poor” is a relative term. If your family had food, clothing, and shelter, and got to attend school, then poor was not how you described yourself. In fact, if truth were told, “rich” would have been Lillian’s term if she had been approached as a child. Lillian knew she was loved because she had seven sisters, a big brother, a mother and a father, and hundreds of kinfolk who showered her with love her whole life. Having them in her life was what being rich meant to her. Thinking about it now as she writes, Lillian realizes a child only knows the meaning between rich and poor when an adult shows him or her. That is how it was in her childhood and that is how she was determined to keep it today in her childcare. She vowed to always teach the children that if you are loved, fed, clothed, housed, and kept safe from harm, then you were rich. She could definitely see, now that she was writing about her life, how connected her experiences as a child were to her profession as a provider. She plainly saw that being loved and nurtured led her to want to do the same for others; especially now when so many of her race seemed to be growing up with teenagers for parents and single moms. She felt she could help, almost like a fill-in parent, or a partner to all those who struggled to raise children alone. Having a father and a mother was important to her, so if she had to play one of those roles in her childcare that is what she would do. Even the children who had two parents still thrived under her loving care.

The hard part was dealing with some of the parents of today’s generation. They saw rich or poor in terms of “things”. If those parents gave their preschoolers a bunch of fancy toys, then they believed others in the community saw them as rich and successful. Lillian and her friends

felt this was wrong, but it seemed whenever they voiced their opinions they were told to mind their own business.

“Stop it,” Lillian sternly told herself. “You are supposed to be writing about your life. Get back to the task at hand. Think about the parents of the children in your childcare later.”

So, where was she? The buildings in her small hometown, that’s where she had left off.

The church may be the only building left from her childhood that actually grew over the years. More of the places she remembered were now gone. New establishments have replaced some; others have gone out of business. Unlike other towns in Georgia she has been to, at least her hometown kept up with the growth in other ways. It was nice to see new restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, and clothing shops popping up all the time. The nicest part was the town council tore down the old buildings so no eyesores were left standing for the homeless or snakes to inhabit. That, she knew, was not the norm for some of the other places her friends lived. Though sad to see some of her favorite places leave over the years, growth meant prosperity for her birthplace, not to mention a waiting list for her childcare. “Enough writing for now,” Lillian tells herself. Buddy, the usual cook in the house, had to work late tonight, so it was her turn to get up and start something for dinner...

Ida Begins Her Story

Ida thought it amazing that she and her friend Rose were both born in the same city in Florida. There was a twenty-five year difference in their ages, so Ida imagined the world she grew up in was totally different than the experiences Rose had felt. Even though Ida knew they were both “big city” girls, she was anxious to read the narrative of Rose’s life and compare it to her own. She bet the other ladies in her Book Club would also be amazed at the differences.

The fact that just because they were both born in West Palm Beach, both African American, both considered poor, and now both childcare providers, did not mean they had similar life experiences. She bet a lot of people, if questioned, would think they had the same life. What did people know anyhow? So many, both Blacks and Whites, in her experience, were quick to jump to conclusions. She had read somewhere it was called a “metanarrative,” sort of like an unconscious stereotyping. Ida thought she might have to look that up and tell the ladies about its meaning. Now, however, she only had a few hours to begin her life story before she had to go shopping for next week’s food for the childcare, best to get her thoughts on track.

Ida thought her childhood was “pretty good.” She remembered how important school and church were to her mother. Her mother raised her and two of her siblings alone until Ida was twelve. Having no idea what happened to her biological father, but being the oldest, she calls herself to this day a “church baby.” She can remember staying at church for one reason or another six out of seven days a week. All of the other African American women in the church helped raise her and her siblings. Someone was always there if her mother had to work late or go to her second job. In the 1970s it seemed like the whole community pitched in to help one another. Maybe, Ida thinks, that is why she is in childcare, to help a small portion of her neighborhood. That and being a business owner, which she always desired as she grew up. Thinking about how important the church was to her mother now made Ida realize she needed to thank her for showing her the Lord’s way.

“I’ll call her later,” Ida said to the empty house.

Ida never thought life was hard for her mother when it was just the four of them. In fact, now that she is an adult, she actually believes her mother’s life became difficult after marrying the father of her two youngest siblings, born when Ida was thirteen and then again at fifteen. She

could not really put her finger on why she felt that way about her Mom. Maybe her mother liked to work and have the church ladies help raise her first three “youngins” instead of staying home with five. Her stepfather would not allow her mother to work. As an African American male, he saw his station in life as the sole provider in the family making him important to the community. Ida always seemed to know that her mother felt differently. It was almost as if her mother did not fit the mold of the “typical” Black woman. She was not a nurturer, she never gave out hugs or kisses unless asked, and she spoke to even her youngest children as if they were adults. “Cold” would be the term that came to Ida’s mind if she were asked to describe her mother. Not that her mom did not love Ida and her siblings, she just did not seem to like being a mother.

Her stepfather was a different story. He might have been stern and a true disciplinarian, but he showed his affection for all five of them with gigantic bear hugs and wet, sloppy kisses. He never played favorites even though three of them were not “officially” his; unlike the partiality she was seeing in some of her childcare parents today. The best part was Ida did not even mind getting those hugs and kisses at the age of twelve or even up until he died last year. Maybe because she was starved for attention from her mother; plus, the church ladies, though nice, did not show emotions either. Now she was thinking like a psychologist, and her education was in business administration!

“Daddy,” she said, looking heavenward, “I miss your hugs, but thanks for passing them on.”

Ida wondered why she felt the need to open a childcare when she thought about her mother. She knew from talking with other providers that they felt the reason they were in childcare was directly attached to having a wonderful, loving, nurturing mother. Maybe it was because of the lack of nurturing in her childhood that Ida now feels the need to give as much as

she can to other children. She also feels, now that she is writing her life on paper, that someone has to be there for the African American children, as well as others, in today's world. Ida views the children as lacking something, maybe it is a strong male presence like she had, so many growing up without knowing their fathers. In fact, her husband helped fill some of that void when he was around the childcare, he loved playing with the children. Ida also saw children come to her house looking like they had not eaten a nutritious, home cooked meal in a long time. Fast food seemed to be the norm with a lot of parents today. In her childcare the children would always get their vegetables, fruits and milk, and protein allotment, and not just because the State required it. Ida also wanted a house full of children. She and her husband genuinely like kids; and while they are still trying to have a child of their own, after twelve years of marriage, having a family childcare in her home is the next best thing.

“I am getting ahead of myself,” Ida said out loud. “Get back to the memories of my upbringing. Hard as some of it is to face.”

The most surprising part of Ida's childhood was the manner in which she was raised once her stepfather came into her life. Before him, she would have to describe her life as “typically” African American. Her family lived in what could only be described as the “projects.” Situated on the “other side of the railroad tracks,” existing on food stamps, Medicaid, and other government subsidies, along with hundreds of others from the same race, Ida never knew any other life until Dad moved them to a slightly better neighborhood.

School, though always important to her mother, who only had a G.E.D., was deplorable until Daddy sent her to magnet schools. Her whole life changed then. Daddy always said, “If you are Black, you have to work twice as hard to succeed in this White man's world.” Ida remembers vividly the first time he raised his voice in her momma's church at a revival and

yelled those words. Hundreds of members nodded their heads in agreement, though afterwards, many came up to her father with questions as to why.

From that day forward, starting in 1990, at the age of thirteen, Ida began to attend “White schools”. “I felt privileged”, Ida thought, as she writes. Teenage girls from my neighborhood, much less of my race, did not attend those schools. She had to ride the city bus, the Metro train, and walk, just to get to school. The first of its kind at the time, it taught science and technology. Ida attributed her excellent grades and hard work in elementary school to her full scholarship to the program at the time. Looking back on it now as an adult, she wonders if the school wanted their “token Black”? Whether that was their motive or not, completing high school in that atmosphere opened doors to Ida she would not have attained elsewhere. She believed it is now called “Affirmative Action”, used today to allow children of “color” to attend universities or other schools to meet a quota. She would have to study that some more now that she thought about it. One thing she understood was that Affirmative Action was seen as lowering the standards for African Americans to attend colleges. Her grades were always exemplary, so being a straight “A” student had nothing to do with that premise in her case; she believes she got there on grades alone. Whether it was something agreeable to her or not, it allowed her to have a fabulous education. It did however come with its own set of price tags. The most hurtful one being the African American children who would not associate with her, or called her “white girl”, “know-it-all”, and other derogatory terms.

Thinking of those “bumps” in the road would have to wait until the next day when she had more time to write. The children were about to get up from naptime, and having had these last two hours to begin her narrative was all she was going to get for the rest of today. Time to

start preparing for the afternoon. The children always woke up starving, so better get to the kitchen and prepare their afternoon snack...

Carrie Sits Down to Reminisce

Last night's Book Club meeting was still rolling around in her head as Carrie stepped into the shower. She was always pleased to discuss books with her friends, but she was especially glad they had decided on the new idea of writing about their own lives. Maybe they could combine it all someday into their own text on African American childcare providers! Carrie knew from all the books out there about African American women, not a single one described the lives she and her friends lived. They were an important part of today's society she thought as she began to rinse off, so much so, that she believed several parents would be lost as to how to raise their own children without the help of the childcare provider. She had been in the business long enough to prove it. Stepping out of the shower to towel off, Carrie thought about where to carve out enough time in her crazy schedule to write. Well, it just had to be done, that was all there was to it. She would just ask her husband to pick up something healthy at the grocery store tonight for dinner, so she could start the minute the childcare center closed.

Carrie thought her day would never end. The family childcare her daughter was now in charge of had a State visit she had to attend. The Center had two employees come down with a stomach virus, so she had to pitch in and help. Then, the new church childcare she was in the middle of getting approved by the State had issues with the Fire Marshall! Carrie thought she might never get home! The good Lord must have had it planned all along. He had humor; Carrie was as convinced of that as she was that he existed. Why else would he choose the day she wanted to write her life story as one of the most difficult?

Even after all these years, Carrie would never describe herself as a Georgia girl. Born in a small town just north of the Georgia, South Carolina border, and with most of her family still within five miles of the dividing line, her true home would always be the place nicknamed “High Point of the Lowcountry.” Swampy marshland, mosquitos, alligators, and shellfish brought memories of home to her. Sure, maybe only the shellfish was something to be cherished or enjoyed, but home was home. The “Lowcountry” had a culture different than others she had ever seen; which until becoming an adult and traveling, was all she knew. The area definitely had a unique breed of people; whether your skin was Black or White. Carrie did not think people outside of the area could understand that, so she would do her best to describe it here in words that outsiders could read. Plain English, she supposed, was how she would narrate her childhood, otherwise, future readers may not understand.

Thinking about the vernacular of the area she was raised, helped Carrie to understand why her parents pushed her and her siblings so hard in school and other areas. As a child she could not understand why the other Black children would call her names, avoid her, even throw rocks at her and try to ruin her beautiful clothes. Now, as a successful businesswomen and adult, she understood. Her family was considered different. They lived very well by anyone’s standards in the low country of the 1960s and seventies; especially for “Black folk”. Writing it all down now brought the pain back. How could one’s own race act like that to another family? Yes, her family had money, land, and a beautiful house, even employees to work the farm; still, was that any reason to throw rocks at a child? Maybe, Carrie thinks, that was the reason she eventually opened her first childcare, so she could protect children from those who might not like them just because they were seen as different. That difference did not have to be the color of their skin; it could be anything. Children deserved to be treated with respect as human beings,

not ostracized due to no fault of their own. She had her parents to thank for teaching her that. Could she help it if she was born into an affluent African American family? Was she to blame if her mother and father liked classical music, Broadway shows, and ballet? Not the typical entertainment of choice for most of her community, but why should that matter?

Reading Shakespeare while growing up, learning to play the piano, and even exceling at karate was the norm in her family. Not so for those who worked for her father, or their children. Her four siblings, as well as her, were each taught to enjoy the “finer” things life had to offer. Her parents never considered the name calling a problem, all they saw was a better future for their children. Even if all the exposure to the “White people’s culture” made it difficult for her and her brothers and sisters, Carrie knew it was her right to have it, no matter the consequences. In fact, she learned to live by the old saying “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The difference between the chant and her actual thoughts were, the sticks and stones did hurt, as well as the words, but after repeating them your whole life, you begin to see their real meaning. Carrie knew that her life was different than everyone else who was born Black, but she had the good fortune to be surrounded by a family who believed it was as much their right to succeed as anyone else’s. She had a mantra she found herself chanting often, even today, when jealousy and pettiness reared its ugly head again because of her success.

“A few more memories to jot down, and then time to rest,” yawned Carrie loudly.

Hearing her husband at the door, along with her youngest child, she knew time alone was about to end. Not that she minded, she loved her family, and looked forward to whatever time they could carve out together during the hectic week. It was difficult to find time together because of the attention she had to give to the childcares. Her family understood, and they helped sometimes on the weekends with some of the big jobs like touching up the walls or

planting flowerbeds. Family meant everything to her, but right now it would have been nice if traffic were heavy coming over the bridge so she could have continued reminiscing. Well, there was always tomorrow, the Lord willing. Carrie stopped writing and got up from her chair to see what her husband and child had in mind for tonight's dinner and a movie, one of their favorite forms of relaxing together...

Leah Shares Her Life

Leah sat down immediately upon coming home from church. She knew her wonderful hubby would be heating up the stew he made last night for their midday meal. That gave her a little time to kick off her shoes, get a bottle of water, and start her narrative. She had so much to say, but then when was she ever silent? Laughing to herself, knowing her life story would probably be twice as long as her friends due to her "expressive vocabulary," she began.

"God is in my heart and in my soul," she said as she writes. Living by faith her whole life, and feeling like she was meant to live a heavenly life while on Earth, was what woke Leah up every morning, and put her mind at ease every evening. Her parents were not particularly religious, so everyone always asked her where she became so zealous about the Lord. Her standard answer was he told her to follow him, and so she did. Not wanting to question her further, most people just shook their heads in agreement or changed the subject.

Her family did attend church and said their evening prayers; they just did not live and breathe by the Lord's word, like Leah did now. Daddy and Mamma were good people though. They worked hard, her father in construction, and her mom at home raising her and her five siblings. If there was one thing she knew her Book Club friends had in common, they all came from large families. She sometimes questioned why that seemed the norm with Black folk, but

she supposed it did not matter since they were all happy and healthy, at least in her family. Some of her readings told her it was due to the history of the African American and their lives as slaves and farmhands. What that had to do with having a family in the 20th century made no sense to her. Leah thought maybe it was due to religion, as she did with most ideas. Then again, maybe the African American women of her mother's time just loved to have children? After all, it was cheaper back then, every child did not have to have the latest technology like the kids today and gas was not over three dollars a gallon!

Anyway, she was very grateful for her large family. Close as "peas in a pod," most of them still lived within "hollerin" distance to this day. In fact, one of her sisters, as well as a brother, lived across the street from her. It was a sad day for her family when her father died in 2000. Leah was thirty-eight, but she might as well have been eight years old for how lonely and sad her father's passing felt. She cried for days on end, and knew in her heart, if not for her family and the good Lord, she might still be crying now. Her daddy was the best! He not only provided for their large family, he showered the whole neighborhood with his love. He would go so far as to cut down a tree from his own backyard if someone needed firewood and could not afford it. He taught her and her siblings the meaning of honesty, bravery, hard work, and loving thy neighbor. In fact, Leah would have to credit her daddy with the fact that she "knew exactly who she was", no one in her life, Black, White, or Brown, was going to stop her from living the life her father meant for her.

The other African American neighbors during her childhood considered her mamma fortunate. Mamma was a housewife, though Lord knows with a brood like theirs that did not mean she ate bon-bons and watched soap operas all day! Between cleaning, shopping, cooking, bathing babies, watching out for the little ones, and all the rest that comes with mothering six

children, her mother could have owned a childcare, too! After all, everything Leah watched her mother do to raise her and her siblings describes how Leah does her job. Leah made a mental note to thank her mamma for showing her how easy it was to care for six youngins. It was her mother that showed her the way to her present career, now that she had time to think it through. Leah had always thought it was the Lord that made her a childcare provide because his presence was so important to all her decisions in life. Now she knew he only guided her. Her mother actually needed to be given all the credit. Leah would have to share that with all her childcare parents tomorrow...

Yvonne Stays Silent

Yvonne knew she'd have to tell the other ladies why she would not be able to write her narrative. She just refused to relive the experience. Maybe some day, but not now. They were her friends; they would just have to understand. Not everyone could explain in words, much less on paper, why they became a childcare provider. She just knew she belonged with children. Talking about it would not give her, or anyone else clear answers.

Rose and Her Journey into Her Career

Though she would be eternally grateful to her aunt, as well as all her family that helped back then; Rose found a way to move into her own apartment after only three years. Welfare helped then, as well as food stamps and finding a better job at the local hospital helped pay for the small one bedroom place. Rose also attributed the work she did on the children's ward leading her to wanting a career in childcare. The children needed her loving touch, and not just those who were ill, like at the hospital.

It took Rose nine years of hard work and sacrifice to become self-sufficient enough to get off welfare. She worked hard at the hospital and even started a reading and play center for the children who were well enough to leave their sickbeds for a while. Those who were not able to leave their beds, she brought toys, stuffed animals, and books to read to them. She knew that it took more than a doctor's care and medicine to make those children well again. The hardest part was watching the ones who she knew would never go home. In fact, if a child died it took Rose days to stop crying, though she never allowed her own children to see her tears.

Her children were her greatest achievement in life. All four helped around the house with chores. The oldest was always ready to pitch in and take care of the youngest when Rose was asked to work late. They each learned how to cook, and to this day her second daughter helps her with her side career as a caterer. She makes the best fried chicken and collard greens the townspeople ever tasted. Rose taught them all that and more, but the most important thing she instilled in her children was to obtain the highest education possible. Each one of them studied late into the night as they grew up. Rose even remembered having to tell them to shut the light off and get some sleep. She was all too familiar with how much a good night's sleep meant to a person. She was so proud of each one of her kids. Her oldest child was currently attending nursing school; already working on her Master's degree. Her second oldest was working side by side with Rose in the childcare, and working with an online program towards her degree in education. Her third child was an accountant in a big firm in Atlanta, which comes in real handy at tax time when his mother's business needs his help! Then there was her baby, who was attending night school to become an electrician after he worked all day to perfect his skill with the biggest electric company in town. Yes, education was definitely important. Rose made sure the parents in her childcare saw the success education created by having her children visit as

often as possible. When she had the parents and children get together for special events, like birthdays, she always invited her own children to come and socialize.

She felt blessed, even with the events of her earlier years. Those first years alone with her children may have been difficult, but it was worth every hardship. Rose believed in setting an example for her children, so she herself decided to go back to school when they were very young. That was certainly not easy with a full time job and raising four youngsters alone. Her parents had also stressed education and she never felt whole until she obtained her two-year degree in early childcare.

Another example she set for her children was giving them an education in the Bible. Rose felt everyone could benefit from learning the words of the Lord. Learning did not just come from a schoolroom in her eyes. No matter how tired from work and school, Rose took her children to church on Wednesday nights and Sundays without fail. Her boss at the hospital knew never to schedule her on a church night. Church was her saving grace, as was her church family. Sometimes, back in the years while she obtained her degree, if it were not for the church ladies, she probably would not have graduated. If one of her children came down with a cold, it was a friend from the church who stayed with the child while Rose worked or attended classes. Once, she recalls, her youngest son needed to complete a project that Rose had no time for, plus did not even understand. A church couple drove her son to the nearest big city to buy the supplies one Saturday, as well as taking him back to their home to complete his work. They would not even let Rose pay for their gas or her son's supplies. She remembers the smile on both their faces when he not only received an outstanding grade, but was later awarded a blue ribbon for the project. "It must have been a science fair," Rose thought out loud. That is probably why she felt

helpless for science was never her best subject. Yes, being a member of her church meant the world to Rose, and she was still a very active participant to this day.

The only blight on the years while furthering her education came when her oldest son lost his arm. All the doctors at the hospital tried their best to save it, but an infection had set in that could not be controlled.

“Amazing,” Rose again spoke to the walls around her, “All that modern medicine and her son still had to have his arm amputated.”

Today, he has learned to adjust well, though it still bothers him when performing certain tasks with his mechanical arm. Rose almost had to take a second job to pay for it, had it not been for all her years at the hospital. The wonderful staff had a fundraiser for her son, which amazingly covered the entire cost.

Rose often hears about feelings of animosity, even racial slurs between her race and White folk in her small town. She herself never felt that way, and believes that all people should be treated equal. As far as she could see, the staff at the hospital, mostly White doctors and nurses, never treated her son or her any differently when they were in need. The folks she worked with then were friendly, outgoing, and treated her with respect. In fact, whenever the subject of race comes up, Rose chooses to just put on a smile and say, “You mean cars going around a track?” Perhaps, she muses, her lack of acknowledging racism is why she cares so deeply about the children in her group home. It does not matter where they come from, or how dark their skin is, all Rose wants for the children is to help them succeed in life.

“Wow! Look at the time,” Rose exclaimed.

I need to get into the kitchen and start the chicken for tonight’s job. One would think owning a group daycare and having eighteen children around the clock would be enough work,

but not for Rose. Feeding people was just another one of her many talents she had learned from her maternal grandmother. It not only gave her great pleasure to feed people, but it helped the families of the children in her care; since all the leftovers from her catering jobs went home with those who needed it. Lord knows, the parents today only know how to drive through McDonald's, or so it seemed to Rose. She would ask her daughter to help her today. Tonight's wedding had over fifty guests, and that was a lot of chicken, plus "fixins". Sorry baby, I know you would rather sleep in on a Saturday, but there is work to be done, Rose thought, as she hurried to wake her daughter...

Cecelia Relives Her College Years

Having the breakfast dishes cleaned, and pouring another cup of coffee, Cecelia was grateful for her quiet solitude on Saturday mornings. It was perhaps the only day of the week that she had entirely to herself, unless there was a special function at her church. Not today, today she would face the task of continuing her story for her Book Club. She had actually been looking forward to it all week, and hoped no one would call while she was writing. She better get her thoughts in order before one of the church ladies called to ask her to bake for tomorrow, as they often did at the last minute!

Never really caring for school as a young child, Cecelia wonders how her desire to go to college became a necessity for her. She remembered two items that made her earlier years in school unpleasant. The first was that she was a mamma's girl. She followed her mother around the house like a puppy, never wanting to lose sight of her. Her mother often had to make one of Cecelia's older siblings take her outside to play just so mamma could get her housecleaning done, so when Cecelia started kindergarten, she was miserable. She cried everyday, in fact, she

still remembered being made fun of because she was still whimpering when she left home for the third grade. Silly as that sounds now that she was recalling those years, it probably accounts for why she still missed her mother in the house now that she was gone. It also made sense that she wanted to work with children, her motherly instincts, and love for babies was just who she had always been and how her mother had been with her.

The other reason school was not a happy experience for Cecelia is because she grew up in the 1960s in the Deep South. Racial tensions abounded in all schools back then. Being African American in Georgia certainly had its moments once Martin Luther King Jr. got started. Cecelia remembers the first day she and her schoolmates were put on a bus to go clear across town and enter an all White school. She had never been more scared in her life. She had never played with a child of another color, and it seemed like all the teachers hated her and her friends. “Those were not easy times,” she recalls out loud. Eventually, things settled down and seemed to be all right. Cecelia even made friends with the White children, but preferred her family and neighborhood friends. She did not think about it at the time, but now as an African American adult, she could see why thoughts like that might seem racist. She never considered herself that way, she has friends now from other races; she just still felt more comfortable with African Americans. Maybe it was because they lived like she did, enjoying the same food, attending the same church, and facing similar challenges as a Black woman. She really could not put her finger on why, but she was too old to change now.

Going to college was even harder for Cecelia than her elementary to high school years. Never learning to drive until she was much older, she took the city bus out to the college. She was always told getting a good education would help her succeed in life, so on the bus she went,

rain or shine. Leaving college with only the knowledge gained, but no diploma, she decided to try again. No one was ever going to say Cecelia was a quitter!

The very following semester after dropping out of the first program, Cecelia applied to the local technology school. Even with four years of a University education, without a diploma, she had to start over. Of course, classes came easily, and Cecelia obtained her two-year Associates in Education. Her last semester in that program defined her life. She was sent to a childcare center near her home, located in the “projects”, to student teach. That became home to Cecelia, and she is still there, going on her thirty-first year teaching the three year olds. She attributes staying there for her entire career to the children. They remind her of the child she was when growing up in the area where the childcare is located. They face the same struggles that life in a low-socioeconomic environment presents. Cecelia sees the drug dealings on the streets, the homes that are falling apart, and the look of hunger in the children’s eyes, so she stays, hoping to make a difference.

“Reliving those times is exhausting,” Cecelia said to herself. “Writing maybe fun at first, and reading over your own life certainly helps you to understand who you are today, but, who knew it would take so much out of you? I sure hope the other childcare providers are having an easier time of it than she seemed to be having,” she continues to think to herself.

Leaving the final chapter of her life for later, Cecelia decides to go out and tend to her beautiful rose garden, a passion she also feels she inherited from her mother...

Lillian’s Pathway

Lillian turned on her laptop, waiting for it to start up her programs. One of these days she was going to have to bite the bullet and get a faster one. She never thought at fifty-four years old

she would love the newest technology as much as she did. Her husband was always buying new programs and other items to make his computer “high tech.” Until recently she was fine with his hand-me-downs. Now the “tech-bug” was attacking her senses and making her more like him. She better stop thinking about faster laptops because on their budget she would have to live with the one she had until it stopped working. Hopefully that would not happen in the middle of her narrative. Maybe she would call her husband and ask him to pick her up one of those thumb drives. After all, reliving one’s life and spending this time writing it all down was worth keeping. She hoped her child would read it when she was finished, it might help him understand why he had to share her affections with so many other children all these years.

Getting down to business, Lillian began to think of her years in school. Like so many of her friends in the Book Club, she grew up in troublesome times. Never fearing school in the early 1960’s, it was not until busing was forced on her race in the 1970s that school became a place to “just get through” daily. Once, Lillian remembers asking her mother why the White kids hated her so much. Her mother’s answer is forever ingrained in her heart, “Just try not to hate them back.” Lillian recalls that she never considered being Black as a problem until the day the “N” word was thrown in her face on the school’s playground, along with a handful of rocks. Those days, and many that followed, once the schools became integrated, were full of hate coming from children who were taught to act that way. Lillian never considered that racism was taught when she was its target. She knows better now that she has taken classes about racism where the teacher speaks of the term as a socially learned experience. That often saddens her greatly, her only recourse is to try to teach the children in her care to accept all people for who they are, regardless of skin color, religion, or culture. Those events in her life lead her to working with African American children in her childcare mainly for that reason.

Even today, in the 21st century, Lillian can still feel the eyes that follow her through some of the stores downtown. She understands that the world has come a long way since her experiences in school, no more separate bathrooms or counters for “Blacks Only” at the restaurants. However, there are still places she did not feel comfortable shopping; most of them owned by generations of “White folk,” born and raised in Littleneck, Georgia. But then, so was she! Writing about those times was cathartic, a cleansing of her soul. She now had another frame of reference for why her owning a family childcare was so important. She needed to play a part in making sure the children today never had to personally feel how she did in the 60s and 70s. The African American children she took care of needed to know all about those times because she knew it was important. To her, if you do not know your history, you cannot know your future. That was one of her favorite sayings from a book, though Lord knows she could not quote it exactly at the moment. Plus, humankind needed to learn from their mistakes so they would not be repeated. Now that she thought about it, living through those times kind of made her an expert on the subject. No college degree needed to teach that to her children!

Though education was very important to her parents and stressed constantly in her childhood home, Lillian stopped at eighteen as soon as she received her high school diploma. When she thinks back on it now, she realizes that none of the girls in her family were encouraged to attend college. She attributes that to lack of funding, her parents really never had the money to help any of her siblings. The girls worked early in life, and her one brother was given all the extra dimes the family could pool together so he could further his education. Never considering whether that was right or wrong, it was just like that in her family; Lillian also worked to help her brother. Not for very long though, she met a much older man right after high school and married him before the summer had even ended.

Out of all her sisters, one did not agree with her parents philosophy on only encouraging their brother to go to college, so that sibling ran off to the big city and made her own way. Lillian is very proud of her sister, as she not only obtained a four-year degree on her own but also went on to work in a prestigious position in Washington, DC. Her sister eventually held positions of power that those in her family never thought possible for an African American female. Not bad, Lillian thought, for an African American woman raised in the Deep South. Her sister made everyone in the family proud, and Lillian often had her come into the childcare and talk with the children. Lillian believed her sister set an excellent example for young African American children, and being able to retire at fifty-seven and move back home made it even nicer for everyone.

Lillian never felt jealous of any of her siblings. All were successful in her eyes, whether going to college or not. Success to her meant a roof over your head, food on your table, a loving family and friends, plus the ability to pay all your bills. Lillian knew she had all that and more. Education was still at the top of her list of priorities, but not for herself. She felt too old to go back to school, but she would read and take classes as much as time allowed so she could help the children in her care. Stressing the importance of a good education was for them now, they had a future to prepare for, and Lillian already had a career that she loves. She enjoys teaching them and she knew she was good at, degree from school or not.

Even with all her hard work, people who did not know her very well still asked her why she never went back to school after finishing high school. She believes that was in the good Lord's playbook, and she has never been one to question his will, so, married at eighteen, then divorced by the age of twenty-one from an abusive husband, Lillian and her two year old son had to make it alone in the world. That day, knowing she had to provide for her son, but not willing

to trust anyone to watch him while she found some menial labor, Lillian began to spread word through her town that she would take in other children so mothers could work. She never looked back.

“I think I will stop and catch a nap,” Lillian said to herself.

Setting her laptop aside, and thinking she would finish her story later that afternoon, her eyes closed before the computer even had a chance to shut down...

Ida Moves onto Higher Education

Ida knew from talking with other childcare providers, especially her friends in her Book Club, that she had the highest level of education of all of them. She never felt like that made her better than any one else, just more prepared. After all, all of the women now writing their life experiences were older than she was, and had been in childcare for a much longer time. Some of them had been running their own business taking care of children for longer than she had been on Earth. Learning from them was just as important to her career as all the years she spent in college. Ida would have to remember the next time they saw one another to tell them how much their years of experience meant to her, because she was often told by those who first met her, she came off as a “know it all!”

Being African American came with its own set of problems, but Ida knew that the fastest way to overcome them was to obtain a degree. Her parents stressed higher education from the time she started elementary school. They encouraged her and helped her with homework, allowed her to take music and dance lessons, and helped her attend the best schools in her city. Her high school experience, as well as her grades and extra-curricular activities landed her a full scholarship to a prestigious university. She was not happy at first that it was a historically all

Black university, but money was money! Once there, she seemed to fit right in, and became acclimated to the culture of the school. Suddenly forced to experience only her own race for the first time since toddlerhood, she remembers being surprised at how much she seemed to fit right in. In fact, Ida was so comfortable and happy; she was unwilling to leave after the first year. Even with other opportunities, Ida stayed and graduated top of her class in 2002. She also never considered herself a beauty queen while growing up, but was crowned Miss Homecoming in 2001. The highlight of her entire experience was meeting her “cutie pie”, as she refers to her husband, during freshman orientation. Her life was so sheltered that he was not only her first boyfriend, but the only man she ever dated, loved, and had a relationship with in her life. Writing it down now seemed crazy as she recalls he graduated on the same day they got married! Her graduation came the next semester after his.

“He walked across the stage to receive his diploma that morning, and I walked down the aisle in my wedding dress that night,” she recalled out loud, the idea of it all seeming impossible now.

Happily married with four-year degrees was not enough for her or her husband. Believing in education for a lifetime, Ida took a job to support her “cutie pie” so he could go back for his first Master’s degree. Not wanting to be outdone, as soon as he finished and could support her, Ida completed her post-baccalaureate in Public Administration. She attributes her drive to continue her education to those in her childhood that said she could never make it in this world. Remembering a counselor, who was white, in high school that used the words “her kind,” as he told her she would fail, or be “turned out.” Ida took the anger she felt that day and used it as ammunition to fuel the fire beneath her. She remembers thinking to herself that being an

African American may make “success in life harder to obtain,” but that she was going to prove them all wrong.

Thinking back on her words now makes her even more determined to go further in the future, but for now Ida uses that passion to teach the children in her childcare that nothing can stop you if you want something bad enough. Certainly not the color of your skin or the fact that you live in the “projects.” Taking a moment to rest her eyes, she glances up to the banner still hanging across their beautiful new home. Ida should take it down as it had been up there for weeks, but the bright colored letter on the silver foil said, “Congratulations.” She hung it up when her husband graduated from yet another Master’s program! She was so proud of him; she cannot bear to remove it. Besides, the parents in her childcare home need to see it because so many of them talked like they could never become anything in life due to being Black. Ida never believed that. Even with more opportunities, Ida still sees a lot of African Americans with low self-esteem, not even attempting to go on to higher levels of education. That kind of attitude should not be tolerated as far as she was concerned, it rubbed off on the children, and that is the last thing they needed to hear.

Her “cutie pie” was the best! He knew she also considered going back to school, but there were other things that took priority right now, like their very first home, and the childcare she had just started. He was already talking about getting his doctorate, and though she supported him fully, they also had bills to pay. Maybe one day they would find a way for both of them to attend a university again, for now, a wonderful marriage, a home all their own, and their success in business was enough. Honestly, she thinks to herself, if that counselor could see her now!

Now that Ida could go back and read her own words, she feels even stronger about her decisions in life.

“I have achieved the American dream,” she said to the banner on her wall. “I came from what most people would describe as “nothing,” and look at me now. I am only thirty-five years old, but I am a homeowner as well as an African American female business owner. More importantly, I am making a difference for others who are starting life just as I did. Who better than I to show them how great life can be?”

Ida figured she better leave the last part of her story till tonight. Her “cutie pie” was due home with the groceries any minute, and she needed to help him unload the car. She could not ask for a better man, and to think he was the only one in her life other than her father. Life was great, but she knew as an African American woman, it had not come easy...

Carrie: Her Years of Education

The next few hours were totally hers, not something normally found in Carrie’s busy life. Thanks to her husband, he made it possible for her to have this rainy Saturday morning to herself. Curling up in her favorite big chair, feet ensconced in her fluffy, pink slippers, a comforter all around her, Carrie felt warm, protected, and ready to continue her story. This was actually beginning to feel good. After all the years of living her life, re-living it was fun! Maybe that was because she never really felt anything but blessed.

The next experience she needed to write was about her education. Carrie knew from very early in life that hard work and continued education would make for a successful life. Her family had instilled those ideas into her head and she was trying to do the same with her childcare children. No one had to tell her anymore, though her entire family did to this day

whenever they were given a chance. Carrie only had to look at her childhood home, or watch how hard her parents worked to confirm her thoughts.

Though her family had plenty of money to send her to any university, plus her grades were excellent, Carrie was so attached to her roots and her family that the only place she wanted to attend was the local technical school, only a half-hour from her home. Not to mention, she had skipped two grades and was a mere sixteen when she finished high school. Sheltered by all her older siblings, the “baby” needed to stay close, at least for the first couple of years. So, when she first began to pursue a higher level of education, not really sure about her focus, she came home everyday to study and sleep in her childhood bed.

The first two years breezed by for Carrie as she took business classes, still undecided about her future endeavors. She knew she wanted to be in a field that took care of others, it was just a part of who she had always been. Nursing, and eventually owning a home for the elderly was initially circling around in her head. She had grown up around a lot of elderly aunts and uncles and was always the one to help them at family events. She loved listening to them share their stories, passing down the culture and the history that was her roots. Taking business courses, she felt, was the first step to becoming a business owner. Carrie saw owning her own business as being a “success” in life.

Well, Carrie thinks back now, life has a way of getting in the way of one’s plans. A bad marriage, a child, and then caring for her dying father-in-law, stopped her progress for the next four years. Her first husband may not have turned out to be the person she fell in love with, but his daddy was the best. So, even after she obtained her divorce, when she found out his father was dying, she moved in to care for him till he took his last breath. That experience led her to return to school because she was anxious to begin where she had left off.

Up to this point in Carrie's life, owning a childcare was not in her plans. She had always been meticulous in her drive to succeed, so setting her sights on elderly care at the time was her only focus. "When did all that begin to change," she asked herself now? Probably not for several more years of twists and turns in her crazy life! First, there was her second marriage in 1988, at the ripe old age of twenty-three. Then, there was her second child, coming after their second year of marriage, just as she was progressing through nursing school at a prestigious university in South Carolina. Unfortunately, that pregnancy was hard, and complete bed rest forced her to quit school again! Being hospitalized nine times before her beautiful daughter was born tended to get in the way of her studies.

People reading her life experiences would think this was certainly the point Carrie began a childcare in her home. After all, she had tried three times to graduate from college, and with two small children, it made sense. No, her sights were still set on elderly care and owning that type of business. Her next move was to work as an office clerk in a well-known restaurant in Georgia and give her body and mind a chance to heal.

Husband and children in tow, Carrie moved her family close to home again in order to take advantage of family who would take care of her babies while she worked in town. Like her friends at the Book Club often said, "the Lord seemed to be in charge of her life". Only a few years into her second marriage, Carrie found herself the sole caretaker of yet another dying father-in-law. How she ever became a childcare provider instead of an owner of elder care still baffles everyone who knows Carrie.

It is now the year 1994, and after watching another father-in-law suffer through cancer and die in her arms, Carrie felt she needed a break. Thankfully, her aunt had left her a home and a trust fund, plus her second husband did quite well. Carrie stayed home with her two daughters

until 2001. Right as the New Year began, Carrie's next-door neighbor asked her if she would take in her child so she could find a job. Not having the first clue about other people's children, but having always been a loving, kind, nurturing spirit, Carrie agreed. The career she has held for the past fourteen years was born that day. It would be many years before Carrie found the time to return to school, this time for a degree in early childhood. Carrie knew deep within her heart, the Lord had put her on the path she now walked. What she still questioned every once in a while was why it took him so long!

Hearing her husband's car pull up in the driveway, Carrie saved her work and closed her laptop. "This was an excellent place to stop," she says. I think I will spend the rest of the day with my loving man and finish the rest of my story tomorrow. Throwing off the comforter and running to meet him just as the front door opened, Carrie could not help but look heavenward and say, "Thank-you"...

Leah's School Years

Leah had talked to Rose and some of the others last night at Bible study and they all agreed that this writing was tougher than they had originally thought. Rose said the hardest part was talking about parts of your life you would rather forget, but then they all agreed it was important for people to know why they took care of children. Leah had asked them where they were in their writings, and everyone said the last section they had done on paper was about their education. So, she figured she better follow suit, since education was so important to all of them, and Leah definitely felt it created the type of provider or teacher you were in your childcare. She knew she was good at teaching, so maybe reminiscing about her education would help her, and others see why.

Too bad it was raining so hard, Leah sure would have liked to sit out on her beautiful new deck while writing.

“Her husband could build anything,” she said out loud.

Looking forlornly out at the large puddles accumulating on the deck chairs, Leah turned to sit down at the kitchen table, at least the light was brighter there.

Leah could never remember a time in her life where education was not stressed as important. Her parents always told her and her siblings that school was their future, and without it, they would be nothing. So, she worked hard in school, from elementary all the way through high school, and beyond. Not that school was easy when she was younger. Being the lightest African American in all her classes, Leah was often teased by the other children. The darker skinned Blacks were mean and spiteful. They spent many hours on the school playground calling her names like, “half-breed,” “yeller cracker,” and “red skin.” It still amazes her to this day that people of your own race could treat others like that. Realizing they were children did not make it easier, but it helped her understand. However, it still exists today in her hometown with adults of color. Hearing that kind of talk sickens her, but she just tries her best to keep that kind of person away from her and her family.

Education always came easy to Leah, so she concentrated on receiving excellent grades. Nothing, not even the name-calling was going to stop her from succeeding in class. Failure was out of the question, it would have meant letting her parents and the Lord down, and that was not acceptable to Leah. She always felt like she had something more to prove because of the color of her skin. She was never, ever told that by anyone, but somehow she just knew it. Maybe it was the White teachers in elementary school who looked the other way when she was picked on. Maybe it was the fact that those same teachers never called on her to answer their questions even

though she raised her hand and knew the correct response. Whatever it was, it left her with more determination to succeed in “their” world than they would ever know.

After high school, Leah married her childhood sweetheart and they are still happily together after thirty-six years. Pregnant almost immediately, Leah stayed home and raised her baby. Though money was tight, she never felt someone else should take care of her child. While her baby slept, Leah read all she could about child development and other items of interest that might help her become a better mother and wife. That love of reading eventually led to Leah attending vocational school in her hometown and completing a C.D.A., known to those in childcare as a Child Development Associate Degree; a six month credential on child growth and development.

Leah stopped writing for a moment to stretch her legs. Her doctor had said she should get up and move around more to help this bad back of hers. Hitting the save button, Leah went across the kitchen to pour herself some water, another thing her doctor advised. Thinking she sure would rather have some sweet tea, she sighed as the ice clinked together in her water glass.

“Back to work!” she admonishes herself loudly.

After completing her C.D.A. everyone at her church, as well as her family told her she would make a great childcare provider. Unable to conceive again, Leah decided she would do just that because she not only loved children, a childcare provided her with the big family she had always wanted. But, before looking into what it took to become a provider in her home, Leah felt more education was necessary to really sell parents on the idea that she knew how to raise children. Leah then found herself applying to Spellman College and attending for the two years it required to receive her Associate’s Degree in Early Childcare. Those years were tough, since she had to commute everyday, and have her mamma watch her baby, but she had a plan.

“Well,” Leah said to her water glass, “Man plans and God laughs!”

Next thing she knows, just as she accepts her diploma, her husband gets deathly ill and all her ideas of opening a childcare are put to the side. Thanks to a lot of praying and help from friends, family, and great doctors, he did recover, but was now considered permanently disabled. Leah had no choice but to take her new degree and apply for a job in childcare outside of the house. It would take fifteen more years before the good Lord saw fit to allow her to open her own family childcare.

Leah knew that was all she had in her mind to write about at this moment. Perhaps she would pick up again later after the rain let up and she could sit outside. Taking her water into her den and settling into her favorite chair, Leah turned on her T.V. to watch another one of her favorite “fight films”...

Rose Comes to Certain Conclusions

“Bye, Bye,” yells Rose as the last child leaves for the day. “They are all so lovable and so adorable,” she says as she turns to the mess before her.

Thank God, it is Friday, she thinks. It never ceases to amaze her how little children, barely two feet tall, can create such havoc! Best to get started on wiping everything down with the disinfectant first. Next comes the daily vacuuming, and of course, a million tiny toys to straighten on the shelves. Rose touches her iPhone to play her favorite tunes and puts the headphones in her ears, cleaning is so much easier to music. She really does not mind the daily mess, because to her it means the children had fun and learned something while playing.

Finally getting a chance to sit down and rest before having to prepare dinner, Rose props her feet up on her recliner. The month is over tomorrow, and that means the stories her and her

Book Club friends promised to write need to be finished. Their next meeting was this coming Monday, which only gives Rose tonight and a part of tomorrow to finish. She has too many engagements to attend at her church this weekend to allow more than a few hours to this project. Time flies when one relates their life experiences on paper! In fact, Rose thinks, writing it within a month's time flew by as quickly as living it seemed to.

Taking the headphones out of her ears, Rose settles down to complete her story. The first thing she had to do was re-read everything she had written thus far. The whole purpose of this project was to see if the Book Club ladies, all childcare providers, could find a connection between their life experiences and the positions they now held. Rose could definitely see her life leading her to caring for children.

“What exactly was caring?” Rose asked herself. “Everything it takes to make a child's life safe and secure.”

Rose knew that the caring she gave to the children everyday in her childcare center was directly related to having lived the experience herself.

Religion was another factor that created the type of provider she was today. No matter how hard her life had been, her family always made an effort to instill the word of the Lord in her heart. She knew her strength to work with children came from her belief in God. In fact, she taught her babies to pray from the time they could sit at a table. The children all learned to give praise for the food on their plates, and the kindness of their parents, loved ones, and Rose. She even took them to church with her on nights when she had to attend and their parents worked late. In fact, her parents were told from the time they enrolled their children, if Rose was not home when they came to get their kids, they could ride on down to the church to collect them.

Religion helped in every facet of Rose's life, and she made sure the children in her care were raised the same.

Reflecting on the other main purpose that connected Rose's life to becoming a provider was the manner in which her family had lived.

"Poor as dirt," she says to the four walls. "I never thought I would say that out loud."

That description of her childhood made her even more determined to try and take in children from poor neighborhoods and help them succeed. Just because certain parents had to live on subsidies from the government, just as Rose had for a time, did not mean their children did not deserve excellent childcare. So Rose did everything in her power to make her center affordable to everyone, even if she had to keep children without pay until a parent could find a job, or get their welfare check. Rose was not about to let a child live on the streets or go hungry, not as long as she was breathing. She knew personally how that could happen, especially to an uneducated African American, single mother. Rose had lived it, and she was going to make sure those out there now had a fighting chance because not all of them had someone in their corner.

Rose feeds children around the clock if they are not picked up on time. Always making sure children receive as much food as their tummies can hold; because seeing children eat so quickly and beg for seconds and thirds, tells Rose, they are hardly being fed at home. Rose would give up eating herself if a child needed more food.

"Perhaps," she says. "That is why everyone who knows her, tells her often how much they love her."

Plenty of people helped her and her own children when they were in need, plus her form of reciprocating shows in the children who smile when full.

Education is another factor Rose connects to her becoming a childcare provider. Always important in her family, but never really given the chance until later in her own life, Rose feels she must ensure the children receive all the “teachings” she can give them. Teaching the children in her care, she does not tolerate any form of intolerance for others, not from her parents, and certainly not from the babies! Rose will go to any lengths to treat all the children equal and show by example that they must do the same. She teaches acceptance and love and immediately corrects any child who says or portrays actions that seem disrespectful to her. It saddens Rose to know that stereotypes and myths against African Americans still exist in her hometown, and she assumes, the rest of the world. However, she believes that her teachings will help the children in her care fight against these ideas, and grow up to see a generation of people who care for each other, no matter what.

Rose pauses to think about her race as a whole. People often confuse the color of one’s skin with the ideals behind culture. Rose supposes culture includes skin color, but she knows it encompasses so much more. Culture, to her is where one is born, the family dynamics of their childhood, the food served in their homes, the language they learn, and so much more. When Rose hears people in her small town refer to all Blacks as “fried chicken lovers,” the small hairs on the back of her neck rise. Best to avoid that kind of ignorance, Rose believes, sometimes you cannot teach an “old dog new tricks”. That is another reason Rose loves being surrounded by children. They are born with a clean slate. If given the right teachings, love, and a firm belief in God, Rose is confident the next generation could be different.

Her childcare trainer asked Rose recently how she feels about living in the Deep South of Georgia as an African American childcare provider. Rose remembers breaking out into her biggest smile and saying,

“Where else could a woman with my color skin and my background become a successful business woman and help raise children? I LOVE it!”

Rose pauses as she writes the last few words, smiling to herself, she can honestly say that this assignment from the Book Club gals was the journey of a lifetime. She never really stopped before to think about how important life experiences were to who you become in life. Not that she would want to relive some of her past, but if what happened to her was responsible for creating the woman she is today, then all she has to say is, “THANK GOD!”

Cecelia’s Final Thoughts

Talking to Rose on the phone last night helped Cecelia get her thoughts in order. At this point in her story she was not really sure how to finish until Rose told her what she had done with her ending. I guess, thinking about it, she should not really call it an ending as her life was far from over, but this story they were all writing was due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting; so it had to end somewhere. Besides, Rose was brilliant when she figured out that tying together the most important experiences in her life to their current careers in childcare was the ultimate goal of writing in the first place. Cecelia never gave much thought to the actual purpose of writing her story until Rose pointed that out.

Grateful as Cecelia was to work in a childcare center where the children loved her, Fridays were always nice to see. After all, everyone needed some time to relax, though the Lord knows, she hardly ever gave herself much of it. Just like Rose, she had better try to finish tonight because her boss at the movie cinema, her second job, called her an hour ago and asked if she could work tomorrow. As much as Cecelia would rather sleep late and clean her house, the extra money was always useful. Hearing the buzzer go off in the kitchen, Cecelia went to get her

food, leftovers from the childcare center. The food would just be thrown away anyhow, so Cecelia had no qualms about taking it home for supper. Besides the cook where she worked was much better than she was at preparing a meal. “One of the only benefits besides the children’s smiles that came with her job,” she said to the oven, as she pulled roast beef, potatoes, and green beans out with a kitchen towel.

“O.K. Rose said to connect the main focus of my life to my current position,” Cecelia says as she begins.

Religion would have to be first. God is all-important, and Cecelia knows everything she has ever done, or will do, is guided by his presence in her life. After reading over the previous paragraphs she wrote, she can easily see that her beliefs put her in childcare. She does not think she consciously choose her career, even though she always loved children, as much as God chose it for her. Just like Rose, Cecelia teaches the children how to pray from a very early age. She believes that if a child learns to respect the Lord, that child will have many blessings in life. She also thinks to herself, blessings are sometimes few and far between for the African American children she has in her class, so a prayer or two everyday cannot hurt.

Besides religion guiding her in life and in the classroom, Cecelia believes that her mother is the main reason she is a childcare provider. Her mother taught her the meaning of caring for others. When her childcare trainer asked her to define the word caring, Cecelia said,

“Providing basic needs, as well as loving a child for who they are, no matter their temperament, their race, their sexual orientation, or anything else that defines them. This is extremely important to the job of being a childcare provider.”

She would like to shout the words from the rooftop of her building if she could, but her quiet demeanor would never allow for that.

“Maybe she could get Leah to do it for her,” Cecelia chuckled to herself. “Leah would have the voice and the guts.”

In fact, Cecelia may just ask Leah to do just that the next time they met. Letting everyone in the “projects” where she worked know the meaning of caring would not hurt a bit.

Cecelia stops to get up and put her dishes in the sink. She needs a moment to gather her thoughts as to what to write next. Perhaps a little dessert would help. Chocolate was her favorite sweet in the world. Knowing sugar was not good for her due to a history of diabetes in the family, she keeps a stash in the freezer in case the cravings get to be too much. Everyone needs at least one secret vice in their life; chocolate was hers. Cracking two miniature dark chocolate pieces from the bar she had hidden, she decides to try to write the rest of her story.

Settling back down in front of her computer, Cecelia takes a stab at the connection between her beliefs in education and what she does with her three year olds in the center. She realizes few people, especially those with closed minds, want to hear this, but Cecelia believes that African American children must be treated differently if they are to become educated. She does not share her feelings with too many people, in fact this is the first time her “sista’s” will hear of it when they read her narrative. But, her trusted friend and childcare trainer asked for the complete truth as to how she teaches, so disclosing it here feels right.

“Africa American children need more direct forms of teaching. They need to sit down, be given direct instructions, and have the teacher very close by to help them,” she remembers saying when asked.

She realizes once she said those words, and now that she sees them in print, that many educators, as well as others, may disagree. Well, she thinks, too BAD! That comes as a surprise

to Cecelia herself as she discloses her feelings because she is viewed by everyone who knows her as quiet, and rarely outspoken.

When faced with the particular question on how to educate Blacks as opposed to Whites, or other races, Cecelia becomes even more outspoken. Maybe it has to do with the manner in which she was taught in school; another connection to her current career in life. But, today, more than ever before, Cecelia believes African American children, especially the poverty stricken ones in her facility, have to do more than just “play.” She has been in training classes where the teacher has talked about play being a young child’s work, or the manner in which they learn. While she can see certain aspects of that theory making sense, Cecelia still believes that African American children need a more direct approach.

People can agree or disagree, but she has been teaching three-year-old Black children using her direct approach for over thirty years and she takes pride in seeing the results. Even though they were still “babies” when she had them in her class, many have stayed in town, or come back home after going away to college. Grown-ups now, her “children” come back to visit her, invite her to their graduations from law school, medical school, and to their weddings, or first-born child’s baptism.

“What more could a teacher want in her career?” she asked herself, “Then seeing the success of a child whose life she played a part in for just one year, maybe two.”

Yes, in Cecelia’s eyes there was a definite connection between what education meant to her growing up, and what it has meant to the children she teaches.

The last life experience Cecelia wants to get down on paper is the idea behind poverty and being Black. She understands with every fiber of her body what it is like to be born into poverty. Raised in the “projects”, and never really leaving them far behind, Cecelia identifies

with the children in her classroom. She supposes that is one of the main reasons she has never pursued another position, even being paid barely minimum wage after thirty years. If her career had to do with income, benefits, or even an eight hour workday, she would be long gone. It has to do with the children. There is simply no other way to put it. The children in her classroom did not choose to be born to parents who struggle. They did not ask to live in sometimes-deplorable conditions. They did not choose to be African American in what she believes is still a “White” man’s world. However, they deserve what every other child in the world should have; food, shelter, clothing, housing, medical care, a good education, and love. Cecelia, though struggling to make ends meet sometimes, believes in God and family. Both created the person she has become to help all the children that cross her classroom door.

Lillian Makes Connections

Lillian heard from the other women that this Monday was their deadline to hand in their life stories, so she’d better get it together. Everyone was going to do their best to connect their experiences to the childcare provider they had become.

“That should not be hard,” Lillian told herself. “I am a firm believer that the manner in which one grows up accounts for the adult choices one makes; that and you God.”

She supposes that is an excellent place to start, with religion.

Going to turn up the lights, Lillian puts on her comfortable slippers, tightens her bathrobe and settles down to finish her story. Good thing it is raining out again because between work, church, and writing this, she has not spent a moment this week watering her flowers or garden.

She says to herself, “God always provides what is needed.”

Just as she is sure the other women who are involved in this writing experience are connecting their strong religious beliefs to their careers, Lillian, knows it is number one. Religion, and believing in the Lord showing her the way, has contributed to who she is since birth. She takes those feelings with her everyday as she opens the door to welcome the little ones into her childcare home. She knows they require guidance, not just in areas like reading and writing, but in the ways of the Lord. Many of their parents are also true followers of the Bible, so it is easy to teach prayer and worship to the children. It is the one area where she has no trouble having the parents go along with her. Completely opposite from getting them to use her techniques on discipline or potty training! Teaching daily prayers and being grateful almost comes naturally to the children in her care. Sometimes she thinks they understand about God better than some of the adults in her church. Maybe it is the innocence they are born with, or just the fact that they are like sponges when so young. They absorb anything they hear, which is another reason Lillian makes sure they hear words from the Bible.

Education would have to be the next biggest connection from Lillian's upbringing to her present position. The acceptable terminology by the general population for what she does is a "provider;" but Lillian and her friends all know they are teachers. She might not have a four-year degree like some of the others, but she has taught children for more years than she cares to count. Education, as she previously wrote, has always been stressed in her life. Lillian does not just teach the children their colors, numbers, and letters. She teaches them to "stand tall," respect themselves and all others. She stresses the importance of using their own minds, not to follow the crowd; especially as they get older. Placing value on education, Lillian sends work home for the parents to complete with their children; even if it is coloring together when they are as young as two. She wants all the children to have as many opportunities to succeed as possible. She

knows deep in her heart that education will help them do just that. She hates to admit it, but she realizes that even now, in the 21st Century, the African American children she takes into her home have to work twice as hard to “make it.” In her words, “It’s a fact of life, so teaching them that early in life is all important.”

Lillian pauses for a moment to reflect on her feelings about being an African American woman who cares for children from her own race. When asked if she believes it helps in her teaching the children, she responds, “Yes, I think so.” Lillian believes that coming from the same race makes it easier for the children to understand her and respect her. She is not really sure if that is due to a similar culture, being raised in the same town, or just knowing what the children in her childcare face each day just because of the color of their skin. She is fairly certain that the factors have to do with the connection she feels with the children and their families. They may not all dress the same, enjoy the same foods, or attend the same church, but they were all born African American in what Lillian still feels is a “White” man’s world.

Looking back at the words she had just written, Lillian wonders if she should erase them. Some people might read this and think that was wrong to say.

“Well, that’s how it feels to me,” Lillian said out loud. “Anyone who disagrees is either not African American or not telling themselves the truth.”

So, she leaves her writing alone. If anyone is reading her thoughts wants to talk about it, they know where to find her!

“Those are pretty strong feelings coming from a woman who is never loud or outspoken,” she says quietly.

She might need to watch how those feelings portray themselves with the children. Maybe she better take a serious look at what she is teaching them about their race. She would not want them to grow up hating White people or anyone else because of something she taught.

“Writing down her thoughts was an excellent idea,” she says to herself. “It is amazing what one can discover!”

Before Lillian retires for the night, she is determined to write about one last idea. The connection between her childhood raised in a very poor family and the children she has currently. She never consciously looks for children from poor families; they just seem to find her. For that matter, she would never turn away a family from another race, but she has never been given the chance. During all her years in childcare, the only clients she has knocking at her door have been parents from the poverty stricken areas of town. She has never advertised in all her years of business. The families come from word of mouth. Lillian supposes poor families that live and work together share her number and that is how she keeps getting children from the same neighborhoods.

“That is O.K.,” she said to herself, “I know what it is like to be poor. God probably put her in childcare to help those most like she was when she was young; he always knows what he is doing.”

Lillian closed her laptop knowing that she was right where she should be in life. Writing her own life experiences made it clear, she was born to become a childcare provider in the very same place where she was born and raised. She saw that now more than ever before. Smiling broadly, she could not wait to share her words with the other providers. Turning off the lights as she slipped into bed, her last thoughts for the night were, “Thank you, Lord.”

Ida Sums Up Her Life

Flipping on the kitchen lights and opening up her laptop, Ida sits down to finish her story. She heard through the grapevine that three of her friends were already finished. Since she knows the exact portions of her life that made her who she is, writing them down should take no time at all. Especially since it was already Sunday afternoon, and her friends were expecting to read her work tomorrow night at the monthly meeting.

There were just a few subjects that stood out in her life that continued to show up daily in her work with the children. Her strong belief in religion, education, culture, and her race, those four parts of her life created the childcare provider she became. She knew it as strongly as she knew her own name. Ida had spoken to Rose and Lillian over the last month, and it was amazing how they all seemed to come to the same conclusions. She wondered for the hundredth time if those factors being so important to all of them had to do with being African American women? She tended to think so, though she was intelligent enough to know that religion and education at least, were just as important to people of other races and cultures.

The biggest difference between Ida and her friends was that she did not teach religion in her childcare. She knew the rest of them prayed daily with the children, even reading the Bible to the little ones. She, on the other hand, though raised in the church, believed that teaching religion was the job of the parents, not the provider. Ida has always believed that religion and education do not mix. So, in her eyes, unless a child is attending a secular school, praying is for the family. However, just because she did not teach prayer in her childcare, did not mean she did not teach the ideas behind living a life full of the Lord's wishes. She stressed respect for everyone, honesty, love, kindness, and hard work to all the families that became a part of her

childcare. That, to Ida, was her form of teaching religion. She would never think to not instill those ideas into the young one's hearts and minds.

Education is perhaps the strongest factor in her childcare. Ida knows that as long as she lives, she will continue to educate herself and those in her care. She wants to teach children in one capacity or another until retirement. Childcare is the way she does so currently, but she has given some thought to becoming an early childcare instructor at the college level. For now though, the babies and toddlers are her main focus. She creates daily lesson plans, and teaches them all their letters, colors, numbers, and so much more. Everyone that knows Ida understands that her life, filled with wonderful educational opportunities, made her the excellent teacher she is today.

Living the majority of her life surrounded by "White people," Ida definitely sees a distinct difference between races. She may have had several friends in high school that were not African American, but there was always a difference in culture. Not so much at school, but she felt it as soon as she left their neighborhood and rode the bus back to hers. Because of her exposure to different cultures and races throughout her childhood, Ida feels better prepared to teach children from any nationality. She hopes that her childcare will continue to have children from all races, as she has now. She worries about that because coming from a very large city that is culturally diverse, and now living in South Georgia, in an all "Black" neighborhood, Ida has heard that soon enough only African American families will seek out her care. Other women have told her in the business of childcare that African Americans in Georgia's small towns like to "stick together". She wonders if that will become true in her case. She hopes not because she feels her background puts her in the unique position to teach children of all colors and cultures. She has proven it thus far as her current enrollment is two Mexican children, two European

children, and two African American children. The best part is how they all get along. That is one of the main reasons Ida loves early childcare. The children are too young to distinguish between skin colors yet! Hopefully, at least the ones whose families sign up for her place will stay that way.

“This was fun,” Ida said to her ‘cutie pie’ as he walks in the kitchen. “I cannot wait to share my life with the others tomorrow night.”

“Then close that computer and we will go buy some new toys for the children,” says her husband.

“Great idea,” says Ida, “I love spending money on them!”

Carrie’s Last Words

Another tough week is over, thinks Carrie, as she takes off her work clothes and puts on her favorite sweat pants and sweater. Quickly moving into the dining room where she keeps the wine chiller, Carrie bends down to choose a bottle of her favorite Chardonnay.

“You are just what the doctor ordered,” she says to the bottle.

Carrie pours herself a carefully measured five ounces.

“Now I am ready to complete my story,” she says to herself, as she sits down and takes her first sip. “At least the God I know and love is not against a glass of wine,” she sighs.

As long as her mind is on the Lord, she might as well start with how religion made her into the person she is today. It is everything to her and her family. Her families’ religious beliefs have seen them through many hardships, and her ups and downs in life prove the same in her mind. Knowing deep within her heart that she would not be the owner of two, soon to be three childcare facilities, if not for God, she preaches his word with every breath she takes. He

placed her on this path, and she will not let him or the children in her care down. The parents in both her home childcare and her group center know that she preaches the Lord's word to their babies. Carrie not only follows the gospel, she reads to them from the Bible. Her children know the words to many daily prayers almost as soon as they can sing their A, B, C's. Carrie discloses this in her initial interview with new families, and it has never been a problem for any of them. Now that she thinks about that, she is convinced it is due to the culture of the African American families she takes into her facilities. Most, if not all of them, attend the church where she is also a pastor, and between their beliefs being the same, and over six hundred members, her childcare is full of God fearing, honest, loving, hard-working moms and dads. All of whom want their children to grow up with the same values. Carrie makes sure of that, and she attributes all of it to her own upbringing.

Taking a small sip of her wine, Carrie pauses to look out the window. A beautiful cardinal is sitting in the azalea bush. He is so bright; she wishes all her children could see him. She could use his color as a lesson for them. A lesson in both the color red, and in the fact that no matter what color we are, we are all beautiful. She needed to make note of that for Monday. The children might not get to see the actual bird, but she could find pictures and discuss the same concept.

That is how Carrie likes to teach. She uses real life as often as possible to help the youngest children in her childcares relate their experiences to what they can actually see. Her philosophy on teaching from life experiences makes perfect sense to her now that she connects it to her own life. Living on a large farm, working with the animals and plants, showed Carrie more than she realized once she started to do the same with the children in her facilities.

“Amazing!” Carrie says to the beautiful cardinal. “We are two birds of a feather, pun intended!”

Carrie pushes on through her thoughts, anxious to get outside for a while before the rain comes. She would love to go for a walk in the moonlight, its glow reflecting on the neighbor’s flowers and homes. If she does not finish her writing now, she might not be done by Monday night’s meeting, as this weekend is jam packed with obligations to her family and church.

African American culture is definitely another factor in Carrie’s life worth talking about. She has always known her family did not fall within the norm of having black skin. No matter the stereotype of her race, she was still African American. She could still see the “looks” from White people, especially if she was in a “rich” neighborhood or shopping for an expensive item in an exclusive store. The fact that people were still acting in such a manner bothered her greatly. In fact, now that she was thinking about it, her own race was not helping. When she watched some of the young teenagers today, she was almost ashamed to be Black.

“Why did they think that wearing their pants down around their hips, showing their underwear, or playing that awful music filled with cursing, was going to help?” she asked herself.

All that did, in her opinion was make it easier for White people to hate them. It just exacerbates the feelings of ill will between the races. This was deplorable to her, and making her job even harder.

Education was hard enough in many ways for the African American children, even now. They really do not need any more hardships to face. The babies she taught were innocent, for now, and she currently does everything in her power to see they stay that way. Sometimes she wishes she could take every teenager she sees hanging out on street corners into her church.

Teaching them the ways of the Bible, and that hard work and education do pay would be wonderful. For now, only the ones who are already in her Sunday school classes are within her grasp. At least the babies in her facilities are being taught early, and they are the ones she will focus on for as long as she has them in her care.

Leah Finishes Her Journey

Honking the horn several times, Leah hopes her husband will hear, as she pulls into her driveway from her usual Saturday afternoon run to Wal-Mart. Always in need of supplies for the childcare, her car is once again packed with items that need carrying into the house. The rain and her back acting up certainly do nothing to help! Honking one more time, she sees the door open and her husband rushes out with an umbrella.

Finally, the food, diapers, wipes, new cups, and other supplies are put away. Leah makes a mental note to wash all the new cups before labeling them tomorrow for the children that are starting on Monday. Reaching for her water bottle, and her favorite comforter, Leah settles into her chair, laptop up and running. This is the last part of her story. All the other ladies are finished. That is what Carrie told her last night on the phone.

“Time to get a move on,” she admonishes herself, as she sips some water and begins to write.

Connecting her life experiences to her current position is simple to Leah. Her belief in the Lord, and his daily appearance in her life since she was born, is the number one reason she is here. No one will ever convince her differently, and anyone who really knows her has stopped trying. As she wrote previously, her strength, her love of children, her every day existence, is because of her beliefs in God’s teachings. He guides her in everything, and she relates that in her

work. Just like her friend Carrie, if the parents do not believe in daily prayer and worship with their children while under her roof, then this childcare is not the place for them. Leah begins and ends each child's day with thanking God for everything in life. He has put these little blessings in her care, and she does everything in her power to guide them based on his word.

“Raising other people's children is part of our culture,” Leah remembered saying to the childcare trainer who asked her about African American women and their thoughts on raising children.

“In my upbringing, we shared everything. When I was “coming up” as a child, anyone fortunate to have a car would give us children a ride to school if they drove by. No one worried about getting into the car, we all knew each other, and trust was part of it. Sure wish the “youngins” today could feel that same trust,” Leah sighs.

Writing about that culture now made Leah wish for the old days. All she could do now was help the African American families to understand that they still needed one another. She knows there are plenty of mean and hateful people from all races out there, but those are the ones she does not allow in her childcare. She worries that the children she does not take in will grow up just like their parents, hating on “Whites”. She tries not to worry about everyone though; she has learned that she can only do so much. Therefore, she concentrates on providing the best understanding of living as an African American to the children she does take into her care. Culture and race may not be exactly the same for these children as it was when she was a child, but certain facts never change; black skin is black skin, and with it comes different responsibilities. Leah believes her friends in Book Club understand her meaning, and will agree with her. The rest of the world she really cannot speak about. She does not want her words to sound racist, she gets along just fine with people from all races; she just explains it to anyone

who asks her as, “That is who we African Americans are, people who do their utmost to watch out for their own kind.” It happens to be the way she feels.

Leah just wants the best for all children. She can only do so much with the ones in her childcare, but she tries to do whatever she can to make a big difference. Educating the children is another part of Leah’s job that means a lot to her. Education, stressed in her childhood, was important. She continues to teach all that she can in her childcare. Just like all her friends in the industry, she teaches the basics: colors, numbers, and letters. Leah also tries to teach some basic computer skills to the children depending on their age. It amazes her how well they perform at the child size computer she bought them last year. Even her toddlers understand how to push the keys on the keyboard to make things happen. She never had opportunities like that growing up, but she currently does everything possible for these children. Leah knows they need to be as advanced as possible in their lessons and knowledge of technology before they enter kindergarten. Not just because they are African American, but because their world seems to change daily!

Leah stops to think about all the other things she would like to write about her race.

Then she looks heavenward and says, “Those other ideas about my people will have to wait because they really have nothing to do with my life or the career I now have. The world has changed tremendously since Leah was a child. Some of it for the better, especially for her race; some things, not so much.”

Now that she has had time to write about her life as an African American childcare provider, Leah thinks it might be the best thing she has done in a long time. Taking a look at who she is as an African American and as a childcare provider has helped her to become even more dedicated to her work, if that is possible. Taking one last swallow of her water, Leah sets

the glass down on her coaster, and turns on the final fifteen minutes of “wrestling”, another one of her favorite past times!

The Providers Share Their Stories With Yvonne and Each Other

Finally, the Book Club meeting was in full swing. All the ladies came in carrying their stories, except Yvonne, whom everyone knew could not put her words on paper. That was all right with the rest of the group, they were excited to have her read their work. Perhaps after she did, she would be able to connect her life to her career in childcare. The room was silent as each woman read someone else’s story. The occasional sipping of coffee or a slight cough was all one heard for an hour.

Looking up at her friends with tears in her eyes, Rose asked, “Is everyone as amazed as I am?”

“You mean the connections we all made to our careers?” asked Cecelia.

“Definitely,” pipes in Ida. “We all believe our religious backgrounds, the importance of education, our living conditions, and our culture, created who we are today. Is that what you all are reading too?”

“Yes!” they all say in chorus.

“Even though we all come from different places, we each seem to have the same thoughts as to why we are childcare providers,” says Carrie.

“Did anyone think that would happen when we first started this idea?” asked Ida.

“Not me,” exclaimed Rose.

“Me neither,” Lillian says.

“Do you think it has to do with being African American?” asks Leah.

“Maybe,” states Ida.

“Well, I for one, love that we are so connected,” says Cecelia. “I always told you we were ‘sista’s’!”

“I found it very interesting to see from your stories that you all are in childcare to help the next generation of African American children succeed,” Ida pipes in. “At least that is my take on all of your stories. I hope you all do not limit yourselves to just African American children. I certainly hope to keep my doors open to any child.”

“Whether that is our ultimate goal, which I agree it is, or not, I am sure glad we did this,” says Rose. “I, for one, hope others will read it for either enjoyment or enlightenment as to why, we are African American childcare providers, no matter the color of the children we have enrolled”

“Amen!” said the ladies.

“I cannot wait to read the rest,” said Yvonne. “You all have put my thoughts on paper. I cannot be sure, but I think I would have to agree with some of the same theories as the rest of you when I write my life experiences too.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” said Leah.

CONCLUSIONS

Though the results of this research are presented in the above chapters as a fictional dialogue, the thoughts and words written are the words of those interviewed. Dialect such as “sista’s” and “chitlins” are the exact language recorded when participants described friends or foods. No attempt was made to change their language because the author felt that this form speaks to the culture of the women studied. As stated in the original research question, the

project's focus was to see if the reason African American women in the South are in childcare is due to their lived experiences; especially in the areas of race, culture, religion, and education. Specific questions were asked as to those ideas and it became plain to see throughout the research process that most, if not all, of the experiences were similar.

Of the six women who participated until the research ended, all continuously held the conviction that religion and education were the two predominant reasons that led them into their careers. The culture of the African American family, their strong mothers, and their ties to children also played a very large part. All the women interviewed expressed the desire to teach children to accept people for who they are, not on the color of their skin. While this important concept came forth within the research, it was not a primary consideration when looking for why these participants became childcare providers.

Motivation for the future success of the children within the African American race also came forth within the study. Though every provider, with only one exception, currently only keeps African American children, they all disclosed it was not done on purpose. The conclusions of the researcher are that the neighborhood dynamics, and close family and church ties, have more to do with enrollment than race. However, several did express the idea that caring for children from their own race felt "right" to them. No one could expand on those results, for all those who spoke of it; they positioned their answers on other factors, such as "word of mouth" between parents. There was one additional finding that appeared once beginning the research. The fact that all of these women desired to become successful, and for a few, it was accomplished by owning their own childcares, by others, they felt they were a success because they see it in the children's smiles and with those who lead fulfilling lives as adults that come back to visit.

The participant's answers lead to the above results without prejudice on the researcher's part. Though the results may seem to some readers as too easy, or not broad enough, they are the true words of those interviewed. In summation, at least the African American women who agreed to take part in this inquiry are in their chosen field due to a strong sense of religion, family, the importance of education, and wanting to help the African American child succeed in life, as well as any child that might cross their doors.

REFLECTIONS

In the years leading up to this project there was never a question in my mind as to what group would become the focus of my work. The African American childcare provider has held a special attraction to me for many years. These women constitute the vast majority of my clients and the need to further my knowledge as to their culture and why they work with young children, provided the necessary impetus for this research.

Though I always thought I understood my student, upon entering the Curriculum Studies Program at Georgia Southern University, I realized I had much more to learn. My journey through the program helped widen my perspective on African American's, but it was the actual pursuance of this dissertation provided me with a window into life experiences different from my own. Understanding my students, and the work they perform is important as it helps enlighten future educators who may wish to work with African American women in the childcare industry. Knowledge of any portion of humankind enhances the field of curriculum studies as it enlarges our perspective on race and cultures.

Curriculum Studies as a field broadens the educator's life by much more than the reading and studying of scholars. As I write these words, I now see curriculum as the entire world

around us. It is not just lessons written for a certain student or program, it is life itself. Bringing the life experiences of the African American childcare provider to light within this study may be a minute part of our world, but it adds to it nevertheless.

As I began to work with my research participants, entering many parts of their lives, such as their homes and churches, my world began to expand exponentially with the knowledge gained. The ultimate goal of understanding the lives of these women and recording it for others, began to come to fruition with each passing interview, visit, and cross-referencing of data.

Though these women are described within the study as African American childcare providers, they were found to be so much more. They are mothers, wives, daughters, deacons of churches, beauty queens, but most of all they are educators. This “insider’s” perspective of these amazing women would never have come to light without the work pursued. It was my honor and pleasure to have spent the last year “walking beside them”.

EPILOGUE

The women portrayed in the above chapters are very real. All are currently African American childcare providers in South Georgia. Though their names were changed to protect their identities, the names given to each were not random. As I have worked with each of these women for years, they have become near and dear to my heart. Therefore, each one, with the exception of Yvonne was assigned a name from my own loved ones. The names are women who have passed on, but were all strong females in my family. I did this for one reason; the African American women who opened their homes and their hearts to me deserve to be honored. In my eyes, it is an honor to work with them and name them, though only in fiction, with those I

loved and respected. This in no way caused my research to become subjective, as an unbiased and objective stance was maintained throughout each interview.

Rose was my maternal great-grandmother, Russian born, and coming to America, she fought her own way out of a “European” world to become a success in her own right. The provider given the name of Rose also fought her way against all odds.

Lillian was one of my great-aunts. Struggling in her early years, eventually owning a successful business with her husband, and traveling the world, ‘Aunt Lil’ showed me that a woman should never hold herself back due to a lack of higher education. Thus her name is attached to the provider who also never went beyond high school.

Ida was also my great-grandmother. Though I never knew her, I am told she was a strong woman. Birthing thirteen children, my maternal grandfather being her youngest, she lived a religious life and gave everything she had to her family. Because I did not learn a lot about Ida as a child, I choose to attach her name to the provider I personally have know for the shortest amount of time.

Carrie was my father’s mother. I grew up hearing a number of stories about her, though she also passed before I was given a chance to know her. The stories I heard about my grandmother always portrayed her as the ruler of her household. These tales seemed to make her come alive. Once I began to name the providers whom I interviewed, the one who sounded the most like Carrie naturally was given her name. It always seemed to me that my paternal grandmother was privileged in her culture, as the participant who bears the name of Carrie tells me she was in hers.

Cecelia was my beloved grandmother, my mother’s mother. My life was blessed with her constant presence until March of 1990. If this journey and its research has given me the

burden of proving we become the adults we are, based on life experiences, I would say I already felt that because of my grandmother. My mother and any family I have left on Earth, tell me all the time how much like Cecelia I am. I not only look like her, but I am told I have her heart. For that reason, her name was given to the provider I felt had the biggest heart of all those I interviewed.

Leah is Rose's middle name, Cecelia's mother. My name, Lisa, is a derivative for Leah. I never had the pleasure of knowing the woman for whom I am named, but I grew up with my grandmother and if she was anything like her mother, strength coursed through their blood; as did caring for everyone in the world, especially children. Naturally, the provider who spoke about children in the same manner was given the name Leah.

The final character within my work is Yvonne. She is not one person, but several parts of many. She has a random name because I never really got to know "her". She portrays the bits and pieces of the providers who would tell me a little when we began interviews, and then for various reasons, would back out of the process. The introduction in Chapter 4 to Yvonne comes from descriptions from those interviews never completed. This is why the character does not write her life experiences; there were none to tell. I left her within the final portions of the work to show how certain African American childcare providers could not answer my questions, or say why they were in their current positions. Most of the "Yvonne's" just answered, "I love children."

I hope as a reader, this helps to explain how much this work, along with these women, has meant to me. The African American childcare providers that I teach, especially the ones who gave me their time for this project, have my upmost respect. I enjoyed listening to their stories

and learning all that I could about their lives. I hope anyone who reads their words feels the same.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

<p>Describe to me what it is like living as an African American in the U.S.A. Has it changed since you were born, in what ways, both negative and positive change? Please give me as many examples as you can of each.</p>	<p>Please describe your childhood in as much detail as possible.</p>	<p>Describe the level of education of your family members and how much value was placed on your education, i.e. were you encouraged in apply yourself towards a college degree</p>
<p>Please tell me as much as you can as to why you choose to live in South Georgia?</p>	<p>What was the culture (agricultural, urban, large metropolitan city, etc) of the area where you were born and raised?</p>	<p>Did you graduate from high school or do you hold a G.E.D? Do you have a higher level of education? If so, please tell me what degree you hold and from where.</p>
<p>What led you to becoming a childcare provider; please describe in detail what motivates you to work in this field.</p>	<p>Please describe in detail the socioeconomics of your family, would you consider your family to have been poor, middle class, or wealthy?</p>	<p>Describe for me how much value you place on education now for both yourself and the children in your childcare?</p>

<p>Please describe in detail why this responsibility is one you have chosen to undertake.</p>	<p>Where exactly were you born and raised? Did you live in the city, the country, in a house, on a farm, in an apartment, trailer or some other type of dwelling? Please describe in detail the living conditions of your childhood home.</p>	<p>Describe for me why you feel the way you do about education.</p>
<p>What role does salary, work conditions, or other factors play in your decision?</p>	<p>Describe the role religion played in your family as a child and how relevant it is currently to your personal life and to the children in your care. Did you attend church, which one, where, how often?</p>	<p>Describe how you felt about school growing up.</p>
<p>Describe the manner in which you care for African American children. Describe for me any differences between the care you provide for African American children as opposed to a child of another race.</p>	<p>Please tell me about the schools ratio of White to African American students and who taught you. Were all your teachers African American or White, can you give me a ratio?</p>	<p>Please take a moment to think of anything we have not covered that you would like included in this interview?</p>

<p>What does caring mean to you?</p>	<p>Describe how African American culture and history were included in the schools you attended?</p>	
<p>Do you understand the meaning behind human behavior? Please tell me in your own words how you exhibit this behavior with the children in your care.</p>	<p>Describe how it felt as an African American child in the classrooms you attended. Please give me as many details as possible?</p>	
<p>Do you believe it is an African American women's job to help raise other families' children of African American decent? Please explain why or why not.</p>	<p>Do you believe African American children need to be taught by African American teachers only, why or why not?</p>	
<p>Please describe your practices and behavior towards the children in your care. Tell me how you believe the particular manner in which you teach African American children might help their success in the school system of South Georgia.</p>	<p>Do you believe the African American child should be taught differently than White children or other ethnic groups? Why or why not?</p>	

<p>Would you consider working with children of Asian, Anglo, or other races beside African Americans? Why or why not?</p>	<p>Describe what culture means to you as a definition and as it relates to living life as an African American.</p>	
<p>Do you believe African American children need to be cared for in a particular manner that is different from other races or cultures? Please explain your answer in detail.</p>	<p>What are your thoughts on the culture of the African American, how does it affect your job?</p>	
<p>Are you more comfortable teaching African American children and describe why or why not?</p>	<p>Please describe how you feel about teaching African American culture to the children in your facility.</p>	
<p>Do you believe it is due to human nature that people naturally gravitate (i.e. work, live, associate) with those who look, act, or come from similar backgrounds. Please explain.</p>	<p>Describe the specific behaviors or practices that you use to teach African American children.</p>	
	<p>Please tell me in detail what you believe the African American child needs to be taught in order to succeed in the K-12 school system.</p>	

	<p>Do you believe caring for African American children in South Georgia is different than in other areas of the country, as in the Northern or Western section? Please give me as many details as possible.</p>	