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SANKOFA: TRADITIONS OF MENTORING

AMONG BLACK WOMEN EDUCATORS

by

Aza A. Baylor

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ABSTRACT
SANKOFA: TRADITIONS OF MENTORING
AMONG BLACK WOMEN EDUCTORS

by
Aza Baylor

The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2014
Under the Supervision of Professor Edgar Epps

The importance of the standpoint of Black women educators is rarely understood and

even more infrequently recognized as a position of exceptional knowledge in regard to

the field of education. Research highlights maternal relationships grounded in traditional

practices of community uplift and connectedness as a common factor in the effectiveness

of Black women educators. This project frames Black women educators within Black

women's culture of Sisterhood and Motherhood as defined by Patricia Hill Collins (2009).

This study explored the influence of sisterhood and motherhood in the experiences of

Black women educators and the impact of those experiences on their work as educators.

The analysis derived from a series of four semi-structured interviews and informal

follow-up conversations with three of my close sister friends who are educators in a

Midwest Public school system. Three narrative portraits of Black women educators were

created based on a 6-month portraiture study involving the collection of observable data,

semi-structured and informal interviews and discourse analysis to capture the perspective

of Black women educators in the field of education. Through an examination of this

portrait study and other studies on Black women's culture and pedagogical engagement,

this project provides examples of Black women educators who embody the essence of

Sankofa in the form of mentoring. Findings indicated that mentoring among Black

women educators builds on a tradition of sisterhood and motherhood in the Black

community. These findings provide three culturally relevant components apparent in the mentoring experiences of these participants: self-actualization, socio-political awareness and mothering of the mind.

Dedicated to my beautiful children

Amari Haki and Niara Ashè.

Always know,

When you are in alignment

With your soul's purpose,

No one can stop you.

I see the divine in you.

You are loved beyond measure.

Siempre ∞

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I give reverence to the ancestors. My great-great grandparents Louiser & Henry Cole and Molly & Bob Earnest. My great grandmother Mamie Cole-Wells. My great grandfather Bell, a victim of white terrorism in the early 20th Century, I salute you. My great grandparents Bertha & Newton Nash. My grandparents Bonnie Ruth Nash-Hunter & DeTroy Carter and Louiser Wells & Hezekiah Adams. My aunts Mary Ann Hunter and Dorothy Lee Blacks and my mother in law, Mary Louise Baylor. Your memory and spiritual fortitude invokes a willingness driven by passion, strength, perseverance, and gratitude. I stand on your shoulders with the utmost respect and honor.

I would like to thank my beloved mother, Dorothy Wells, whose quiet spirit and sharp intelligence serves as a continuous encouragement for me to always pursue my highest potential. My father, Charles Nash, whose words of wisdom were always right on time. Thank you. My sisters, Yolanda Gardner and Anita Rent, for their embodiment of true sisterhood, nothing can ever separate our bond. My brothers, Corey Nash, Jonathan Nash, and Charles Nash Jr. who keep me grounded. Thank you. My husband, Allen Baylor, thank you for your support through this process. You have been right next to me, every step of the way. I truly could not have gotten through this without you. You have been my rock, my shoulder to cry on and many times my motivation to move forward with this work. Thank you for believing in me, I love you. To my sister friends that made time to dialogue with me for the purpose of this research, you inspire me. I'm sure your stories will encourage other educators as well. WE are the change we want to see in schools. To my sister circle Lashanna, Tracey, and Torayanita, your support has been

immeasurable. Thank you. To Mr. Green, you have helped me through this process more than you know. I appreciate you.

This endeavor represents the co-creation of a project influenced by many. However, the influence of my major advisor, Dr. Edgar Epps, and committee members, Dr. Raquel Farmer-Hinton, Dr. Decoteau Irby, Dr. Julie Kailin and Dr. Raji Swaminathan proved to push me beyond my limitations. For that, I give thanks.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the same way Barbara Christian (1989) questioned where she was in American literature while taking a close look at the nationwide failure of urban schools, I ask, where am I in urban schools? Where is the Black woman in the school community? What has been her experience? What has she said about education? Driven by these inquiries, Black women take center stage in this attempt to conceptualize the values embedded in historic traditions within the culture of Black women educators.

Using Black Feminist Theory as a conceptual framework allows for a lens that illuminates interlocking components of sexism, racism and classism that may be at play affecting the experiences of Black educators in urban schools. Black feminist thought also addresses the overarching system of domination head on, exposing and critiquing the historically oppressive conditions embedded in a society that disproportionately disenfranchises the poor, minorities and women. The Black woman stands in a unique position and consequently has a unique viewpoint when it comes to the education of her children in the Black community. Time and time again, researchers have determined that successful Black women educators utilize othermothering techniques as a means to developing effective relationships with Black students (Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003; Dingus, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson, J. A., Mickelson, K.A., Hester, M. L., & Wyrick, J., 2011). In fact, motherhood and sisterhood are fundamental aspects of Black women's culture (Collins, 2009). Utilizing Black feminist theory as a framework, this work placed the experiences and viewpoints of three Black women educators within the context of motherhood and sisterhood traditions. Therefore the intent of this study was twofold: First to explore the influence of sisterhood and motherhood in the

experiences of Black women educators, and second to analyze how those experiences impacted their work as educators.

This introduction establishes the fundamental concepts driving this research study by clearly presenting (1) the statement of the problem (2) the significance of the problem and (3) the significance of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The history of Black education and contemporary studies documenting successful teachers of Black children overwhelmingly name Black educators (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 1991). Additionally, research on exemplary teachers of Black students overwhelmingly name Black women as highly effective (Dixson, 2003; Dingus, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson, J. A., Mickelson, K.A., Hester, M. L., & Wyrick, J., 2011). This fact begs the question; why are there such a small number of Black teachers in heavily Black populated urban schools? Milwaukee Public Schools (2012) reports that White teachers (71%) dominate the teaching profession in Milwaukee. Consequently, Black teachers hold few slots (18%) in classrooms where Black students are the majority (56%) in the district, while White students represent only 14% of the student population (Figure 1). These data indicate White teachers are teaching the majority of Black students attending public schools in the city of Milwaukee, which also represents includes schools where many Black students score below par on basic skills exams (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2012-2013).

Figure 1: 2012-2013 Milwaukee Public Schools Teacher/Student Population.
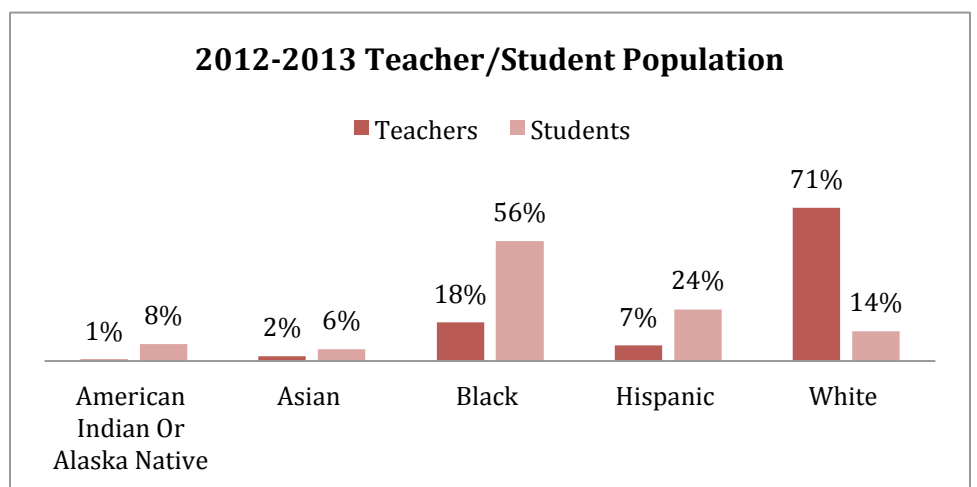
This is not to suggest that teachers are the sole problem or solution to improve the academic achievement of Black students; however, teachers are one of the most essential tools in the classroom. Concerned with the conditions that may improve the academic achievement of Black students, this study focuses on the viewpoints and experiences of Black women educators and how those experiences and viewpoints influence their engagement in the field of education.

Cultural Synchrony.

The widespread low academic achievement among students of color taught primarily by White teachers signals a critical question of whether cultural factors hinder or support teacher effectiveness. Patricia Cooper's study (2002) on the significance of race between Black students and their teachers indicates that while effective White teachers may incorporate similar practices, such as using culturally relevant pedagogy, conveying high expectations and demonstrating awareness of socio-political aspects of schooling for Black students, few share practices aligned with cultural synchronization.

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[1] Table 1- MPS 2012-2013 District Report Card and All Staff Report.
[2] The proper behavior is exemplified by the role of Mammy in the film *Gone with the Wind*. The deviant behavior is perceived as any "uppity" acts that challenge the dominance of Whites over Blacks or any

According to Jacqueline Irvine (1991), cultural synchronization prepares black students to be successful within the constraints of racial and class discrimination prevalent in U.S. society. If cultural relating is an indicator of effectiveness between teachers and families, it is imperative that researchers, policy makers and school officials understand the significance of the role of Black educators. Research supporting cultural synchrony would provide a strong argument for more aggressive methods in hiring and retaining Black teachers in schools highly populated by Black students.

Significance of the Problem

The teacher shortage in U.S. schools has been associated with teacher dissatisfaction of school environments due to high stakes testing, retrenchment of tenure, and increased pressure to improve student outcomes (Moore, 2012). More specifically, the attrition of Black teachers has been associated with desegregation (Foster, 1997; Madkins, 2012; Tillman, 2004), inadequate preparation for college (Irvine, 1988) and biased standardized testing for teachers (Anrig, 1986; Irvine, 1988; Hood & Parker, 1994; Justiz & Kameen, 1988; Madkins, 2012).

Notably, prior to the Brown v. Board decision in 1954, Black teachers made up fifty percent of the Black professional population (Madkins, 2011). Foster (1997) reported that Black teachers grew from 15,000 in 1890 to 66,000 by 1910. Significant historic accounts of the decline of the Black teacher population report after *Brown v. Board,* nearly 40,000 Black teachers lost their jobs in seventeen southern states from 1954-1972 (Fine, 2004; Irvine, 2002; Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004). By 1986, the Black teacher population had declined to eight percent and remains low in spite of the increased Black student population in public schools (Madkins, 2011).

According to Jacqueline Irvine (1988), factors associated to the decline of the Black teacher population include " the number of college students declaring teacher education as a major, the decline of black college students, widening career options for Blacks, especially Black females, and teacher competency test" (p. 503). The lack of student preparation for college is largely correlated with "tracking in high school, where Black students are disproportionately assigned to low level, non-college preparatory curricula (p. 505). Consequently when students aren't prepared for collegiate studies, college enrollment across the board decreases. Further limiting the number of students entering the field of education.

Related to the idea of college readiness, teacher competency exams serve as a gateway to the teacher profession, many programs requiring students to test prior to enrollment (Mikitovics & Crehan, 2002; Petchauer, 2012). There is a consensus among researchers indicating standardized exams privilege some cultures while disenfranchising others, indicating certification exams are bias by design (Mikitovics & Crehan, 2002; Bennett, McWhorter, Kuykendall, 2006; Flippo, 2003; Memory, Coleman &Watkins, 2003; Hood & Parker, 1994). Considering one cannot become a teacher without passing standardized test, implementation of teacher competency exam "seems to be the greatest threat to the survival of Black teachers (Irvine, 1988, p. 505). Fundamentally, it is agreeable that teachers must be adequately prepared to engage students with a high degree of rigor; however research indicates teacher testing does not increase teacher quality (Angrist & Guryan, 2008). Additionally, Goldhaber and Hansen (2010) assert that student achievement is positively impacted when students are paired with teachers of their same race. Further indicating support for a more diverse teaching population.

Studies indicate that Black teachers often serve as positive role models for Black children (Tillman, 2004). Traditionally, Black teachers interact with students from a familial standpoint providing both academic and personal support. However, Black students are not the sole beneficiaries of Black educators; White students also benefit Irvine (1988) states:

> White students need black teachers as role models so that they can gain accurate perceptions of our multiethnic society. In addition, the presence of Black teachers in schools helps counter negative stereotypes that White children have about Black people—stereotypes perpetuated by ignorance, prejudice, isolation and distortion in the media. (Irvine, 1988, p. 506)

The role of Black educators in the school community inspires inquiry on their specific viewpoints and life experiences. There is a growing group of literature (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 1991; Dixson, 2003; Dingus, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson et al., 2011) that demonstrates a distinct teaching culture among Black women teachers generating from cultural traditions in the Black community. Providing a platform for these voices offers insight on the benefit and necessity of a more diverse teaching staff in urban schools.

Significance of Study

The significance of this qualitative study is to add to the growing literature aiming to examine the viewpoints and experiences of Black women educators and how those viewpoints and experiences shape their approach to educating Black students. Additionally, this work provides policy makers and school administrators with data to aid in their retention of Black educators. Researchers have examined exemplary teachers of

urban students, the majority of which were Black teachers, and have equated

effectiveness with those who teach from an Afrocentric pedagogy (Asante, 1980; Hillard,

2003; Harris, 1992), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings; 1995a; Delpit, 1995;

Gay, 2010; Foster, 1994) and/or a maternal approach (Case, 1997; Beauboeuf-Lafontant,

1999; Dixson, 2003). With that in mind, I believe the effectiveness of Black women

educators is acquired from not only the aforementioned pedagogical aspects, but also

other collective cultural traditions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research on the effectiveness of urban teachers overwhelmingly characterized Black teachers as culturally grounded (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 1991; Dixson, 2003; Dingus, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Ladson-Billings; 1995a; Gay, 2010). Studies centering Black women's pedagogy found that mothering practices highly influence student-teacher relationships (Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Utilizing Black feminist theory as a framework for this study asserts the position that Black women engage in society through cultural practices which have been significantly influenced by the intersectionality of race, gender and class oppression (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). Black feminist theory presumes Black women's culture can be best understood by analyzing the "role of historically specific political economies, in explaining the endurance of certain cultural themes" experienced by Black women as a group (Collins, 1986, p. 21). Therefore, exploring the role of teaching from a black feminist standpoint acknowledges the historic, political and ultimately the economic role of teaching. Consequently, this review of literature establishes a dialogue around the influence of race, class and gender on the viewpoints and experiences of Black educators.

This review begins by establishing the framework driving this work by exploring literature on Black Feminism and Black epistemology and then proceeds with a brief Historical/Political look at Black education and the dearth of Black teachers. The review examines the ongoing struggle for equal educational and employment opportunities, which frames Black teachers as agents and education as agency. The review extends toward an exploration of key concepts including Afrocentricity, cultural pluralism, cultural synchronization, culturally relevant pedagogy and engaged pedagogy. Followed

by a section that centralizes Black women teachers with a review of literature on Black

Motherhood and Black women's pedagogy; specifically reviewing literature on

othermothering, caring and politicized mothering leads to a discussion of mentorship and

gaps in the literature from which I derived my research question.

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminism

Critical social theories generated from positions of oppression tend to

fundamentally challenge the dominating groups in an effort to expose accepted repressive

conditions. In fact, "dominant groups rule, in part, by encouraging women, men of color,

and other historically marginalized groups to replace their self-defined standpoints with

knowledge representing elite group interest" (Collins, 1991, p. 368). Black feminist

ideology focuses on not just the descriptors of gender, race and class issues, but on how

interlocking systems of domination are at play to maintain the ideals of the dominant

group. "Since the majority of African American women experience not privilege but race,

class, and gender oppression, black women's experiences provide a useful lens for

viewing these larger systems" of oppression (Collins, 1991, p. 373).

Black feminist ideologies consist of multiple viewpoints on the experiences of

Black women in the diaspora. The work of Black feminist scholars demonstrates the

various ways in which Black women experience oppression and resistance. This work

explores Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood to highlight fundamental

techniques in which Black women resist oppression.

Critical Black feminism.

Black feminist literature highlights the various levels of oppression experienced

by Black women and the individual and collective ways they resist that oppression.

Grown out of Critical Legal Studies and Critical Race Theory; Critical Race Feminism "focuses on the lives of those who face multiple discrimination on the basis of race, gender and class, revealing how all these factors interact within a system of white male patriarchy and racist oppression (Wing, 1997, p. 3). The nexus of Critical Race Feminism is that Black women experience discrimination on multiple, intersecting levels often due to race, gender and class issues. Stressing that Black women do not hold a singular identity where we add components, instead the position of Black women in society is multiplicative.

> We, as Black women, can no longer afford to think of ourselves or let the law think of us as merely the sum of separate parts that can be added together or subtracted from, until a white male or female stand before, you. The actuality of our layered experience is *multiplicative.* Multiply each of my parts together, 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1, and you have one indivisible being. If you divide one to these parts from one you still have *one* (Wing, 1997, p. 31).

The ideology of multiplicity is not limited to multiple burdens but also represents the multiple ways in which Black women persevere in spite of systematic oppression (King, 1988). Thereby creating cultural traditions of resistance represented in sisterhood, motherhood and creative expression.

Black Feminist thought.

Review of historical literature of black women activists (Cooper, 1890; Harper, 1896; Stewart, 1832; Terrell, 1898; Truth, 1851; Wells-Barnett, 1900) demonstrated common themes, which are aligned with the tenets of Black Feminism. Underlying themes gathered together offer an analysis of (a) the interlocking nature of oppression, (b)

self-definition and value, as well as (c) the necessity of the continuous development of Black women's culture (Collins, 1986).

Interlocking nature of oppression.

Black Feminist theory is grounded in the life experiences of Black women. The unpleasant truth is that in a heterosexual race-based society where patriarchy reigns, Black women are faced with multiple levels of discrimination. Black Feminists do not just call attention to issues of race, gender and class, instead their focus shifts to determine what elements drive these systems of oppression (Collins, 1986; Wing, 1997). Therefore, Black feminist thought "treats the interaction among multiple systems as the object of study" instead of an addition to other theories (Collins, 1986, p. 20).

In her text, *From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (1984), defines either/or dualistic thinking as a major component in the interconnectedness of oppression. Likewise, Collins (1986) defines this same phenomenon as "dichotomous oppositional difference" (p. 20). Both of these positions emphasize the ideology of oppositional thinking, which sorts and rates one as better than the other. The differences are never equally important; yet the categorizations "invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority" (Collins, 1986, p. 20). Therefore, giving attention to the interlocking elements of oppression provides a platform to speak against all oppression, equaling a quest for overall humanity. The experiences of Black women in some ways represent the oppression of all minorities in this society. As a response to the interlocking nature of oppression, Black women have long suggested a need for a holistic vision of humanity, including equality for all people (Cooper, 1890; Collins, 1986, King, 1988).

Self-definition and valuation.

Historically, Black women have been defined externally by groups of people that have an interest in exploiting and defining Black women as inferior people. Consequently, the most important elements of Black Feminist theory are self-definition and valuation. Specifically, the imposition of stereotypes, aimed at creating caricatures of Black women, is clearly a strategic act of power. Exerting this invalid assumption of authority over the images of Black women and thereby creating harsh and detrimental images "function[s] to dehumanize and control" Black women (Collins, 1986, p. 17). The perceived insolent behavior of Black women is thereby controlled through these images, as they misinform society with erroneous ideas of proper and deviant personality and behavior traits of Black women.[2]

Equally as important is the act of assigning value to particular images of Black women. Interestingly, the images depicted in mainstream media in many cases are "distorted renderings of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to White patriarchy" (Collins, 1986, p. 17). The overly sexually aggressive Black superwoman image is an attempt to devalue Black womanhood as matriarchal and lacking femininity as defined by White men. Black Feminist suggests that Black women instead embrace their assertiveness and sassiness and use these qualities to survive and transcend the harsh environment that attempts to circumscribe their empowerment (Collins, 1986; Wing, 1997).

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[2] The proper behavior is exemplified by the role of Mammy in the film *Gone with the Wind.* The deviant behavior is perceived as any "uppity" acts that challenge the dominance of Whites over Blacks or any perceived lewd and sexual immorality as expressed with video vixens in popular rap music videos.

Black women's culture.

Within the context of Black Feminist theory, culture is expressed by emphasizing "the role of historically specific political economies, in explaining the endurance of certain cultural themes" (Collins, 1986, p. 21). From this stance, Black Feminism grows from relationships among women where lessons of self-definition and valuation are created and passed on as survival mechanisms. Therefore, an ideological framework can be established using the symbols stemming from the self-definition and valuation within Black women's cultural practices. This outward display of self-defining and valuation can be viewed in "social institutions like church, and family, through creative expression of art, music, and dance, and if unsuppressed, in patterns of economic and political activity" (Collins, 2009). Having been generated from a position of interlocking oppressive conditions, Black women's culture can be used to analyze the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression. Common themes within Black women's culture are sisterhood, motherhood, and creative expression.

Sisterhood, motherhood & creative expression.

Black women's culture provides a frame of reference that assists Black women in seeing the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression. Black women's culture is accompanied with values derived from self-definition and valuation. Certainly there does not exist a fixed thematic list of Black women's experiences, however there are absolutely overlapping themes that may link Black women to form a collective Black women's culture.

Interpersonal relationships between Black women traditionally play a significant role in the Black women's culture. This sisterhood, in general, is understood to mean a

"supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from shared feelings of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. 22). In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment,* Collins (2009) suggests that sisterhood is present "in the comfort of daily conversation, through serious conversations and humor, African American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness and right to exist" (p. 113). Black women expressing a shared recognition of uniqueness in society extends beyond close relationships to include connections between Black women "who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood" (p. 22). Similarly, Black women's culture cultivates motherhood. Motherhood in the Black community is developed through a sense of loyalty and attachment that extends to all children in the Black community. In addition, Black women's culture examines the importance of creative expression as it provides documentation of self-definition and valuation through literature, dance, music, art, and theatre (Collins, 1986). Black women's culture is expressed extensively through literature, art and music (Dillard, 2000).

The multiplicity of Black women's experiences in school communities serves as an example of the multiple identities, various levels of oppression and resistance Black women experience in society. The influence of race, class and gender intersect as a theoretical frame for this work because they aid in giving meaning to the multiple roles of Black women educators as sisters and mothers in the community. It is with Wing's (1997) suggestion that I attempt to not just talk about multiplicity but highlight the ways in which we "act on our multiplicity" in our communities. This work does not imply that all Black women educators subscribe to Black feminism nor implores all Black women

educators to act maternally or communal focused. However this work does propose that all Black women have unique standpoints that frame our perspectives based on our experiences in society. Collins describes the Black woman's standpoint as, "those experiences and ideas shared by African-American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society—and theories that interpret these experiences" (Collins, 2009, p. 22). Therefore utilizing Black feminist theory as a framework provides theoretical and epistemological frame of reference that supports conceptual interpretations from a Black woman's standpoint.

Black feminist epistemology.

Many Black women scholars and activists critique and challenge the educational philosophy of the Western education system while being grounded in Black feminist epistemology. The growing literature of Black Feminist pedagogy is embedded in the work of many Black women, as they tell the stories, the truths, and the wisdom of Black women educators. These collective experiences, common histories and accompanying worldviews of Black women when shared and passed down become the Black woman's standpoint (Dillard, 2000; Collins, 2009). This wisdom, as Collins described it, is the core of Black feminist epistemology. Black Feminist epistemology is based on ways in which Black women validate knowledge; therefore, it provides an understanding of the collective behaviors and relationships among Black women, which is imperative in understanding Black women's teaching culture.

Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning.

Collins (2009) described four essential elements of Black feminist epistemology; the first is Concrete Experience as a Criterion of Meaning. According to Collins, for

many Black women, experience is perceived as more credible than information read from books. The collective belief that knowledge is gained from experience suggests researchers must "develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas" (Collins, 2009, p. 277). Prior to having children of my own, a major obstacle I had as a teacher was answering the dreaded question from parents, "Do you have children?" Black women parents wanted to check for my wisdom in child rearing. When I answered no, I was compelled to offer stories of my years of experience working with children, and the numerous nieces and nephews I helped raise, teach and inspire. For some, this experience validated my ability to help children overcome behavioral or academic issues, while others were hesitant and tested my ability to empathize with them as parents.

Use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims.

The second essential element of Black feminist epistemology, Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims, emphasizes dialogue and connectedness as a way of knowing. For Black women, new knowledge is generated within community as opposed to in isolation (Collins, 2009, p. 279). The idea of connectedness is grounded in African tradition derived from seeking the "type of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony" (Asante, 1987, quoted in Collins, 2009, p. 185). Dialogue provides a tool with which communities connect and understand one another and as a result become harmonic. Black feminist epistemology is based on finding voice, listening and hearing as indicators of knowing (Collins, 2009).

Ethic of care.

Third, the Ethic of Care "suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (Collins, 2009, p. xxx). First of the three interrelated components of the Ethic of Care, is individual uniqueness. This component acknowledges an appreciation of creative expression without pressure to conform. The ethic of care, established out of traditional African humanities principles, implies that "each individual is thought to be an unique expression of a common spirit, power, energy inherent in all life" (Collins, 2009, xxx). The belief in the unique individual is illustrated by the value placed on personal expressiveness in Black communities. Second, appropriateness of emotions in dialogue validates emotional dialogue as acceptable if the speaker feels it necessary while communicating about an issue, experience or standpoint. Third, acknowledging the capacity for empathy validates knowing by putting yourself in the shoes of someone else to gain an understanding of their experiences. When individuals believe the listener is empathetic, they are more likely to share the wholeness of their experiences (Collins, 2009, p. 282).

Ethic of personal accountability.

Lastly, the ethic of personal accountability is characterized by the importance of the ideas and the identity of the person expressing a specific stance. The significance of accountability lies in the belief that ideas and actions are based on personal core beliefs. Claiming expertise on an issue requires a full explanation of that stance, as validation of knowledge is considered. Therefore, examining an individual's knowledge claim consequently results in the evaluation of her character, values and ethics (Collins, 2009, p. 285).

These four elements demonstrate an epistemology grounded in values and ethics. These elements are distinguishable within the discourse among Black women and often demonstrate shared experiences. Appropriately, use of this epistemology offers a valid and ethical approach to examining the experiences and viewpoints of Black women educators.

Historical/Political Aspect of Black Education

The complexity of the history of Black education is entangled in systematic oppression where marginalization has been used as a tool to maintain domination. The inhumane captivity of Africans in the United States began 1619. With an existence doomed for inhumane labor and servitude, captors did not feel Africans needed literacy skills. However, for the purpose of converting Africans to Christianity, some enslaved Africans were taught to read the bible (Lusane, 1992). Learning to read and write soon led to enslaved Africans using their literacy to help others escape confinement. After the 1791 rebellion and successful revolution of enslaved Africans in Haiti many U.S. states began to outlaw literacy for enslaved Africans (Lusane, 1992). Actual legislation was enacted between 1800-1835 in most Southern states, which made it a crime to teach enslaved Blacks to read or write (Anderson, 1988). Although deemed a criminal act, many Whites and enslaved Blacks took the risk of learning and teaching other Blacks to read and write.

Teaching took place in "churches, deserted railroad cars, abandoned shacks, under the moonlight, and virtually anywhere relatively secure" (Lusane, 1992, p. 11). Underground schools existed in several southern states, while some groups such as The Quakers and the Abolition Society established schools and openly advocated for

educating Blacks. Northern free Blacks established schools as early as 1762 in Newport, Rhode Island and in 1777 in New Jersey; by 1779, there were at least seven Black schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Lusane, 1992). During the Civil War, the country begun to seriously pondered the idea of free schools for both Blacks and Whites. Ironically, the successful campaign for public education among free residents coincided with the movement to "contain and repress literacy among enslaved Americans" (Anderson, 1988, p. 2).

Black teachers as agents.

Black women activists of the 19th century were vigilant in their support of education, uplifting the race and encouraging teacher education. Their documented writings in support of education stressed education as a means to liberation and social mobility. These writings also exhibit a race, class and gender standpoint, demonstrating the longevity of the well-known understanding and experience of the engrained fabric of intersectionality experienced by Black women. Establishing the ideology that oppressive conditions are not only related, but are also "bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity" (Collins, 2009, p. 42). This concept signals the importance of examining Black educators within their specific historical and cultural context.

Maria M. Stewart, known as the first woman of any nationality to speak in public to a mixed race group concerning the rights of women, also challenged Black men and women to unite and turn their "attention to knowledge and improvement" (Steward, 1831, p. 28). She concurrently encouraged women to open their own schools where they could display their own talents and leave a legacy of greatness. Exclaiming:

O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O, ye daughters of Africa! What have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have ye set before the rising generation? What foundation have ye laid for generations yet born? (Stewart, 1831, p. 27).

Advancing these ideals, Anna Julia Cooper (1890) stressed that women should seek higher education in her text, *A Voice from the South*, as she criticized Black men and their general opposition to higher education for women.

It seems hardly a gracious thing to say, but it strikes me as true, that while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic. They leave nothing to be desired generally in regard to gallantry and chivalry, but they actually do not seem sometimes to have outgrown that old contemporary of chivalry—the idea that women may stand on pedestals or live in doll house, but they must not furrow their brows with though or attempt to help men tug at the great questions of the world. I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worthwhile that women aspire to higher education (p. 85).

Empowerment was a consistent theme among 19th century writers. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a professional antislavery speaker, published a short story, feminist in nature in 1859 that focused on empowering the race (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 39). In her speech, *The Political Future of Women*, Harper (1896) challenged the right to vote based on manhood and educational tests by naming the unjust murders by White men that were

common in the South. She challenged women "to demand justice, simple justice as the right of every race" (Harper, 1896).

Furthering the discourse, In *The Progress of the Colored Women,* Mary Church Terrell (1898) spoke of the numerous Black women who pursuit higher education and the role they played in the education of Black children. Terrell found that, although the number of colleges and universities accessible for Black women at the time were minimal, Black women sought out higher education at an increasing rate.

> In Wellesley, Vassar, Ann Arbor, Cornell and in Oberlin, my dear alma mater, whose name will always be loved and whose praise will always be sung as the first college in the country broad, just, and generous enough to extend a cordial welcome to the Negro and to open its doors to women on an equal footing with men, colored girls by their splendid records have forever settled the question of their capacity and worth (Terrell, 1898, p. 65).

The acquisition of education encouraged many Black women into the profession of education themselves. In the late 19th century, Terrell stated that over 80% of teachers of Black students were Black women. Black women teachers, especially those in rural areas, faced adversities in their quest to teach Black children. The horrific conditions in the South exemplified Black women teachers as heroines of the time; as Terrell wrote, this person "of whom the world will never hear, has thus sacrificed her life for the race amid surroundings and in the face of privations which only martyrs can bear" (Terrell, 1898).

Other scholars such as Carter G. Woodson, in his text *The Education of the Negro*, equated education to the cultivation of self-assertiveness, which posed a threat to free labor and economic stability in the antebellum south (Woodson, 1919). Early Black

schools were led and supported by Blacks, and seen as a key to liberation prior to the end of the Civil War. By 1865, more Black schools were developed with the assistance of benevolent societies and the Congressional Freedman's Bureau, leading to the first mass movement to fight for universal state supported education (Anderson, 1988, p. 19). By 1867, public state-funded education was made legal through the coming together of Black leaders and Republican politicians (Anderson, 1988). Between the years 1860 to 1910, illiteracy rates among Blacks dropped from 95% to 30%, despite the increased use of child labor, supervision and coercive control of southern Blacks (Anderson, 1988, p. 31).

Industrial versus liberal arts education.

The Emancipation of Blacks in 1863 led to the opening of hundreds of schools for Blacks across the country. Nonetheless, rooted in the history of American education are two forms of schooling, one for a democratic citizenship and the other for a second-class citizenship (Anderson, 1988, p. 1). Extensively supported by White southerners and northern philanthropist, industrial and moral education taught Black educators to value hard labor and accept their subordinate status in society while rejecting political rights. The social-political system in which Blacks maneuvered became more complex in the debate over industrial versus liberal arts education. Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute, founded by Samuel C. Armstrong in 1868, and Tuskegee Normal Institute, in 1881 by his protégé Booker T. Washington, paved the way to gear primarily industrial education to Black educators (Anderson, 1988, p. 33). The Hampton Idea, as it became known,

Essentially called for the effective removal of Black voters and politicians from

southern political life, the relegation of Black workers to the lowest forms of labor

in the southern economy, and the establishment of a general southern racial

hierarchy… the work of adjusting Blacks to this social arrangement would be

carried out by indigenous Black educators, particularly teachers and principals

aided by Hampton-styled industrial normal schools, state departments of

education, local school boards, and northern White philanthropist. (Anderson,

1988, p. 36).

W.E.B. Dubois engaged in the debate against funneling potential Black educators and

leaders through the Hampton model. In doing so, he acknowledged the good Washington

had done, yet criticized his stance of teaching Blacks to be submissive to Whites while

encouraging the relinquishing of political rights. DuBois contended, "the talented tenth"

of the race should uplift the race, requiring a well-rounded education (DuBois, 1903).

Many Black private colleges, including Fisk University, Atlanta University, Spelman

College, and Tougaloo among others, embraced the DuBois philosophy.

W.E.B. Dubois made clear his stance with the assertion that the educated among

the race, the *Talented Tenth*, should stimulate social change by educating the community.

"From the very first," he exclaimed, it "has been the educated and intelligent of the

Negro people that have led and elevated the mass, and the sole obstacles that nullified

and retarded their efforts were slavery and race prejudice" (DuBois, 1903). Many of the

elite Blacks who became teachers were educated at Black institutions such as, Fisk

University, Howard University, Atlanta University, Morehouse College and Spellman

College (Graham, 2000). There are also examples of Blacks attending predominately

White prep schools like Phillips Exeter, as well as Harvard University, Brown University, Wellesley College, Amherst College, and Oberlin College in Ohio (Graham, 2000).[3]

Scholars argue that social mobility and economic attainability has a direct link to education, which they believe to be controlled and supported by the ruling class in an effort to maintain their seat of power (Marx, 1848; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). From this perspective, controlled curriculum development translates to job readiness and inevitably economic status, a clear indication of the power dynamics employed by schools (Delpit, 2006). If the central component of education is indeed the reproduction of the status quo based on class status and race differences, how do teachers combat this deterministic social phenomenon? Black scholars essentially challenge this structure by addressing inequality and emphasizing the necessity of human agency within the Black community, equipped with competent teachers and cultural synchronization.

The struggle for equality.

During the reconstruction of the South, Blacks faced Jim Crow laws, which instituted segregation across the south. By 1885, most Southern states implemented laws requiring separate schools for Blacks (Lusane, 1992). Such laws provided the foundation for the ruling of *Plessy V. Ferguson* of 1896, legalizing the practice of segregated facilities. The legal fight against segregation was decided in the courts in 1954, with the *Brown V Board* decision deeming separate educational facilities as inherently unequal. However, the federal government did not enforce the law until after the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which prohibits discrimination of any sort.

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[3] The Black teachers who were education pioneers where often members of the elite: Daughters of doctors, lawyers, funeral home directors, founders of local black banks, insurance companies, newspapers and other well-to do and well educated men and women (Frazier, 1957; Graham, 2000).

Much of the literature discussing the climate of Black education prior to the *Brown* decision excludes Black educators by centering legal discourse as the fundamental source of importance. Before 1954, Black teachers were restricted by law to teaching only Black children in the South and North and in general, were against school integration and discriminatory hiring policies, fearing these policies would limit teaching opportunities (Foster, 1991; Danns, 2009). Vanessa Siddle Walker (2013) argues, although limited in literature, Black educator's activism for equality preceded and paralleled the legal campaigns. Consequently, structural components that stifled the educational attainment of Black students in segregated schools were widely overlooked, including deliberate unequal distributions of resources, inadequate school facilities and culturally biased standardized tests that were used to support an assumption that Black teachers were incompetent educators (Foster, 1997). The *Brown* decision widely focused on placing Black students into predominately white populated schools, with little attention toward academic success in such a racially charged environment. The perspectives of Black educators were not considered, nor the plight Black teachers might face as a result of closing segregated schools (Bell, 1983).

Many Black educators view desegregation as having given Blacks a "false sense of access, opportunity and integration" (Hosford & Mckenzie, 2008, p. 452). However, among many Blacks, desegregation led to a hope for a better future, resulting in a mass migration from the rural south to northern and southern urban centers. Fearful of the new urban populace, many Whites in urban areas nationwide relocated to suburban areas to avoid living in communities with Blacks (Cashin, 2004; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008). Consequently, urban central city populations increasingly became predominately Black

and were reflective in the city school population. De jure segregation practices common in Southern states were mirrored with de facto segregation in Northern states where Black students and teachers were restricted to Black schools. Teacher representation did not follow this trend; Black teachers continued to face restricted job opportunities, while White teachers were allowed to dominate the teaching field a trend that continues even to this day (Foster, 1997).

The outcome of the *Brown* decision with its insistence of equal access to *school buildings* as opposed to *equal resources and teacher representation* to ensure opportunities to develop intellectual potential among Black students continues to plague educational opportunities for Black students. School desegregation with its focus on Black and White students sharing classrooms did little to assure equitable educational opportunities for Black students. Hosford and McKenzie (2008) declared that desegregation practices were simply a mixing of bodies, these authors claim that a state of integration resulting in harmony and unity had not truly been attained. Ladson-Billings (2006) describes this circumstance as an education debt. A debt in which it appears that policy makers have "not only back[ed] away from the promise of the *Brown* decision but literally refusing even to take *Plessy* seriously" by adequately funding education for all students (p. 9).

The Dearth of Black Educators

"If and when they [Blacks] are admitted to these [public] schools certain things will

inevitability follow. Negro teachers will become rare and in many cases disappear"

W. E. B. Du Bois (as cited in Madkins, 2011).

In 1960, W. E. B. Du Bois predicted the downward spiral of Black educators, with the above quote. Yet Black scholars such as Carter G. Woodson (1933) argued that Black teachers were better fit to teach Black children with hopes of eliminating a system of mis-education. He stressed that if a Black man is "to live in the ghetto he can more easily develop out of it under his own leadership than under that which is super-imposed" (Woodson, 1933). This was not an attempt to rally for separatism, but to point out that education requires teachers to understand the history and culture of the students they teach. Education, he protested, must reside within, "common sense schools" with "teachers who understand and continue in sympathy with those whom they instruct" (Woodson, 1933).

The current paucity of Black teachers can distinctly be traced back to the desegregation era marked by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Other researchers document the contemporary state policies exclude Black teachers from the teaching profession in the form of biased teacher certification exams (Delpit, 1997; Madkins, 2011), while others name broadened career opportunities or inadequate preparation for college (Irvine, 1988) as contributors to this epidemic.

Foster (1997) reported that Black teachers grew from 15,000 in 1890 to 66,000 in 1910. Significant historic accounts of the decline of the Black teacher population report after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, nearly 40,000 Black teachers lost their jobs in seventeen southern states from 1954-1972 (Irvine, 2002; Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004). During the deliberation of this case, the expertise of Black teachers was not sought nor taken into consideration during the trial or the implementation of integration policies that followed (Bell, 1983). As a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)

decision, many Black segregated schools were closed, creating a massive loss of jobs for Black teachers (Fine, 2004). The history of Black education indicates an era when teaching was one of few professional opportunities open to Blacks in the United States. With the change of times, opportunities in other career fields, has played a part in the decreased numbers of Blacks entering teacher education programs.

Segregation provides a starting point to analyze the decline of Blacks in the field of education. Other researchers report that many aspiring Black educators are inadequately prepared for college level courses. Irvine (1988) claims, many Black students who attend urban schools are undereducated during their primary and secondary education experiences. Urban schools are commonly characterized by their lack of funding causing teacher layoffs and limited resources resulting in fewer educational opportunities for students (Madkins, 2011). In addition, urban schools are more likely to serve primarily minority students; hire less qualified teachers and resulting in the majority of the students obtaining limited and/or basic academic skills (Zeichner, 2003). All of these elements are believed to contribute to the lack of college readiness of Black students.

Many researchers believe the influx of teacher certification exams has dramatically affected the number Blacks in the teacher pipeline (Cooper, 1986). Although standardized exams in general have been documented as culturally biased (Mikitovics & Crehan, 2002; Bennett, McWhorter, Kuykendall, 2006; Flippo, 2003; Memory, Coleman &Watkins, 2003; Hood & Parker, 1994) and an ineffective measure of teacher effectiveness (Irvine, 1988; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Bennett, McWhorter, and Kyukendal, 2006) states continue to require exams prior to issuing

teacher certification licenses. Moreover, the Black teacher pipeline is curtailed by a lack of interest the field of education due to low salaries and perceived limited leadership opportunities (Irvine, 1988; Gordon, 1994; Shipp, 1999). In a study comparing education majors with non-education majors, Shipp (1999) found non-education majors placed higher values on salary, job security, and career advancement than did education majors. Considering the importance of the role of Black teachers discussed above, their absence and subsequently their retention warrants serious attention to ways in which to recruit and retain Black teachers.

Education as Agency

If education is to provide students with a sense of agency, Woodson (1933) and Garvey (1967) stressed, the development of critical consciousness must be a staple in Black education. Advocates of Black control of public schools populated by Black students stressed the necessity for an education that will reject the universal strategy of White superiority, which subjugates Blacks and other non-White people through schooling. Scholars on Black education created a thematic tone that stressed the necessity of culturally relevant teachers and an acknowledgement of the deterministic mis-education that serves the dominant class. With this in mind, I draw borders around literature that centers critical pedagogy as a means to develop critical consciousness.[4]

Afrocentricity.

Building on the tradition of Marcus Garvey, Maulana Karenga grounded his theory of *Kawaida*[5] using culture as a means to understand and assert knowledge of self in society. Kawaida understood "culture as the crucible in which the liberation struggle

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[4] Acquiring critical consciousness assumes students develop a critical view of their socio-cultural realty and a critical awareness to overcome oppression.
[5] Kawaida: Swahili for tradition.

takes form and the context in which it ultimately succeeds" (Karenga, 2007). According to Karenga, learning cultural morals and values within the context of an ancient civilization such as Kemet heightens "consciousness and compels us to see our culture, people and history in the context of the sacred and within the dimensions of the Divine" (Karenga, 2007). Karenga's work stressed a transformative education, where an awareness of ancestral origin in conjunction with African history, symbolism and cultural values served as a gateway to academic achievement and consequently the development of the community. From this work grew philosophies leading to Kwanzaa celebrations, Black Studies programs among our nation's universities and Afrocentric school curriculums.

Molefi Asante's social change theory (1980) builds on Karenga's idea, which led to the practice of Afrocentric pedagogy within elementary and secondary schools. Afrocentricity centers African culture, traditions, symbolism and value systems as a focal point for educating Black students. According to Asante (1980), an Afrocentric value system awakens a collective consciousness, working towards an overall improvement of the Black community. More specifically he states:

> Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena. Thus, it is possible for anyone to master the discipline of seeking the location of Africans in a given phenomenon. In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that

blackness is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia,

patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and White racial domination. (Asante, 1980, p.

2).

Many scholars on Afrocentricity have found that an Afrocentric education provides a

successful model in building effective Afrocentric-based curricula as well as value-based

character education entrenched with symbolism derived from African traditions (Sefa Dei,

1994; Harris, 1992; Shockley, 2007).

Cultural pluralism.

Culture within a school environment assumes culture is a by-product of collective

experiences connecting individuals with their environment (Sizemore, 1974). Education

then makes most sense when it develops from the culture in which students are grounded

within their communities (Hixson, 1974). The ideals of cultural pluralists continued the

classic work of critical consciousness by drawing attention to the assumed supremacy of

White history, culture and consequently the inappropriateness of a universal European-

based education for other ethnic groups. In doing so, cultural pluralism challenges the

idea of a melting pot while scrutinizing assimilation that requires relinquishing cultural

valuation and self-definition (Epps, 1974). Instead, insisting on the acceptance of

difference, pluralism is considered a necessity in educating students from different walks

of life. The "condition of cultural parity among ethnic groups in a common society" must

be realized to assure equal educational opportunities for all ethnic groups (Sizemore,

1974, p. 94).

Cultural synchronization.

Jacqueline Irvine's study (1991) analyzed the importance of cultural synchronization between teachers and students and found it to be key in student achievement and teacher expectations. With a focus on cultural differences and teacher expectations, Irvine found that "White teachers are more likely than Black teachers to hold negative expectations for Black students" (Irvine, 1991, p. 61). This study does not assume that all White teachers are ineffective or that all Black teachers are effective; however, Irvine suggested that cultural similarities between Black teachers and Black students enable them to draw on shared cultural experiences, more often than not, that White teachers are not privy to. Irvine's Black Student Achievement model incorporates a synchronization of cultural characteristics. Irvine claims this synchronization between students and teachers has the ability to counter the influence of discriminatory societal structures, institutionalized practices and policies such as a linear curriculum, tracking and deficiency-based disciplinary practices (Irvine, 1991, p. xvii).

Culturally relevant pedagogy.

Gloria Ladson Billings (2009) builds on this theory with her scholarship on *culturally relevant pedagogy.*[6] In an ethnography Billings that examined the pedagogical practices of eight exemplary teachers of Black students, these "Dreamkeepers," as she described them, all demonstrated a belief that all students can succeed (Ladson-Billings, 2009). According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant teaching must meet three standards: "an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a socio-political or critical

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[6] Culturally relevant pedagogy: "a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160).

consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 483). Culturally relevant pedagogy can be recognized by examining how teachers exhibit and conceptualize themselves as well as others (p. 478), social relationships and connectedness (p. 480) and a fluid concept of knowledge (p. 481) including that which is held by the students themselves (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Lynn (2006), in a portraiture of three culturally relevant Black male teachers, found that culturally relevant teaching also encompasses a personalized knowledge of street culture. The study indicated that an understanding of the significance of street culture in urban centers served as an asset in fostering genuine relationships between students and teachers; that is, successful teachers used street culture as a resource to build intellectual connections (Lynn, 2006). Although street culture may not seem to most educators to be an avenue of intellectual stimulation, this finding supports the idea that culturally relevant teaching is a "socially mediated process and related to students cultural experiences" (Irvine, 2009, p. 41).

Engaged pedagogy.

bell hooks (1984) draws on Freire's rejection of the banking system and expands the theory of liberation with her assertion that engaged pedagogy is "more demanding than critical or feminist pedagogy" because "it emphasizes well-being" (hooks, 1984, p. 15). Paulo Freire's classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* by Paulo Freire (1970) serves as a foundation of critical discourse in the field education. Freire heavily critiques traditional pedagogical practices as a reinforcement of domination and subordination. The "banking system of education," coined by Freire, (1970) considers students as "an empty vessel to be filled" by the teacher (p. 79). Instead Freire, argues for a problem-

posing method, one in which the relationship between the teacher and student should be cultivated by engaging in dialogue and critical reflection together to make meaning. This method is believed to lead to critical consciousness, through which students acquire a critical view of their socio-cultural reality and critical awareness to overcome oppression. Critical consciousness, then, is believed in this context to lead to a transformative pedagogy, whereby students gain the critical thinking skills to transform their socio-cultural reality (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy has since been extended to include an examination of race-, gender- and ethnic-specific pedagogical practices.

hooks argues that a liberatory education is only possible when "everyone claims knowledge in a field in which we all labor" (hooks, 1984, p. 14). Engaged pedagogy not only stresses the importance of student-centered learning enriched by critical thinking, but also highlights self-actualization as a key component. According to hooks, teachers must be "actively committed to a process of self-actualization" (hooks, 1984, p. 15). The teacher's role is not simply to empower students but to "care for their souls" and to grow as a result of their relationships with students (hooks, 1984, p. 13). This actualization process challenges teachers to demonstrate a mutual vulnerability by sharing personal experience with students, shifting the power in the classroom to a neutral place for all involved to learn. This holistic approach to teaching demonstrates a pipeline to critical consciousness among the students, while challenging educators to teach to transgress.

Among the writers above, there is an absolute concern for an education that will improve the social conditions of the Black community. These scholars stressed the need of culturally relevant education based on social and political issues faced in the community in an attempt to aid in the development of the Black community as a whole.

In addition, culturally relevant teachers are noted as an absolute necessity. At the most fundamental level, teachers of Black students must understand the great history along with the current plight of the Black community. Education, then, should counter the discriminatory tactics that disproportionately impede equal access to opportunities that aid in advancing social mobility among the group as a whole. The above scholars spoke of the re-education of Blacks as one that should center community uplift and invoke characteristics such as self-valuation and self-determination.

Centralizing Black Women Educators

Rooted in a political stance, Black women's culture is often demonstrated through acts and symbols of self-definition and valuation grown in response to the matrix of domination. Many Black feminists have researched educational issues and practices; yet Black Feminist pedagogy remains under-theorized. Cultural and critical consciousness, as driving forces of practice, have common history in the Black community with comparable themes that speak to the inequalities in urban schools and the resilience of Black women educators. Reoccurring research themes on and by Black women, emphasize motherhood and community uplift, which demonstrate that Black women's teaching culture embodies a Black feminist epistemology in practice, distinguishable within a socio-historical context and tradition of mothering practices (Collins, 2009; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003).

Black Motherhood.

Black motherhood in West African societies serve as a core function of daily life, other family and community responsibilities formed around mothering (Collins, 2009, p. 55). The condition of enslavement imposed working conditions that separated mothering

from other aspects of life; consequently all women felt responsible for each other's

children (Case, 1997). In addition, these conditions made motherhood a commodity,

considering childbearing ultimately increased the labor force of the self-proclaimed

owner (Collins, 2009, p. 57). Motherhood served as an important relationship to transfer

values about society and culture (Case, 1997). Private relationships between mother and

child offered an opportunity for mothers to teach their children "everyday forms of

resistance" and to "trust their own self-definitions and value… a powerful tool for

resisting oppression" (Collins, 2009, p. 57).

Othermothering.

The role of child rearing in African traditions among mothers and othermothers

continues to shape culture in the Black community. Common in Black communities,

"Othermothering," is defined as, women who share mothering responsibilities with

biological mothers within the community (Collins, 2009, p. 192). Not only do women

within families such as grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or cousins, assume mothering

responsibilities, but othermothering extends beyond biological boundaries toward the

larger community of women and include "fictive kin" relationships.[7] Othermothering

practices are often learned early; many young Black girls are routinely expected to care

for younger siblings and/or children who may be associated by fictive kin relationships

(Collins, 2009; Case, 1997). Traditional motherhood views in the Black community

assume the responsibility for all the children of the community. These responsibilities

involve caring for the emotional and/or physical well-being of the child, including

assisting the biological mother who may not have the resources or mental well-being to

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[7] Fictive kin terms are used as a form of address for persons who assume the status of supplementary or replacement kin; as a form of address, which expresses familiarity within a personal relationship; and/or as a public validation of a special kind of association (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972).

care for her child alone. Mothering responsibilities then encompasses social activism and is considered "community othermothering". When Black women act and "work on the behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and accountability, which embrace[s] conceptions of transformative power and mutuality" they are functioning within the role of community mother (Collins, 1991, p. 132). Therefore, Black women's gender identity serves as a nexus to examine pedagogical practices based on its historical foundation in community and social activism (Dixson & Smith, 2010).

Black women's pedagogy.

A conceptual starting point for understanding Black women's political activism is within the role of "othermother" (Collins, 2009). Witnessing and experiencing this type of mothering, within family and kinship relationships, sets a platform for the potential growth of an ethic of care and personal accountability among Black women (Collins, 2009). Individual Black women shape this ethic of personal accountability, as they have specific ways of being that establish caring and community uplift. An essential element of Black women's pedagogy is the role of othermothering.

Othermothering: Mothering of the mind.

Research indicates othermothering as a commonality among Black women educators in regard to implementing strategies to enhance student achievement. It has been noted that, "exemplary African American women teachers use the familiar and familial mother-child relationship as a guide for their interactions with students" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 74). This level of advocacy is formed in most cases due to the fact that many Black women teachers often see themselves as "othermothers" or women who feel accountable for others' well-being, and therefore, commit themselves to

the social and emotional progression of all children in the community (Irvine, 2002; Collins, 1991).

Case (1997) conducted a qualitative study of the othermothering practices of two Black women educators. She describes othermothering as an attempt to satisfy psycho-educational[8] needs with a "sense of responsibility, clear-sighted attachment, and attentive love" (Case, 1997, p. 36). Overall, the guiding force of othermothering is clear-sighted attachment resulting from childhood memories of being "watched both by maternal figures and by community figures" (Case, 1997, p. 36). According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005), analyses of exemplary Black teachers overwhelmingly demonstrate a maternal approach. Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains, these teachers "view the maternal as a profound commitment to the well-being and survival of Black children and Black people" (2005, p. 76).

Black women educators have traditionally taken their concern for Black education beyond the classroom in addressing larger societal issues as they related to academic achievement and community upliftment. Dixson's study (2003) found that Black women teachers "believe it is their community obligation to speak on behalf of African American students and their families when necessary" (p. 225). In her study of two Black women teachers, Dixson (2003) indicates five interwoven themes between both educators: Teaching as a lifestyle and public service; discipline as expectations for excellence; teaching as othermothering; relationship building and race; and class and gender awareness. One participant of the study spoke out against the possible relocation of an

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[8] Psycho-educational needs- "The psycho-emotional and intellectual development of children are inextricable tied together" (Hayes & Comer as cited by Case, 1997, p.110).

in-house transitional education program for homeless children, the only such program within the district. On why she addressed the school board on this issue, she replied,

> …I felt that I needed to get up and say something and give them a voice because I work in close contact with that program and with the families that come through the program. I kinda always make myself present. Yep, here's another African American person that you can identify with in this building, if you need anything (Dixson, 2003, p. 227).

For the educators in this study, teaching was a lifestyle that did not end with school hours. Instead, teachers routinely extended their work hours preparing for future lessons, serving as othermothers, or making home visits. In addition, these teachers "challenged their colleagues to confront their biases and prejudices in an effort to make school a better place for all children" by speaking out in school board meetings, faculty meetings or in the teacher's lounge (p. 232). These educators strove to guide student success by communicating not simply an understanding of an oppressive society, but by also providing wisdom to maneuver within a society where deceptive tactics are used to subjugate people of color.

Caring.

The fundamental features of Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) model of womanist caring involve: (1) embracing the maternal; (2) political clarity; and (3) an ethic of risk. Based on the collective experiences of Black women, Beauboeuf-Lafantont claims womanist standpoint epistemology is a tradition among Black women teachers. Along with maternal and political aspects, the ethic of risk implies that Black women engage in the teaching profession from a socio-political stance despite the overwhelming

oppression positioned against them and their students. Taking a risk, not knowing how much success they may have, these teachers teach due to a commitment to the Black community.

Black women teachers with their maternal approach create intimate relationships with their students and see themselves "as part of rather than apart from other people" (p. 81). This mutuality is demonstrated in classroom dynamics where expectations are interdependent, supportive and taught based on the needs of the class community, both individually and collectively (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2002). The study demonstrated that Black women teachers create classroom environments that foster collectivity and interdependence. Patterson et al. (2011) illustrated this notion with descriptions from participants on classroom dynamics as having "mutual responsibility and working for the common good" (p. 282).

In addition, Shiller (2009) found that teachers of color demonstrated an ethic of care by expressing a "desire to get to know their students and to connect with them, especially by trying to understand who the students were in order to get them to improve academically" (p. 479). Black women teachers in many instances connect with their students through a sense of a shared identity, having grown up in similar neighborhoods and holding similar aspirations for social mobility (Walker, 2000).

Politicized mothering.

In an examination of the knowledge, beliefs and life experiences of six Black women teachers committed to social justice, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1997) probed how Black women teachers come to making social justice a personal and pedagogical focus. The study defined politicized mothering as "grounded in the teacher's belief that theirs

and the student's personal growth and development are critical to the process of education and central to the realization of social justice" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997, p. vi). The findings indicated teachers saw their work through three inter-related aspects, which were maternal, political and moral understandings of education.

In another study, using the same data from above, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) explored Black women teachers' perceptions of self and motivations for teaching. The findings demonstrated three womanist stances. The teachers (1) located themselves in female activism and derived knowledge, fortitude and voice from foremothers, (2) embraced caring as key to social activism, and (3) believed development to be quintessential to human activity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 440).

Politicized Mothering examines caring beyond the cultural aspect and hones in on the political awareness that shapes the maternal approach of Black women teachers. This type of caring is characterized as authentic caring, a "trans-historical and communal vision of social change that sustains their commitments to children" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 258). Teachers using this approach see themselves as change agents. These teachers have an unyielding belief in the success of every student, and the possibilities to transform the community based on the success of children. This perception of self "provides politicized mothers with the moral fortitude and vision to persevere in their particular form of caring and teaching" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, p. 258).

Gaps in the Literature

Understanding Black women's culture is imperative to understanding the role Black women play in schools. Far from a monolithic way of being, Black women's

collective culture within specific contextual instances demonstrates acts of sisterhood, motherhood and creative expression as diverse as the women who validate the existence of such a culture. Collins explained three key reasons Black women's culture is important. The first indicates Black women may appear as aligning themselves with the conventional way of being in society, while covertly opposing and working against oppressive conditions. Therefore, the way in which Black women apply their recognition of oppression is demonstrated within Black women's culture, which embodies a Black female consciousness. According to Collins (1986),

> Black women's activities in families, churches, community institutions, and creative expression may represent more than an effort to mitigate pressures stemming from oppression. Rather, the Black female ideological frame of reference that Black women acquire through sisterhood, motherhood, and creative expression may serve the added purpose of shaping a Black female consciousness about the workings of oppression (p. 23).

In addition, Black women's activism is different than the mainstream accepted definition of activism. For Black women, activism is not necessarily lived out loud and can take on many forms. Collins (1986) explained how an action such as rejecting external definitions of Black womanhood is itself an act of activism. Activism can be demonstrated in Black women teacher's efforts to mentor students by aiding in their development of a critical consciousness to view society in a way that promotes their well-being. Consciousness then can be viewed as a route to freedom, a departure point for activism, with full view of the opposing system, bobbing and weaving systematic traps.

Thirdly, the culture of Black women serves as an "analytical model" to "explore the relationship between oppression, consciousness, and activism" (Collins, 1986, p. 24).

Shared Sisterhood.

Black motherhood in the form of othermothering has been demonstrated as an effective practice among Black women teachers as it is discussed in the previous section. Yet the values of Black women's sisterhood are not as widespread in Black women's pedagogical literature. According to Collins (1986), Black women's culture has three specific dimensions: sisterhood, motherhood and creative expression.

When one thinks of Black women and sisterhood, a common misinterpretation is that being Black is an automatic indicator of sisterhood among Black women. However, McDonald (2006) defined sisterhood as "an awareness of being similar to other black women in terms of feelings, ideas, interest, ideology, and politics" (p. 35). Collins offered a similar definition, stating sisterhood is a "supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from shared feelings of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. 22). This awareness links Black women together, due to a shared bond of struggle while living in spaces where whiteness is property[9] and maleness is power. McDonald's study of class differences among eighty-nine working class and middle class Black women examined whether the ever-growing gap in life situations that decrease the levels of contact and similarity might widen the gap in how Black women view struggle and ultimately sisterhood within the Black community. While McDonald did not imply all Black women should view sisterhood the same, she did argue that different perspectives guided by class differences may impede political and social progress in the Black

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[9] See *Whiteness as Property* by Cheryl I. Harris

community. However, traditional roles such as community othermothering distinctively serve as an interest in the betterment of the community as a whole. McDonald (2006) found very little class polarization around issues of gender-ethnic identity and consciousness: "the proportions of middle class black women supporting or rejecting certain ideas are for the most part virtually the same as or are only moderately different from those for the lower class" (p. 5). Consequently, these women rejected the idea of individualism; instead, their livelihood centered on community work. This mentality is what bridges the gap among Black women and "seeks to move toward the mutuality of a shared sisterhood" (Collins, 2009, p. 207).

Sisterhood is demonstrated "in the comfort of daily conversations; through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist (Collins, 2009, p. 113). Black women share a common viewpoint and experience society similarly, so much so that many Black women agree there is a "need to value Black womanhood" (Collins, 2009, p. 113). Dixson and Dingus (2008) found that some Black women become educators based on the influential relationship of other Black women who encouraged them to do so. Such practices within the context of relationships among Black women teachers and Black mothers may indicate supportive relationships aimed at maintaining cultural integrity and collective critical consciousness.

Although research indicates Black women in general tend to have difficulty connecting based on the ever-growing class difference (McDonald, 2006), successful Black women educators, I believe, have maintained the cultural practice of both motherhood and sisterhood through a desire to generate collective critical consciousness.

I contend that, just as institutional racism is viewed as a linking culprit in racism, sexism and classism (hooks, 1984), struggle based in oppressive conditions link authentic bonds between women of color and the community (McDonald, 2006). This study explored the influence of sisterhood and motherhood in the experiences of Black women educators and how those experiences impacted their work as educators.

Mentorship.

This study is interested in the factors that address the academic achievement of Black students in urban schools. Specifically interested in educators who share an understanding of the cultural aspects of teaching. This project conceptualized mentorship within the context of cultural traditions of sisterhood and motherhood among Black women in the field of education. Essentially concerned with the conditions that may change the current educational disparities in urban schools. This project reveals mentorship as an integral part of sisterhood and motherhood experiences among Black women educators.

Teacher induction.

In the field of education, teacher induction programs[10] are perceived as a proactive avenue to retain the teacher population. Teacher induction programs at large represent the most common route teachers receive mentoring (Jonas, 1996). Russell (2006) reports that 80% of teachers experience mentorship through induction programs. Teacher induction programs take on different forms; no specific mentoring model has been defined as being more successful than others. Depaul (2000) noted that successful models involve specific expectations of the mentor and the mentee. These formal models

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[10] Teacher induction programs are designed to support novice teachers and usually include a teacher mentor or coach. Gardiner, W. (2012).

of mentorship attempt to socialize mentees by teaching them to assimilate into the current professional structure that created the necessity for mentoring programs in the first place. They negate the solidarity of many formal mentorship programs holding traditional hierarchal structures with a one-way transmission of information. In traditional mentoring programs, mentors are focused on teaching mentees to assimilate into a structure that systematically marginalizes individuals based on race, class and gender (Dingus, 2008).

The term mentor first occurred in Western literature through Homer's (800 B. C.) Greek myth, *The Odyssey*. Odysseus, a warrior in the Trojan War, appointed Mentor to advise and guide his son Telemachus. Throughout the story, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and ruler of all things crafty or skillful, manifested as Mentor to provided insight to Telemachus. Ultimately, Mentor was charged with guiding Odysseus' son to consider the past, think critically about situations, to think for himself and to be wise about the choices he made. This epic poem on mentorship provides what some may consider as a baseline to understanding the role of the mentor and mentee.

In recent years there has been a considerable amount of literature on the benefits of mentorships to the protégé, mentor and organization. The scholarship explained that classrooms of teachers who receive mentoring from more experienced educators were more likely to create effective lesson plans, routines and classroom expectations and were better prepared to manage disruptive behavior (Evertson & Smithey, 2000). Teacher mentors are able to grow as leaders through their guidance and sharing of knowledge in the form of mentoring. Pertinent organizational information is passed down through mentorship increasing retention rates for schools.

Evertson and Smithey (2000) conducted a study, comparing classroom practices of teachers who had formal mentors with those who had informal mentors. The study revealed the mentoring relationship was most effective when the mentor had the knowledge and skill to transfer to the mentee. The formality of the mentorship was not significant in effectiveness suggesting connectedness not formality breeds successful mentorship relationships. In *The mentor's guide: facilitating effective learning relationships,* Zachary (2000) stated a lack of connectedness between the mentor and the mentee and/or the mentor's lack of mentoring experience results in ineffectiveness.

While Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) provided empirical data to demonstrate the positive impact on teacher mentorship, opportunities to continue mentorship relationships beyond induction programs may provide increased job satisfaction, thereby leading to a prolonged career in the field of education. Darling-Hammond (1998) asserted that collaborative working environments provide interactions among teachers that improve their teaching craft, consequently improving job satisfaction. Collaborative school environments suggest that weaving mentorship into school culture provides an opportunity for formal and informal mentorships to develop. There is a consensus among social scientists that mentoring positively impacts teacher retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004) and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

Culturally-based model.

Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of teacher mentorship programs is that by design, these programs embody structural components that do not account for race, gender or class factors. A considerable amount of literature on mentorship convincingly suggests that ineffectiveness is mainly due to a lack of connectedness (Zachary, 2000). If

connection is one of the factors that hinder successful mentorship relationships one must consider the similarity-attraction paradigm, which suggest that similar demographic factors such as race, gender and age group create positive responses and lead to positive interactions (Hu, Thomas, & Lance, 2008).

Further addressing the lack of connection, Dingus (2008) conducted a study where she argued a need for "culturally based models of teacher mentoring and understanding how race and culture inform professional development and enhancement." In Dingus' *I'm Learning the Trade*, she described her participation in the chartering of a Black women's professional organization. The planning phase addressed a pivotal aspect that "emerged across all aspects of planning: mentoring for those coming through the professional ranks and for those already holding professional positions" (p. 361). Dingus also described mentoring as "holistic" and "attend[ing] to the mind, body and soul" (p. 262). The organizational charter members determined that mentoring should "build on the intellectual, spiritual and cultural strengths of Black women in ways that can bolster them for the challenges of multiple oppressions (Dingus, 2008, p. 362). The same study found three relevant themes. The first, Black women teacher's standpoints, determined how culture influenced participation in mentoring networks. The second addressed leadership skills, indicating that mentors model leadership skills across generations of black women. Third, due to racism within the field, mentoring networks of black women offer a cultural space for black women teachers (Dingus, 2008). The study addressed same race and gender mentorship and provided a model based on culturally relevant content provided from a Black woman's standpoint. Similarly, Sims (2002) demonstrated that protégés who shared the same race and gender as their mentor reported

career and psychological support. Those who shared the same race and gender reported a

higher level of identification with the mentor as opposed to those only sharing the same

race of the mentor (Sims, 2000). The aforementioned studies indicate a need for teacher

mentorship that takes into account cultural similarities to produce effective mentorships.

Researchers have determined that mentoring aids in personal development, career

development and a successful educational experience (Crawford & Smith, 2005, p. 52).

Studies also indicate that individuals who experience mentoring are more likely to mentor

others (Vincent & Seymour, 1999). The effectiveness of mentoring relationships has

been said to rest on the level of connectedness. Similarly, researchers examine the

necessity of same race and/or gender mentorships. Dingus (2008) presented a culturally

based mentoring model highlighting black women's standpoints, modeling leadership

that counters racism within the ranks. Adding to this body of literature, this study further

illuminates mentoring from a Black feminist standpoint, highlighting its use as a form of

resistance and activism.

Chapter 3: Qualitative Methodology and Design

This study is situated within Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist thought framework (2009) and provides insight on the culture of sisterhood and motherhood through highlighting the viewpoints and experiences of Black women educators. This work hopes to begin filling the gap on literature exploring the sisterhood component of Black women's culture in the field of education. Sisterhood is defined as having "supportive feeling[s] of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from shared feelings of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. 22). Similarly, McDonald's (2006) definition accurately described sisterhood as "an awareness of being similar to other black women in terms of feelings, ideas, interest, ideology, and politics" (p. 35). Sisterhood in the context of this study is not confined to group dynamics; instead it springs from expressed experiences of sisterhood traditions of the participants. Fundamentally, this study frames Black women educators within the context of Black women's culture of motherhood and sisterhood and examines their viewpoints and experiences as educators in urban schools.

This project explored viewpoints and experiences among this group of women and argues that the collective viewpoints and similar experiences serve as key aspects in a politicized culture of sisterhood and motherhood among Black women educators. The overall research question driving this study, "How does Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood, as defined by Collins, influence the experiences of Black women educators, and how do those experiences impacted their work as educators?" In essence exploring, whether Black female consciousness is shaped by Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood (Collins, 1986), and to what extent do shared viewpoints and experiences impact how they engage in the field of education?

Portraiture as Methodology

This section will demonstrate how the qualitative study developed by embedding tools of portraiture. In sync with each participant, this project co-created meaning and validated a worldview concerned with social justice, distinguishable through motherhood and sisterhood traditions among Black women educators. Portraiture also allows the merger of art and science; a direct connection to the ideals of Black feminist theory that encourage the use of storytelling and creative expression: "Portraiture captures the voices, relationships, and meaning making of participants, as individuals and community members in one fluid vision that is constructed by the researcher and participants" (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). This mixture of visual art, music, and/or literature aims to give a more complete picture of the participants and the researcher.

Unlike the strict regiments of positivist paradigms that require quantitative based epistemologies, as well as non-participatory status by the researcher, qualitative research, and more specifically usage of the portraiture method, intentionally makes visible the researcher. More so than in any other research method, the researcher's voice, perspective and insight is present in the creation of the portrait. Determining the focus of the research, building relationships with the participants, watching and interpreting actions and behaviors while co-creating the narrative, the researcher remains central to the research. Just as in any other research method, portraiture requires a persistent balance of "personal predisposition with disciplined skepticism and critique" on behalf of the researcher in an effort to create a sound research study (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13).

Portraiture is drawn out of the "traditions and values of the phenomenology paradigm and shares technique, standards and goals of ethnography" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). It offers an opportunity to examine the whole by focusing on an individual phenomenon. The narrative documents a mixture of the actual context, such as the physical settings, cultural rituals, norms, values and historical periods that inform the perspectives of the researcher as well as the participants. This process requires detailed descriptions gathered by "watching, listening to, and interacting with the actors over a sustained period of time." The essence of portraiture is embedded in how "actions and interactions are experienced, perceived, and negotiated by the people in the setting" (Lightfoot &Davis, 1997, p. 15). Portraiture is meant to merge art and science in the sense that the storytelling artfully takes the reader on a rigorous academic journey while inspiring acts of solidarity offering opportunities for social transformation (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Co-creating portraitures allowed for more creativity while utilizing narratives in an innovative way as it also challenged the notion of epistemology and validation issues as researchers seek to know participants through describing and analyzing particular behaviors and perspectives. In co-creating these portraitures, I did so by drawing from my sisterly relationships with each participant in the study. This work also makes visible the tradition of sisterhood, highlighting the relationship I have developed over the years with each participant. Moreover, this method makes clear the tension between the researcher's ever-present voice and subjectivity, with the obligation to remain neutral and analytical.

What's good?

Portraitists resist grounding their work in deficiency models; therefore, the starting point seeks out the good. The review of literature embedded in this paper on successful black teachers demonstrates "what's good" in urban schools. What's good? Culturally relevant teaching and Othermothering practices are indicators of success. What's good? Same race teachers tend to have effective culturally specific ways of engaging Black students. What's good? Many successful Black women teachers teach from a maternal stance, a tradition in the Black community. This body of literature guides my inquiry. What about Sisterhood? As does motherhood, sisterhood has a long tradition in the Black community. What about the tradition of support among Black women? This line of questioning led me to the aforementioned research question that aims to understand how this tradition may play out among Black women educators.

Portraiture Structure.

The fundamental elements of Portraiture are context, voice, relationship, emergent themes and aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. XV). This section will clearly define these five aspects in the context of this research. Followed by a discussion of the specific research design in regard to the research sites, purposeful sampling criteria, data analysis procedures, my role as researcher, potential ethical issues and methods of validation.

Context.

As portraitists shift through actions and reactions, the contexts in which all interactions transpire are crucial for interpretation. Contexts, as in the physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural and aesthetic shape experiences, provide clues,

and create a guide leading to an understanding of behavior, thoughts and feelings

(Lightfoot, 1997, p. 41). The art of context embodies descriptors that place the reader in

the midst of the scene, seeing, hearing and ultimately feeling and/or understanding the

perspective of the researcher and the participants creating the story.

Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describes five ways to apply context in research. The

internal context is where the physical terrain is described in detail, and no detail is too

minuscule. Second context is personal, which I used by intentionally writing myself into

the narrative. The perspective of the researcher is clear, and while it seems this technique

would encourage the reader to accept the story as written, ironically this approach

encourages the reader to make interpretations from different points of the vividly

described terrain (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 50). The cultural and historical context of

the scene is equally important, as it highlights values that shape the purpose. Portraitists

present this context by sketching symbols and signs into the physical image in an effort to

enhance the understanding history and culture. The fourth contextual method is the use

of aesthetic features. Here metaphors are used as symbols, "pointing to larger

phenomena that will emerge as significant and be developed more fully later on in the

narrative" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 55). Shaping is a constant part of portraiture.

The researcher shapes the context as the participants themselves respond to and shape

changes to the environment (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 57).

Voice.

The positivist approach to voice assumes disingenuousness, while portraitists are

upfront with their voice being clearly visible in the text. The voice of the researcher is, in

fact, so central to the narrative that the researcher's voice is considered to be the primary

research tool. The researcher's voice brings forth the research questions as well as the

theoretical lens as it provides the "lens of description, interpretation and analysis and

narrative," and can hardly be silenced (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 86). In light of the

ever-present voice of the researcher, the portraitist's "work is deeply empirical, grounded

in systematically collected data, skeptical questioning (of self and actors), and rigorous

examination of biases—always open to disconfirming evidence" (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 85).

The element of voice in portraiture can be applied in six different ways: "voice as

witness, interpretation, preoccupation, autobiography, listening for voice and voice in

conversation" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 87).

The portraitist as witness captures the environment and/or behaviors from the

boundary; observing things that may go unnoticed by the actors involved in the routine of

their day. In general, ethnographies are in search of meaning. Therefore, the

interpretative voice is making sense of the environment by capturing a vivid description

of the environment and actors, ideally so the "reader might be able to offer an alternative

hypothesis, a different interpretation of the data (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 91). Voice

as preoccupation is applied to the way in which the researcher brings in her assumptions,

intellectual interest, and understanding of the relevant literature (Lightfoot & Davis,

1997). The lens in which I view the practices of Black women educators is clarified by

the preference of Black Feminism as a theoretical lens. The literature review gives the

reader a clear backdrop to how the literature is interpreted and applied to the current

research questions.

Voice as autobiography, the researcher "brings in her own history—familial,

cultural, ideological, and education to the inquiry" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95). In

Chapter Four, I intertwine my personal experience in a de facto segregated preschool

transitioning to an integrated elementary school; subsequent descriptions of the

progression of my experience as a Black woman working in an urban setting further lay

out my connection to this project. In addition, researchers listen for voice as they capture

the "timbre, resonance, cadence, and tone of their voices, their message and their

meaning" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 99), and are observant of body language. Many

times body language suggests emotions felt by the participants causing stagnation in

speaking, such as resistance or confusion. Listening for voice then mends the gap from

that which has been spoken with vivid descriptions composing a holistic view, placing

the reader within the environment clearly seeing and hearing the interactions between the

participants. The final use of voice displays the dialogue between the researcher and the

participants. Here the researcher writes in her conversations, documenting the budding

relationships with the participants. Voice in dialogue demonstrates the co-creation of the

story, while the communication may result in merging ideas and meaning beneficial to

the essence of the story.

Relationships.

Portraiture is based heavily on connections through building relationships. So

often we hear of relationships in the sense of "gaining entrance" or finding the

"gatekeeper" as if relationships are built solely for entry points. Portraitists however,

center relationships in gathering data and creating the story. Relationships give way to

fluidity and reciprocity, developing formal and informal responsibility, trust, intimacy

negotiated, data collected, and knowledge constructed (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135).

Relationships are catalysts of the research story and pose the most "conceptual,

methodical, emotional, and ethical" complexities, as the researcher must merge the relationship within the fundamental meaning and co-creation of the story (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135).

This research does not assume relationships produce monolithic thinking; opposing viewpoints, beliefs and values are equally important to the development of the story. I have learned throughout my life that relationships are more about personal growth than the actual relationship itself. The way we relate to and respond to others fundamentally reflects who we are as individuals. Therefore, it is self-understanding, "which emerges out of the inter-subjective experience of relationships—impetus for deep inquiry and the construction of knowledge" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 136). The portraitist builds and renegotiates relationships and intimacy, is engaged not in harmony or disharmony but in the natural balance of forming authentic relationships. Portraitists build relationships by not only developing symmetry, reciprocity and boundary negotiation as discussed above, but also by searching for the "good" and being empathetic.

Looking for the good does not imply a skewed ambrosial story, but relies on an approach from a positive stance. The portraitist builds from a stance of strength as opposed to weakness, one that is collaborative instead of authoritative and relies on validation rather than assumed inadequacy. This approach naturally gives sight to the opposing elements that point to areas of struggle and vulnerability. Making connections with and hearing stories of the participants facilitates a relationship through which the researcher can empathize with the participants. Gaining the perspective of the participants through empathizing requires the researcher to "learn to relax mentally and

spiritually and physically, learning to let one self go into the other person with a willingness to be changed in the process" (May, 1939 as cited by Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 147). Relationship building is complex, yet it aids in the depth and authentic co-creation of the story by the researcher and participants.

Emergent themes.

Portraitists never stop listening and coding. This ongoing coding is grounded in the framework outlined earlier and encompasses the interest of the researcher. It also provides a guideline to draw out patterns and document those consistent themes. Illuminating emergent themes is a "disciplined, empirical process—of description, interpretation, analysis, and syntheses—an aesthetic process of narrative development" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185). Honing in on emergent themes, the researcher listens for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals, triangulation and dissonant patterns.

Aesthetic whole.

The aesthetic whole is created by orderly and consistent themes that display a pattern, which emerges from the pre-existing yet fluid conception, the strategic structure of the narrative and the form developed by the texture of the stories. This merging of conception, structure and form frames a coherent perspective, lined with a sequence of events, experiences and voice. (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997.) Portraiture seeks to inspire, to awaken, to place the reader within the environment to see, feel and understand the perspective of the participants as they tell their story.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data was derived from four semi-structured interviews with each individual participant lasting between one and two hours, and informal follow-up phone interviews to each participant over the course of approximately six months. The use of a semi-structured interview style fits well with portraiture because it allows an opportunity to build depth throughout the interview. Follow up calls were also made to gain clarification from pervious interviews. The dialogue during the interviews aimed to draw out the viewpoints and experiences among a group of Black women educators.

Due to the personal nature of these interviews the participants and all other names were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and to free them to be as candid as possible. The first three interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, then analyzed before the subsequent interview took place to adequately build on data previously collected. Notes were taken during follow up phone interviews and during face-to-face interviews to document the relevant context during the face-to-face. In addition, due to technical difficulties, field notes were also used to document data during the final face-to-face interviews. Field notes were not transcribed verbatim. Data gathered from field notes are noted as such in the text.

In order to set the tone for a comfortable research climate, participants chose the interview location. I was sure to be considerate of the time and desires suggested by the participants. As with any relationship, kindness and consideration builds a solid foundation. One participant was interviewed in her home, one at her school; the third participant was interview in her home and her school at her convenience.

Interviews.

Over a six-month timeframe, I engaged in four face-to-face individual conversations with each of my sister friends and aimed to capture their viewpoints and experiences. The interviews were semi structured; interview questions were drafted only as a guide, the conversations were encouraged to flow organically. This project sought to co-create portraitures in an effort to explore the influence of sisterhood and motherhood traditions within the field of education. This research does not claim to be a finite structure of Black Motherhood and Sisterhood; without a doubt other viewpoints and experiences are sure to exist among the vast number of Black women educators.

The first interview focused on context, involving gathering data relevant to understanding the physical, historical, cultural and aesthetic influences to understand the origin and development of the viewpoints and experiences of the participants. These interviews provided clues and created a guide leading to an understanding of behavior, thoughts and feelings. The interviews flowed more like casual conversations; loosely guiding the interview were the following questions:

1. Where did you attend high school? College? Graduate school?

2. What level of education does your mother/father have?

   a. What is your mother's current occupation?

   b. What is your father's current occupation?

3. Did your siblings attend college?

4. Did your parents encourage high academic achievement?

5. Did your parents encourage college?

6. What is your most memorable educational experience?

7. What was your first job after college?

8. Why did you choose to go into the field of education field?

9. Why urban schools?

10. Explain your general impression of the state of Black education today.

11. Did anyone/ or a particular experience encourage you to become an educator?

12. Since you have been in the field of education, what are your biggest successes/disappointments?

I reviewed the transcripts from the first interview to get a general understanding of the participant's background and their viewpoint on education for Black children. The data was examined for patterns in upbringing, educational attainment, motivation and experiences as educators. This process was repeated for each subsequent interview.

The second interview focused on voice. These interviews built on questions asked during the first interview. For example, during these interviews I asked the participants to tell me more about their experiences in schools and purposefully pulled out pieces from the first interview to provide the participant an opportunity to clarify her viewpoints, challenges and successes in the field of education discussed in Interview One. During these interviews the participants branched from their concept-based responses about urban education to giving examples that supported their impressions of the political climate of schools.

The focus of the third interview was on relationships. Although relationships serve as the medium between the participants and myself, this interview provided insight on how other relationships serve in support of their work as educators. Here I gave the

participants an opportunity to speak about what's good in the realm of education including discussions of supportive relationships. Participants were asked:

1. Who or what supports your work as an educator?

2. Do your family or friends support your work as an educator? If so, in what way?

3. What inspires you to continue this work?

4. Do you have other teachers who you mentor? If so what generated those relationships? Do you still keep in contact with those mentors?

5. *Do you feel mentorship is important for younger teachers?*

The fourth and final face-to-face interview was conducted after reviewing previous data, coding, and identifying emergent themes. I provided the participants the themes based on their responses to gain perspectives of the analysis. This approach was taken to also assure co-creation of meaning with the participants. This interview lasted approximately one hour, and data was collected via field notes. The participants overall stated trust in my interpretation of the findings and offered little to no additional interpretations of the data, which led to asking specific questions about their view of each theme, such as: "Do you view balance as a consistent theme in your life? How do you balance work and your personal life?" Two of the participants received one Follow-up phone interview, while one participant received two follow-up calls. These calls offered an opportunity to gain clarification on pervious conversations and/or gain additional information connecting to the concept of balance and othermothering. Data from the Follow-up conversations and the final interview were collected with Field Notes and are noted as such in the Findings section.

Data Analysis

The emergent themes in this project were constructed by recognition of repetitive refrains and triangulation. The first step involved identifying repetitive refrains, listening for the same refrain over and over again by different participants. The participants "give voice to this refrain through identifying it, naming it, and sometimes through actions and gestures" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Refrains were also noted in the environment, distinguishable by art, signs and/or symbols. For example, this study found art and symbolism of elephants in the physical environment of each interviewee, representing African culture of maternal strength.

The second step utilized triangulation to weave different pieces of data together to determine whether or not there was a convergence. In other words, the process identified whether different stories had the overall same message. Additionally, patterns in how the educators' viewpoints compared to empirical research on Black teachers were sought throughout the data. This step resulted in reading through all the interview transcripts and field notes, coding concepts associated with Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood.

The final step involved reorganizing Black feminist themes leading to the emergent theme *Mentorship* as the project developed in that direction. Based on coding from the data, I decided that concepts aligned with Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood held similarities to mentoring relationships. Mentorship characteristics entailed the essential elements to effectively describe the viewpoints and experiences throughout the narrative. This process resulted in the conceptualizing mentorship distinguishable by: self-actualization, socio political awareness and mothering of the

mind, conceptions that are interrelated. Ways in which they are operationalized are presented in Table 1.

In addition, as suggested by Dixon (2005) connections can be made across genres through use of symbols and metaphors that speak to the interconnectedness of the Black experience. As a portraitist I took the liberty of utilizing the African proverb Sankofa as it provides a metaphor linking the ideology of mentorship to the experiences of sisterhood and motherhood among these educators. In essence, Sankofa symbolizes the utilization of the wisdom of the past to build the future.

Table 1. Coding.

Sankofa Mentorship Themes	Distinguishable by
Self Actualization (SA)	Fostering the balance of behaviors perceived as necessary to effectively pursue personal and politically charged career goals.
Social-political Awareness (SPA)	Formally or informally disseminating information on race and class issues that serve to develop a critical consciousness. Critical consciousness in this context is defined by an awareness that fosters the ability to overcome oppression and transform socio-cultural reality.
Mothering of the Mind (MOM)	Development of *younger generations* by sharing cultural and political knowledge based on personal and/or collective experiences with oppressive conditions.
Examples of Coded Data	
Tia stated, "When I was working with Ms. Jones she really stressed balancing; she still calls me to check on me every now and then. I remember a few evenings she would come to my office and say, 'Get your purse and go home, we'll try again tomorrow.' (SA) (MOM)	
Asha stated, "I find myself organizing my professional development material in a way	

that I am always talking about race and class issues." (SPA)
Nia, "She cared enough to teach me cultural as well as professional lessons." (SPA)(MOM)
Tia, "as an educator, it's very natural for me to nurture students in a way they see and feel that I care about them." (MOM)

Researcher's Role

Research in general, though perhaps more so with portraiture, requires the researcher to stay cognizant of any personal biases that might misrepresent the meaning of the collected data. It is essential portraitists are up front in stating their identity; history and overall experiences. These elements aid in the development of questions, as well as the shaping and defining of the data. Therefore, no different than any other research method, whether qualitative of quantitative, the researcher must "manage the tension between personal predisposition and rigorous skepticism" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). My voice is fully established through the documented understanding of the relevant literature, the interjection of related personal stories and the interpretations generated from those stories. As a Black woman educator, my story of sisterhood and motherhood intertwine with the participants in the study; therefore, strategically positioning my *autobiography voice* will add to the richness of the text. Relationships, as the key method of using the portraiture method, require ongoing negotiation of boundaries and empathizing with participants to understanding the meaning of their behaviors; they subsequently co-create a story relevant to Black women's culture. Knowing the participants personally however did require renegotiation of the interview

start and ending times. The interviews were very casual and although important data was collected; during each interview there were several interruptions resulting in less than two hours of dialogue available for transcription. By the last interview, the laxity of the participants resulting in the final interview being cut down to one hour and the use of field notes to gather data to mesh with the less formal climate provided by the participants.

Purposeful Sampling

These portraits fully utilized current relationships as a medium between the participants and myself. More specifically, "convenience sampling which involves drawing elements from a group (usually most appropriately regarded as a subpopulation) that is easily accessible by the researcher is one of the most commonly used purposive sampling technique" (Kemper, Stringfield & Teddlie, 2003, p. 280). This way of knowing provided an in-depth view of the shared cultural values among Black women educators. I sought to tell the story of three women who make up my community of sister educators. Just as Ladson-Billings (2005) did in her text, *Beyond the Big House,* I chose to use intimate relationships with Black women educators whom I have known for several years. Initially, I discussed the idea of my research with each of my five sister friends who are educators while very casually discussing the current state of Black education and the possibilities high achieving schools across the board. After which, I contacted each of these women to request their participation in this study. Three of those five friends agreed to participate in this study. In using intimates for participants, I anticipated some commonality between the participants and myself. In addition our pre-established relationship acted as a foundation of comfort, allowing participants to be

completely straightforward in their responses. Using intimate relationships offers an opportunity to collect genuine stories of life experiences.

Methods of Validation & Potential Ethical Issues

This study was conducted through the intimacy of personal ongoing relationships with Black women educators. I have not only chosen to study people who are in the same line of work as I am, but intimate relationships, of individuals who share same race and gender. When creating a portrait of an individuals experiences and viewpoints, ethical issues of representation loom during the planning and ultimately during analysis. In light of this concern, pseudonyms were used in the place of all names. My personal and professional ties to these participants require the "highest level of ethic standards to preserve both levels of our relationship" (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 22).

Conducting research this way poses some risk to the validity of the work because this method is outside the traditional realm of research methods. Dixson (2005) argues that portraiture challenges how we define objectivity and rigor in the social science research tradition. This work is grounded in Black feminist epistemology, which rejects traditional epistemological standards. At the core of Black feminist epistemology is the wisdom garnered through shared experiences, common histories and worldviews of Black women. Further, Black feminist epistemology is based on ways that Black women validate knowledge. Therefore the use of Black feminist epistemology and portraiture methodology challenges traditional epistemological frameworks and gives way to new and innovative ways in which we develop and understanding research participants. A more in depth discussion of Black feminist epistemology can be found in Chapter two.

Conclusion

The following chapter is a convergence of context, voice, relationships, and emergent themes that surfaced during this project. As stated in the literature review, self-definition and self-valuation are important elements of Black Feminist thought. Within the context of Black feminist thought, defining and valuing motherhood and sisterhood are vital aspects of Black women's culture. These portraits are not confined to group dynamics or peer group limitations. This study of sisterhood and motherhood may fall short of the reader's expectations if bounded structures of group relating or a minimum level of interaction is needed to define sisterhood and/or motherhood qualities. Instead this work is grounded in Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood. Sisterhood among Black women is defined as "supportive feeling[s] of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from shared feelings of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. 22). Mothering as it relates to characteristics of the women in this study also utilizes a definition by Collins, who explained the transmission of knowledge among black women as the "mothering of the mind" (Collins, 2009, p.121). In addition, Collins emphasized the way in which Black women attend to the development of younger generations by sharing cultural and political knowledge based on personal and collective experiences with oppressive conditions as motherhood (Collins, 2009).

From this position one can view the culture of motherhood and sisterhood as fluid, multidimensional, shaped and interpreted through the familiarity of experiences. In addition, Black Feminist epistemology concludes that it is appropriate to document the establishment of ideas and actions that are based on personal core beliefs. In the tradition of portraiture, the renderings of positive experiences of the participants simultaneously

acknowledge accompanying cultural values grown from oppressive conditions. The findings of this project represent an examination of the unique way in which Black women educators engage in the field of education utilizing a tradition of sisterhood and motherhood.

Chapter 4: Portraits

Traveling an hour and a half northwest from Chicago on interstate 94 you enter the city of Milwaukee, the largest city in Wisconsin, known as one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the nation (Logan & Stults, 2011). The entrance into the city from the south side meets a growing Spanish speaking community. The interstate highlights the Allen-Bradley Tower, the largest four-sided clock in the country, standing 280 feet tall. This landmark, erected at the headquarters of Rockwell Automation, contours the remnants of a once-booming manufacturing city. The city's downtown business district merges east toward Lake Michigan where a beautiful lakeshore is surround with yachts and million dollar homes. Milwaukee's lakefront is also home to an astonishing art museum, which underwent renovations of over 120 million dollars more than a decade ago and has received national recognition for its 90-foot tall cathedral ceilings and 217-foot long wings that open and close twice each day.

Moving further northeast, Milwaukee's east side is a predominately White population of eclectic upper class professionals, hippies and college students. The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, with its spacious campus sits just a few blocks west of Lake Michigan. In sharp contrast, mostly middle and working class Blacks reside on the North side of the city. The city streets are laden with a multitude of liquor stores, bars, daycare centers, churches, barbershops, hair salons and a host of fast food restaurants. The North side once enjoyed a successful Black business district known as Bronzeville, which was largely destroyed by the construction of the highway system. The Bronzeville district is also a reminder of the poorly supported Black Holocaust museum that closed in 2008 after a twenty-year stint in the area. My perception is one of somewhat of an

outsider, having been born in raised in the south. Many of my close friends raised in the city of Milwaukee embrace the neighborhood from a different angle, harboring memories of a joyous childhood, where they felt safe, loved and immersed in culture.

In sharp contrast to the city streets; as I situate myself in this study, I am reminded of my upbringing in a small Mississippi town of less than eight thousand residents, nestled in the dense foliage of kudzu vines, which the elders say were used as camouflage during the Civil War. The splendor of the Mississippi countryside fostered my childhood. Blithe warm days were spent in play yards where bright red clay became chalk as I played school underneath the esteemed beauty of magnolia trees. My memories of schooling began with Head Start,[11] a natural transition into schooling, not because of the program but because of the Black women who occupied the learning space in each classroom. The building sat about two blocks "across the tracks"[12] and was the prior home of my mother and father's segregated school.

My parent's segregated high school closed in 1969 however was revamped into a Head start center in the early 1970's. As a six year old, the history of the old segregated Booker T. Washington School building was subtly brought into vision as I transitioned to first grade. More than 10 years later, the history of resistance could be felt as I prepared for first grade with an unspoken understanding that Whites would dominate my formal schooling experience from that point forward. No longer would I walk in to the classroom greeted by hugs or teachers saying with laughter, "Them Bonnie Ruth legs there honey," speaking of how my shapely legs resembled those of my paternal

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[11] President Johnson's attempt to wage war on poverty resulted in the development of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) where the idea for early childhood education for the poor in the form of Head Start programs to improve early child development were established in 1965 (Steiner, 1976).

[12] Term used to distinguish a boundary marked by railroad tracks dividing White and Black communities.

grandmother. Or by teachers asking about my maternal grandmother: "How Ms. Louiser doing? I haven't seen her in a good while." Or by the comments of my beauty and comparisons to my mother: "Hey pretty girl! You know you look just like Dottye Pearl with your hair pulled up like that." Ultimately, comments such as these brought me warmth and comfort. The school environment felt like an extended family and embodied a sense of safety, similar to that felt when surrounded by family.

Unlike the community-centered Head Start center where my mother was the Center Director and my paternal grandmother and other women from the community were the teachers, the integrated elementary school (1st-6th grade) was noticeably different. The major distinction at first glance was the unfamiliar White faces of the majority of the teachers, who clearly were not from the Black community. As I prepared to dialogue with these three Black women educators, I am reminded of Ms. Lucas; my sixth grade teacher, the first Black teacher in my grade school experience.

Asha

En route to Asha's home on a brisk autumn Sunday afternoon, there was a clear view of the normal hustle and bustle of neighbors walking up and down the busy street. Halted by a red light at the active intersection four blocks from her home, the corners were crowded with people. Many waiting for the city bus, others patronized the gas station, fast food restaurants, and corner stores.[13] My mind wondered of the life of many of the unsupervised youth in such an overtly disorganized climate. After parking my car on the street in front of Asha's home, I made sure to grab my laptop and rearrange a small bag in my backseat as to not be visible to passersby. Asha lives in the upstairs unit

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[13] Corner stores are small community stores that primarily sell junk food (candy/ chips), a small selection of low cost groceries at an inflated price, cigarettes and beer.

of a two-family home, where her mother occupies the downstairs unit. The home, purchased by her parents shortly after they married in the late 1960's, sits within a bustling Northwest neighborhood. An area once home to hard working homeowners, Asha shared, her neighborhood now house "mostly unemployed and/or low-income renters." In addition, she stated, frequent police patrol and reports of fairly high incidents of crime are common. Asha's description of her neighborhood supports Logan & Stults' (2011) claim that affluent Blacks earning over $75,000 annually often live in poorer neighborhoods than the average White earning less than $40,000 a year.

Shivering, I hurried to the side door entrance; the sun was setting and the wind had become brisk. Asha greeted me wearing black and white shorts and a white t-shirt. Her dress was far from incongruous for a cold fall day. She typically kept her house very warm and her activity was nonstop throughout the day. She bounded up the steps inviting me in while giving me direction on where to sit as I entered her cozy home. She cleared her kitchen table and continued to bounce around the house, picking up a newspaper and several books that were out of place. She returned to the room, somewhat out of breath with a mist of sweat cumulating on her brow. She pushed her thick black dreadlocks from her face and offered me a glass a wine as we began our discussion.

Now, 36-years-old, Asha is active and focused. I've rarely seen her without a wide smile, showing off her beautiful white teeth. She is very diligent in her work with students. Along with talk of community, our conversations varied from spirituality, social events, to current books. If not some national media frenzy to politick about; our local schools and community always ignited an in-depth discussion. Asha and her calm, mellow tone may cause one to underestimate her passion as she talks about the issues

faced in her day-to-day work as a school social worker. She and I met in 2001 where we worked as case managers facilitating protective services for foster children. Without a doubt, this experience helped prepare Asha for work in urban schools. She understands the economic and social dynamics parents, teachers and students face in urban communities.

Each day we plead with teenage foster children to adopt a constructive attitude as we struggled to guide them toward a positive path. Case management was emotionally and mentally draining work. It seemed as though we were simply shuffling paper as opposed to helping children and families. Asha and I would often get together just to vent and discuss the events of our day. Managing our caseload proved to be an act of empathy, obvious through our passionate conversations. We sought out real solutions, most of which always seemed just out of reach due to the bureaucratic guidelines and stipulations of the child welfare system. Unlike the majority of the case managers who were young White women fresh out of college, unaware of the disparities that exist in urban centers designed by institutional racism, Asha and I were from the community. These issues hit home for us. These were our families and children tangled in an oppressive system.

Case management served as a gateway to working in urban schools while we both pursued graduate school. My relationship with Asha was not based solely as a result of having worked together as case managers, but how we seemingly grew into an understanding of the sociopolitical environment we faced while working in the community. As we transitioned from case management to working in schools, our

friendship grew. We continued to discuss ways we can serve the community through our roles in schools. Asha shared:

> When I went to undergrad, I really just knew I wanted to go to college. I'm the baby girl, and the only child to go to college. My two older brothers decided not to go, so there was an unspoken expectation that I go. I did not stay on campus; I stayed home with my parents and commuted to campus every day. So when I decided to pursue graduate studies I took that journey very seriously. I felt like I had something to prove to myself because I hadn't done well as an undergrad. Both of my parents had Bachelors and Masters Degrees and worked in the community. Prior to working as a social worker I didn't really *get* what was going on in our community. But as I worked in the field, the disenfranchisement became clearer. That's when I made a commitment to work in the community and make a difference…. My first job after finishing grad school in 2004 was with an agency that aided in the independence of mentally ill residents. Around this time, my father told me I need to consider taking my skill and love for the community into the school system. That's where I can make a difference. Shortly after we had that conversation I applied for a school social work position and was hired and assigned two schools in the district where I divided my time.

The second interview I visited Asha's home again, she greeted me with a hug, hospitality and red wine. "Have a glass!" she insisted. "Girl, did you see my school on the news last week?" I hardly ever watch the news anymore due to the overwhelming negative tone. I hadn't a clue to what she was alluding. As she continued to explain, part of me braced for the story as she began.

> Well, our secretary has been stealing money. (Shaking her head in shame and
>
> disappointment.) It's all just sad. I just don't get why they gotta call the media
>
> when this kind of thing happens. Our poor babies have such a challenge in
>
> respecting school and school authority. Things like this make it even harder for
>
> them. Not to mention we had a parent call the news because a teacher slapped a
>
> child! Now I'll be the first to admit this little boy is a handful. She [the accused
>
> teacher] said the student spit in her face first, and it was just a natural reaction for
>
> her to slap him.

My eyes widened in amazement. I could not imagine a child spitting on me, let alone

slapping a child. My impulse was to criticize this teacher for hitting the student. What

do her actions say about her role as a teacher, I questioned? Asha offered much

understanding for the teacher and student. She spoke of the ever-pressing issues faced by

both:

> These kids are coming to school with no home training. And most of the teachers
>
> lack empathy. Lord knows most of these White girls can't relate to kids growing
>
> up in the hood. This student is sent to the office daily for disrupting the class in
>
> some way or another. The teacher is a veteran teacher and has been teaching in
>
> the district for forty years. She's tired, and it's time for her to retire. Her patience
>
> is gone. You know how it is, out of a class of thirty, maybe three or four are
>
> respectful and have involved parents. How did you deal with unruly students
>
> when you taught?

When she asked me this question, my mind went directly to my ability to engage students

from a maternal approach. Briefly explaining my maternal approach, I then asked Asha

if she felt she engaged from a maternal stance as well. Asha expressed that she did not feel that she was a mother figure, however she felt connected like family with her students.

> I don't feel like I need to be a mother or act like a mother to connect with children. In many ways I feel like I take an auntie approach. The approach that we are family and the things I am telling them are for their good even if they don't recognize it right now. I reject the mother label, because I have so much respect for women that are mothers. It's not a role that I feel should be taken on haphazardly. It's a lifelong responsibility. Even to this day my mother supports me when I'm having an emotional issue. She is very encouraging. She tells me that I need to let things go and not take things so personally and know what I am doing is for a good reason. And know that I can't control people; all I can do is continue to do my best. I know she understands what I'm going through because she works in the community too. The teachers on the other hand for the most part just don't know what to do. They are like fish out of water in our schools. I take it upon myself to try to help them understand through addressing these issues in professional development trainings. Very seldom do I get a chance to have one on one interactions with teachers to discuss racial issues. And I'm not sure I want that. It seems they get offended at the very notion that they are in need of diversity training. They see it as a strike against them. Always defending themselves with this 'just because I'm White doesn't mean I can't teach Black children,' refusing to acknowledge the lack of knowledge and understanding of culture.

As if on cue, in the middle of our conversation, Asha's mother called. Asha looked at the caller id on her phone and smiled. Answering, "Yes momma, I'll call you back when I'm done with this interview," she hung up the phone and chuckled. "Every time she hears more than one set of footsteps above her head, she calling to be nosey." she said while laughing.

I changed the subject slightly and asked, "Why do you continue this work?" "If not us, then who," she initially replied. Understanding schooling as part of a structural design, Asha views her work in the community as political. Specifically, Asha is motivated to aid in the socio-political awareness of the teachers:

> The students inspire me, when I walk around school and hear teachers speak to students in a negative and racist tone. I take note of these occurrences; they give me information to base professional development trainings for teachers. I believe I must be the example I want to see want to see in schools.

Working as a school social worker places Asha in a unique position as an educator. Asha reminded me of the various needs of public schools and the impact of our work with colleagues and students. Asha continued to discuss the overarching "illusion" of education being the great equalizer. She insisted schools influence the social development of communities. Contrary to the concept of equalization, Asha's sentiments suggest that many teachers lack cultural competence, which leads to pedagogy focused on teaching students servitude:

> I find myself organizing my professional development material in a way that I am always talking about race and class issues. So many of the teachers express acts of pity when they find out some of the issues students may be facing at home.

But I'm there to tell them these children don't need their pity. They need them to make sure they have the tools they need to succeed beyond high school. They need to be prepared for college if that is the choice they make after completing high school. Help them [the teachers] see their pity is not helping them. Matter of fact, the pity party these teachers have for some of the students is one of the biggest hindrances in the education of some of our students. I feel I can relate to the students who are in urban schools. Most schools don't have staff that represents the student body. Therefore the children are being set up to think there are only certain things they can do. They don't see many teachers, social workers or school leaders that are Black. The school that I'm at now only has two black teachers. That is unacceptable. Schools don't deal with the child on a holistic level. People who are in control of the education system don't see the importance to teach our children about culture or community or how to explore or think outside the box. They only want to teach a serviced level of black culture… The school system as a whole seems to want to teach Black children to be workers, not thinkers, not entrepreneurs.

The lack of Black teachers is a hot topic among my educator friends and is viewed as a structural issue. The literature review addresses this issue, noting that some state policies are implemented to exclude Black teachers from the teaching profession in the form of biased teacher certification exams (Delpit, 1997, p. X). After Asha shared her passion for helping teachers become more aware of the sociopolitical climate, she added that she and other Black teacher friends are known to teach similar lessons.

It's part of why we teach! She exclaimed. We have a moral obligation to pass

down cultural lessons to children. Being a social worker, many of the students

come talk to me about personal issues. And from those conversations I

understand that sometimes homework is not a priority for some students. So I

really try to get through to them. Letting them know that one day they won't be

relying on their mom for things and when that day comes they need to be

prepared to take care of themselves and that is one of the purposes for school.

When I arrived at Asha's home for the third interview she invited me up quickly,

as she was in the middle of cooking dinner. We had some small talk, as she finished

cooking. I had been to Asha's house many times, however, this day as I waited for her to

finish cooking, my eyes went directly to the base of the kitchen table. The base of the

table was constructed with three elephants and a thick layer of glass sitting firmly on top

of their heads. When she sat down to talk she took a deep breath and as she exhaled she

blurted out, "finally!" We had postponed this interview about four different times due to

the spontaneity of our busy schedules. Between my two children and her busy schedule it

was difficult connecting for the third interview. I suggested we start with the topic of

supportive relationships. Asha gathered her composure and bent one arm on the table

with her fingers grasping her chin and gazed at me intently as I asked, "Do you have any

mentors?"

You know there have been many, yet there have been few. Often times, it's the

little things that folks don't even realize they do or say that end up having a

lasting impression on you. [For instance,] …when I was working as a case

manager, Carol, a supervisor cut her hair and started dreadlocks. She was the talk

of the office. Everybody had so much to say about how she made such a big mistake and looked a mess. Well, I had known Carol prior to working for the Bureau, she was a friend of my aunt. So I felt comfortable asking her questions about her hair. She explained that she wanted to wear her hair in its natural state. Started giving me the spiel about no longer buying into the Eurocentric standard of beauty. A light bulb went off inside my head. I started to question everything from hairstyles to my music selection. She gave me a book that day, hold on I know it's on my bookshelf… [Rambling as she searched her bookshelf]. Yes, here it is, *Hairlocking: Everything you need to know: African Dread & Nubian Locks* by Nekhena Evans. After that, I started reading books about African culture left and right, and soon cut my hair and started wearing my hair dreaded. She had a major influence on my newfound political awareness.

Asha continued,

And Ms. Green, she was an interim principal. She was very encouraging; she was interested in what I was doing. She had been in the school system since 1976. Younger people seem like they have something to prove, but she is someone who has a lot of experience in the school district and has finesse about her. She asked me if I had ever thought about being a principal. No one ever asked me that before. I felt like she saw something in me that I hadn't even seen. You know how your mom encourages you to try different things or improve your skills in something? That's how it felt. She told me, 'If you ever need a recommendation let me know.'

Asha's discussion of these supportive relationships naturally led to discussing self-care. Asha is adamant about taking the time to take care of herself religiously by working out, working a part-time job or being involved in some type of activity. Asha seems to keep herself busy, yet expressed that her activities keep her focused on her health and personal well-being. She explained,

> Working in a school can be emotionally taxing. Being the social worker, I hear many of the stories that the teachers aren't privy to. Sometimes the lack of compassion and cultural awareness makes the schooling experience for our children harder than it should be. As the social worker it disheartens me to deal with discrimination, racism and sexism coming from the teachers. Then of course the issues coming from home that negatively affect some children. Some days I need to just go take a run after dealing with this foolishness. You must have a balance and not get overly attached to what's going on.

Asha expressed that she works persistently to balance between her work and personal life. When I called to follow up with her to discuss balance, I asked if she had always maintained a workflow that allowed her to maintain balance. Asha stated [From Field Notes]:

> When I first started working for the district, my time was split between an elementary school and a high school. The issues faced by the students were dramatically different but required attention and a high level of energy. I was going on home visits daily checking on students who were not attending school regularly. Spending countless evenings completing paperwork. The combination of all the work I was doing was starting to take a toll on me. I was eating a lot of

fast food and just in general not taking care of myself. One day I looked up and I had gained over twenty pounds. Ms. Kay was significantly older than me, but she worked out every day and was in great shape. She was the physical education teacher at the high school where I was assigned. I started asking her questions about fitness and she suggested that I attend an aerobics class with her. From that day forward she and I occasionally take fitness classes together. But all and all, she ignited a flame in me to be fit.

Asha perceives her ability to balance work and her personal life as a crucial element to her physical health. Often overlooked, self-care emerges as a fundamental part of Asha's experience as an educator. During the final interview, Asha and I discussed specifically the ways in which sisterhood and motherhood traditions are present in the Black community and recapped on how those traditions are aligned with educators who encourage development of socio political awareness and self actualization through self-care. On the subject of motherhood traditions, Asha remained consistent in her interpretation of mothering and her perceived lack of alignment with the concept.

Summary.

… climb the mountain, though your hands may be weary

swim the ocean, though your legs may be tired

run the extra mile, though your stride may be worn down

fight, fight, fight

never surrender, sweet justice…

(Scott, 2001, Disc 2: Track 4)

The above quote conveys Asha's commitment to self-care through physical activity in light of her unwavering commitment to fight for equality for students in urban schools. Asha's viewpoints and experiences support much of the literature deeming it beneficial for educators to understanding the political climate of urban schools. Asha's work as a school social worker positions her in a unique stance where her self-imposed responsibility to the community is demonstrated through her intensive work with students, parents and teachers. Asha's viewpoints and experiences exhibit her commitment to students and are essentially linked to her work with teachers and the community as a whole.

Nia

The first interview with Nia was by far the hardest one to maintain. Life just always seemed to get in the way, restricting the time to meet with each of my sister friends. Eventually Nia suggested that we meet at her school after learning of a cancelled meeting off campus. Around 10 a.m. I headed to our meeting. Her school is less than ten minutes from downtown, so I head northwest crossing under the I-43 overpass. Notably, the walls of the underpass display a mural chronicling the rescue of Joshua Glover, a black man who had escaped enslavement by way of the Underground Railroad. As the story has been told, his captor eventually located him with the help of the U. S. Marshalls. Glover was arrested and jailed in Milwaukee. The mural captures the scene of proud local abolitionists protesting Glover's arrest and his eventual rescue. Interestingly, the mural serves as a marker separating the prosperous downtown area and the dismal northwest side.

Driving onward toward the school, the streets gave a vivid visual of concentrated poverty. Abandoned buildings and homes and the common repetitive strips of liquor stores, churches, and fast food joints. I continued my scenic drive, noting the community norms I had seen several times over. Numerous women pushing strollers and/or walking several steps ahead of their school aged children. On this cold day I noticed several children underdressed for the grim December weather, wearing coats yet lacking gloves, hats and/or scarves. The faces of children some may consider too young to be alone on city streets, are commonplace racing across busy streets, an all too familiar norm that never settled well with me.

I arrived at the school building wedged between two Catholic churches were it was once a Catholic boarding school. The school now houses a daycare center, a Head Start program and the charter school where Nia serves as the school leader. I made my way to the busy front office. I waited patiently behind parents dropping off and picking up small children. I signed in with the receptionist and waited for an escort to her office. When I entered Nia's office, she was in the middle of having lunch. She briefly introduced me to Sherry, the Dean of Students. Sherry quickly said hello, while gathering her lunch from the table. She hurried out the door still chewing her food, with a mound of paper under her arm and the rest of her lunch in hand. Nia explained [from Field Notes],

> Sherry is our Dean of Students. She's having a hard time with our middle school students. She and I were just brainstorming ideas to enhance the culture of high expectations with them [middle school students and teachers]. The hardest part is getting buy-in from the teachers. The teachers just gotta lead and be consistent.

Part of our plan is to couple experienced teachers with new ones. And to create shared planning time so they can really start working together and feed off of the strategies of their teammates. But girl I can go on and on about these teachers and the huge need we have here to keep everyone on the same page! Go ahead and rest your coat.

Nia and I embraced, looking each other up and down, showering each other with compliments of beautiful hair, skin, shoes, and accolades of work well down in our fields. As Nia closed her lunch container, I complimented her chain belt of marching elephants as we began to catch up. "Girl, I need to fit in lunch whenever I can, some days I forget that I haven't eaten!" (Laughing and brushing crumbs from her knee.) Motioning for me to come with her, she stands from her chair saying, "Let me show you around." With such pride, Nia introduces me to her teachers, giving me a rundown of how she has changed the curriculum, stating some teachers were encouraged to "get off the bus" who weren't in alignment with her mission. She also pointed out star novice teachers whom she was mentoring. When we returned to her office, she sat down, and began by saying:

This is some hard work, but I wouldn't give it up for nothing! In order to do this *right* (pause) you gotta have heart, you gotta be strong and you must be in the role for the betterment of everyone including yourself. Education in the hood is about knowing right from wrong, justice and equality."

Nia, a 47-year-old African American mother of two is currently the principal of a local K-8 charter school. Nia was a Special Education supervisor for the school district prior to enrolling in a school leadership program where she and I met. During one of the first informational meetings of the leadership program, there was an in-depth

conversation among the cohort about special education services. Nia was very candid and took a position that was not well received among some of the cohort members. During a group discussion she expressed her outrage with the large number of Black boys receiving special education services and declared that over half of the special education recommendations were based on the teacher's inability to connect with the student. Her blame was aimed at all educators who do not speak out against the overrepresentation of Black children enrolled in special education programs. Although I had not seen the evidence of her specific claims, it is general knowledge that Black children disproportionately occupy special education seats in public schools. Familiar with the disparities, Nia's passion about the subject resonated with me.

Nia married young and had plans on being a housewife and stay home mom. When her youthful marriage ended after only five years, she found herself a single mother with two children applying for government assistance.

When my marriage ended I was content with our decision to separate. But I had not anticipated the hard times that came with being a single mother. I decided to go to college and major in Human Services. I didn't know what I wanted to do; I just knew that spending time in a classroom would help me decide. After graduating with my bachelor's degree I got a job as a paraprofessional in the school district. But it wasn't until I faced discrimination with the special education team at my son's school that I really decided I wanted to be a teacher. I would go the IEP meetings and the teachers would completely disregard my recommendations and answer my questions using acronyms that I didn't understand. They were just outright rude. I was so angry that I decided to enroll

in a teacher certification program and get my Master's degree in Special

Education. I worked as a special education teacher for five years, then I was

promoted to a Supervisory position."

During the second interview, Nia provided an in-depth understanding of her experience

as a single mother. Nia shared that her experience as a single mother with a disabled son

as extremely frustrating. She believed the lack of communication and disregard for her

opinion was directly related to her status as a Black single mother on welfare.

Here I was, single, with two children on my own. Since my children were

receiving free lunch, that was an indication of my class status. There were times I

would make suggestions or ask questions, and they would actually ignore me, and

baby that would burn me up! No one in the family knew about disabilities. I felt

that they [teachers and school leaders] talked down to me because I was a single

mom on welfare. They used language I didn't know. They didn't listen to my

concerns. I had a huge distrust of the IEP (Individual Educational Plan) team.

When I went into those schools as a single mom with a disabled child, I didn't see

any of *us* in the schools. Now I advocate for parents who don't know, and the

ones who don't know what they don't know!

The interplay of race, class and gender oppression imposed on Nia during meetings

designed to support her role as parent, is telling of the unwelcoming climate of some

schools. What Nia describes is without a doubt a dismissive attempt to devalue her voice

as the student's mother. Nia's ability to use this experience of discrimination as a

stepping-stone to build her career in the field of education is admirable.

Nia's fiery personality is undeniable; she has a no nonsense attitude with students yet embraces them with an equal amount of love and support. As I sat in her office at the end of a school day one afternoon waiting to begin the third interview, several students who were staying after school for extra curricula activities peeked in her open office door with bright smiles to say hello. She smiled sending a warm hello, then hurried them out, "Get to wherever you are supposed to be young men." I then asked her what motivates her to continue this work; she responded: "There is something within me that drives me; not the job. Operating from an internal place, can't be taught, it results from an experience." She continued, "I'm inspired when students come to my office to hug me. I'm like momma or auntie to them. It's an unspoken relationship built on trust and respect." Nia explained that her experience as an educator offered evidence that validated the ever-present effects of racism and class discrimination in our society:

> … Schools have never been set up for an equal playing field. Still set up to keep the unequal levels of social economic status. The preparation for college should be for every student. The current role of education? To maintain the haves and have-nots…

Nia continued the conversation expressing a concern with the lack of diversity in the teacher population and insisting that the lack of diversity disenfranchises Black students because they lose out on gaining cultural lessons that could assist in overall community development:

> One of the biggest issues today is the fact that the majority of the teachers are not a reflection of the community. I just feel strongly that children need to see people

who look like them and speak messages that help them internalize education.

Every child needs to see people like them. Cultural lessons need to be taught. Nia is convinced that the teaching population is not as diverse as the student population. A situation, she reports, results in a lack of important cultural lessons students would otherwise likely receive if they encountered more Black teachers in classrooms. Nia continued by discussing her role as an educator.

> I feel blessed to have life work that involves preparing children for the future. So, the more I learn about the politics of schooling, the more I feel obligated to share this information with students…So that means my school must create a college preparatory environment for students to understand if that route is one they choose, they have the tools to do so.

Demonstrating her role as an educator as one that necessitates informing students of the political nature of education. Having also engaged students from this standpoint, I understand the difficulty of transmitting such pertinent information to students and how doing so can be a passionate yet draining task. This line of discussion led to the subject of personal and career support, she shared, "there have been several Black women in particular who have reached out." She continued,

> Ms. Moore, an older black woman, was my formal mentor in a principal preparation program, we are still connected. She is always there with a listening ear. She retired from the district about three years ago; she has a wealth of knowledge, advice, and wisdom to give.

Sitting there with her wheels churning, Nia went on to name two other women who had supported her as an educator:

> Ms. Lynn, another older Black woman, mentored me. She was a principal at a school I worked for. She helped me smooth my rough edges. She would often tell me, "people should hear your voice and not see your attitude." She helped me soften my message. She cared enough to teach me cultural as well as professional lessons."

Nia, went on to add,

> Ms. Jackson, another older black woman that influenced me, is currently a superintendent in another state. She was like momma, she taught me about smart suits versus fashionable suits. She actually took me shopping to show me how to dress for interviews.

In discussing individuals who support her, Nia described three "older" women who cared, mentored, listened, and demonstrated maternal characteristics. The above descriptions suggest maternal relationships that supported Nia in through a journey of resistance and resilience. In discussing work/life balance the conversation imply an internal balance was needed to negotiate day-to-day responsibilities along with emotional stability. Nia expressed:

> …you know keeping a balance between home and work is important to maintain my sanity. Sometimes you gotta take a breather. When I get sick, it's a sign I'm off…you know, spending too much time at school, not enough with my family, or neglecting to give myself the attention I need.

After recognizing balance as a theme, I made a follow up call to Nia and explained that balance seemed to be a fundamental issue expressed across all three interviewees and I

wanted to talk to her more about it. Nia shared that her school was having parent teacher

conferences that evening, and asked me to come by around 6 pm. I agreed.

To start our conversation, I asked Nia what were the pertinent issues that seem out

of balance and how she adjusts and balances when necessary. She laughed and began

telling me a story about her work as a special education supervisor.

Well, I first started to notice that I felt overwhelmed or off balance when I worked

as a special education supervisor. My caseload consisted of eight schools, where

I managed the special education staff. This special education work is a trip.

There are so many people with degrees in special education, yet they have no

understanding of the natural tendencies of African American students, boys in

particular. Every child that has a lot of energy does not need special education

services and Ritalin. I made it my personal business to follow up on new

assessments; they were coming left and right. I was attending IEP meetings and

talking with the teachers. Trying to help them understand just because a child

does not listen to a teacher does not mean he has Oppositional Deviant Disorder,

especially if that same child acts appropriately with other teachers in the school. I

remember distinctively one day I was leaving my office and another special

education supervisor, Ms. Smith, asked me what the heck was going on in my

schools! I sat down and started telling her of the many stories and cases of

students who were being referred for special education services unnecessarily.

Nia's experience is reflective of the continuous effects of the Elementary and Secondary

Act of 1965. Enforced one year after the implementation of school desegregation policies,

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, equipped with Title I funds

designated to aid in the achievement of "at risk" students through compensatory

programs, was enacted. The implementation of compensatory education paved the way

for a long-standing ideology that Black students are "at risk" and in need of special

programming to properly intermingle in a White society. Nia addressed compensatory

educational programs that ushered in trends of tracking, retention and special educational

programs. Such programs demonstrate how some desegregation plans implemented

strategies that have proven to do more harm than benefit for Black students (Horsford &

Mckenzie, 2008). Nia insist, many of these compensatory programs continue to

negatively influence the academic potential of Black children, due to a focus on race

and/or class status instead of academic improvement. Feeling the frustration in Nia's

voice I asked, "What specifically supports your self-care?" Nia responded, "Sometimes

self-care means leaving my school before the sun goes down, other times, it may mean

taking a day off to refocus. The important part about taking care of yourself is listening to

your body and your stress level." Nia went on to explain how Ms. Smith encouraged self-

care in the midst of a stressful time at work.

> Ms. Smith put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Child, you are not super
>
> woman. Do what you can, but don't kill yourself in the process. You running
>
> around here like a chicken with her head cut off, that's not good for your health."
>
> Ms. Smith was old school. She was concerned and I felt her words as she spoke.
>
> And at the same time, I felt the harm that was being done to students who were
>
> being labeled unnecessarily. I just broke down right there and cried. I didn't
>
> know what to do. Ms. Smith then shared with me a file she had been establishing
>
> over the course of the twenty years she had been doing this work. The file was

full of professional development trainings she had developed for special education teachers. She stressed to me that working with people who seem either unconcerned or just plain unaware of the long-term damage they may be doing will drive you crazy, which I was on the road to crazy. She urged me to take a few days off, mental health days is what she called it. I was blessed to have her become my mentor that day; I went to the doctor the following day, and learned my blood pressure was extremely high and I required medication. She taught me about self-care.

After listening to this story I was amazed and intrigued that Ms. Smith had given her such critical advice. I asked Nia if she still keeps in contact with Ms. Smith; she stated, "Girl yes! I feel like she saved my life in many ways that day, she taught me how to love the work and love myself at the same time."

The final interview was conducted in Nia's school and was largely interrupted by student needs. Although brief, our discussion of the traditions of sisterhood and motherhood through socio political awareness, self-actualization and mothering of the mind resulted in Nia's self-reflection of mentoring and mentee relationships. Nia wholeheartedly agreed with her role as an educator as being one that is political and maternal. Nia explained that she had not viewed her actions with teachers as encouraging self-actualization; however clearly saw how this concept was present in her interactions with mentors. On the subject of sisterhood, Nia explained her experience of discrimination as one that directly connects her with the Black mothers. Reasserting her role as an advocate for single Black mothers.

Summary.

> *"Miscommunication leads to complication,*
>
> *my emancipation don't fit your equation"*
>
> *(Hill, 1998, Track 2)*

This quote represents the way in which Nia responded to discrimination from teachers as a single mother. Instead of passively accepting cruel treatment, Nia worked to educate herself about special education practices. The passion Nia has for education is clear in her discussion of her career trajectory in the field of education. The multiplicity of Black womanhood is evident as she transition into the workforce as a full time college student and paraprofessional teacher all while continuing her work as a mother. Nia's transition to working in schools was based in a political understanding of schooling. Her experience of being discriminated against while working with teachers on an individualized education plan for her son spearheaded her career as a special education teacher, district special education supervisor and now school principal. Nia's experience affirms the literature that indicates the tendency for many educators to wrongfully associate a parent's ability to participate in their child's education with their economic status or race (Cooper, 2009). Nia expressed her socio-political stance by indicating a concern for the lack of diversity among the cities educators and the overrepresentation of Black children in special education programs. Nia's role as a school leader also provides opportunities to support and mentor teachers. In addition, Nia's role as othermother is clear in her interactions with students and her expressed concern for their future. Her experience and receptivity of "othermothering" from older Black women in the field is

also reflective in the narrative. Further confirming the maternal approach taken by Black women educators.

Tia

In an attempt to interview Tia, she and I played "phone tag" for quite some time. The best day for her to unwind and talk was on Sundays. The day of the interview, Tia called an hour before the interview, apologizing that she was running late from a luncheon but was en route home. I was so appreciative of her taking the time to talk with me, I encouraged her to take her time, and suggested maybe we push the interview back an hour to give her time to get settled. "Noooo," she replied. "Girl, I just might go to sleep if I'm sitting there by myself too long, get on over there at the same time!" she exclaimed. We hung up the phone and I went to her home at the time we had agreed upon. When she answered the door, we yelled at the same time, "Hey!!" as we hugged each other tightly. We hadn't seen each other in a while due to our pressing responsibilities. As she invited me in, she picked up her pumps off the living room floor and we sat down on the couch. Directly adjacent from where I sat was an astonishing collection of elephant figurines. I too collect elephants; hers were beautiful, ranging from wooden, crystal, and marble. She went to them, pointing out specifically those that had been given to her as gifts from her sister friends and community mothers.

Our conversation started off with a simple, "How are you?" Tia blew a bit of air from her mouth, and chuckled a bit, "Things are good, tiring, but good." "Tiring?" I asked, "tell me about that, what is tiring you, Sis?"

Well, this is my second year as a principal, and the longer I'm there, the more things I see I need to get done. So I'm destined to do great things there. I'm at

my school six days a week, sometimes seven. And many times til 10 o'clock at night, a lot of times I come home empty, you know? I question, how do I balance work and life? And I feel like I just need to figure out how to blend it…this work is not for the faint of heart, which I know you know. Sometimes I ask teachers, "How would you want your child to be treated in the classroom?" when I see them treat a student unfairly. Some folks are either completely detached or overly personalize their work, you need balance to be successful.

Tia's immediate discussion of work-life balance indicates the importance of mastering or "blending" the two as she described. Tia's compassion for students and drive to aid in the their academic achievement drives her work to the wee hours of the night which exposes the need for a healthy balance of the two.

I met Tia in 2005 while attending a literary luncheon; at the time both she and I were middle school teachers. During lunch, we exchanged stories of our teaching experiences. Tia was organizing a pre-teen after school program for girls and asked me to work with her. This interaction resulted in our sharing of educational practices while planning weekly seminars for the twenty girls enrolled in the program. At the end of the school year, she and I were both planning to enter doctoral programs full time. Leaving the classroom was a major decision. I remember the butterflies I felt in my stomach on the day I submitted my resignation letter. Tia also had a hard time with the transition; however, she had received a fellowship that covered her tuition and provided her with a monthly stipend to soften the challenge.

After two years of taking courses, I took a break from my studies to participate in a school leadership program. After completing the program, I was left uncertain of how I

wanted to contribute to public schools. This uncertainty fueled my desire to complete my doctoral studies in Urban Education. Shortly after I returned to school, I received a call from Tia. She was also working on her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy and itching to get back into schools. She called to inquire about the school leadership program I had attended. I shared my perspective of the program. Shortly afterward, Tia decided to apply and was accepted. Tia is currently the principal of a K-5 school in the Milwaukee public school district.

As stated above, Tia puts in long hours in her school, and although she feels the need to take breaks, she revels in the achievement gains and the relationships she has built with teachers, students and parents. When I spoke with Tia about balance and support, she was candid about the difficulty finding balance and her appreciation of supportive mentors in her life.

I was placed at a K-5 grade school as an Assistant Principal [during a school leadership residency]. My mentor principal was an older African American woman, [Ms. Jones]. And really a part of me feels that made a huge difference in comparison to my other cohort members who had very different experiences with their assigned mentor principal. There would be things she would say to me that wasn't on my radar. Nothing that I could read or learn in a formal way; but it was a thing like, because I am similar to you in gender and ethnicity I'm gonna tell you this. You know? It was her way of nurturing our relationship while giving me the tools I needed to lead a school. We became this dynamic duet, and we were one voice in the building.

Tia suggest the effectiveness between her and the school principal was based in a connectedness based on a similarity in gender and ethnicity. Further describing the experience as nurturing indicating a maternal connection with her mentor. Tia spoke of balance quite frequently, obviously an area she struggles with. She explained:

> It's so easy to take things personally. Especially when you see students being treated unfairly by individuals in position to teach them. Because in all reality, it is personal. When I was working with Ms. Jones she really stressed balancing; she still calls me to check on me every now and then. I remember a few evenings she would come to my office and say, 'Get your purse and go home, we'll try again tomorrow.' I recognize the need to balance, but honestly, with all the work that needs to be done, it's hard, it's not something you do once, there is a constant readjustment of your personal needs. I haven't figured it out yet.

Tia's experience working afterhours and becoming completely entrenched in her work was very familiar to me. As a middle school teacher, many nights I found myself in the empty school building creating lesson plans, making photocopies, cleaning and rearranging my classroom. Although my life was very different then, similar to Tia's: I was single and did not have the responsibility of family, yet I was noticeably stressed by the weight of responsibility of improving the achievement rates of my students. There was a teacher, Ms. Blacks, who had retired from the school district, but decided to return to work in this charter school close to her home. She was a special education teacher and visited my classroom frequently. She made it her business to check on my emotional well-being daily. Her asking me how I was doing caused me to think about how I was actually doing prompting an internal focus on self-care.

During the second interview, Tia reminisced on the five years she taught middle

school and facilitated the pre-teen program for girls. Anyone who knows Tia would

agree that her approachable style aids in her successful relationships with students. When

I asked how she connects with students, she replied:

> …there is something very natural for me to connect with children. All my life
>
> I've been taking care of children. That's just how it's done in our family. As the
>
> oldest, you watch out for the younger ones. And not just my siblings either, my
>
> cousins too, and sometimes the smaller kids from down the block. Everyone just
>
> took care of everyone. So as an educator, it's very natural for me to nurture
>
> students in a way they see and feel that I care about them.

Tia explained that she treated students the way she knew she would want to be treated.

She shared the importance of listening to students and allowing their knowledge and

voice to be heard. While sitting in her office after one of our interviews I witnessed just

that. The following is an excerpt from field notes taken of two fifth graders that were

sent to her office for arguing in class:

> The girls came into the office abruptly, both speaking at the same time, trying to
>
> explain what the arguing was all about. Tia sat there quietly and stared at the girls
>
> until the room dropped to silence. "Now," Tia stated, "I want both of you to have
>
> a seat and I will listen to what both of you need to say, but you cannot speak at the
>
> same time. Is that understood?" Both girls answered in unison, "Yes ma'am."
>
> After listening to both sides of the story Tia continued by asking one of the
>
> students, "How would you feel if these same things were being said about you?
>
> Especially if they weren't true?" Kenya sat quietly for a minute, and then

answered solemnly, "I wouldn't like it." Tia went on, "Ok well keep that in mind, put yourself in her shoes, and treat her how you want to be treated. Now you may go back to class." Tia then asked me to leave the office so she could speak with Shanita privately. About ten minutes later, Shanita opened the door with a smile on her face. As she was walking out, Tia said, "Come here and give me a hug, and remember you do not let other people steal your joy. Be proud of who you are, a beautiful intelligent young lady. Understand?" Shanita responded, "Yes ma'am."

This interaction gave me a clear picture of how Tia approached the students from a neutral place without assuming right or wrong, caring for their souls as hooks' (1984) engaged pedagogy would affirm. She allowed their voices to be heard without interruption. The following day I spoke to Tia over the phone about what had transpired between the two students, wondering if the conflict had resurfaced. Tia explained the girls were good friends and were back on track. However, the classroom teacher was upset the girls were not suspended for their disruptive behavior in the classroom:

> I had to explain that although their behavior was disruptive, suspension is not always the answer. See, I need my kids to understand, when they come to me, we can talk. I'm not just some authority figure who issues out suspension. I want to be someone they can come to when they have a problem and come to me without shame or fear. But knowing that I'm there because I care for them not because I collect a check.

The theme of othermothering seems to always be present in discussing interact with students. Tia expressed her lifelong behavior of mothering with her biological siblings, extended family and community. Wondering if her love for education stemmed from her

"natural" tendency to nurture I asked Tia, "What made you go into the field of education?"
Tia explained, the impetus for her pursuit a degree in education formed in high school
where she began to notice inequality between the city school and the predominately
White private school she attended. She explained:

> My desire to become a teacher comes from the fact that I went to predominately
> White private schools, and I didn't have any Black teachers. I didn't see anyone
> that looked like me. I started to notice from my friends that the education that I
> was getting was very different from what they were getting in the city schools. I
> wanted to know why. I had friends who went to the public schools and they
> weren't getting the same, so I began to question equity. The field trips down to
> the expectations were different. I questioned early if it was a race issue.

The ever-present race issue within schools encourages Tia to aid in the sociopolitical
awareness of her teaching staff. Tia readily admits she struggles with the lack of cultural
competency of some of the teachers in her school. Working in urban schools requires a
deep understanding of the political climate that exist. Consequently, high academic
achievement in urban schools requires an openness and awareness of different viewpoints
and experiences that support a holistic learning experience for all students and teachers.
Such a standpoint is evident in how Tia analyzes the educational environment in her
school and how she implements strategies to dismantle discriminatory practices:

> You know I have a lot of teachers new to the profession and I can see a big
> difference between many of them and some of the more seasoned teachers. The
> novice teachers are very aware of social justice issues. I can tell that their studies
> have exposed them to some of the structural issues faced in urban schools. As a

school leader, I build on that foundation with school-wide readings and

professional development trainings.

At the start of the third interview, I revisited the conversation on school wide readings,

asking how this trend started; Tia expressed that she developed the idea of school-wide

readings from a principal she worked with some years ago. Curious about her

relationship with the principal, I asked, "Who was the principal that started the summer

reading assignments?" Tia explained,

> Ms. Frances, I don't know her very well, I only worked there for a year. But see,
>
> I know her from church. She's the pastor's wife at my grandma's church. She's
>
> been working in MPS [the school district] for at least twenty years. I have a lot of
>
> respect for her; she is always open to talking to me and giving me advice about
>
> school leadership and district bureaucracy. She is a gem in the rough.

The significance of Tia's comments demonstrates her ability to identify the needs of her

school and the courage to address the politics of race issues with teachers. Tia stated,

> There are days when I go to work, I feel like I'm at war. I literally feel like a
>
> solider. This is matter of national security! To see where our kids are now, I just
>
> can't stop working with them, they need so much, and they need to understand so
>
> much."

Tia shared how being a school leader challenged her to be true to her values. In

that challenge, she explained, many hard conversations were had when teachers

disregarded the mission and vision for the learning environment. While talking about

unaligned teachers, she often used the phrase, "If it's not a good fit, get off the bus" a

phrase often used in the school leadership training Nia, Tia and I participated. Getting off

the bus stressed the option given to teachers who resisted maintaining an environment conducive to learning and high academic success. Tia gave me the background of a teacher whom she gave this option.

> I have this teacher in my building who teaches art. The children love being in her classroom. What I have just become aware of is that she has been giving students passes to come to her classroom during her prep time to help her. Meanwhile, of course, these students are missing out on instruction time; time they should be working on other academic projects. These are the teachers that feel that because the students like them, they are good teachers, not so. It's a shame when you need to teach teachers the importance of students being engaged during classrooms during instruction. A teacher that allows students to hang out in their classroom when they should be in class demonstrates a bad judgment and an apparent lack of interest in the students' academic development.

> Tia went on to state,

> … This particular teacher feels that being hip and cool with middle school students helps her learn Black culture and connect with the children. My commitment to serving the community through leading this school will not stand for this behavior from a teacher.

Exploring this concept further prompted a follow-up call. I shared my analysis of the political stance as one that requires an analysis of the structure of oppression and followed by asking if there were any experiences that had profoundly impacted how Tia viewed school and society. The following are excerpts from field notes taken during the phone call:

I had always known for as long as I can remember that being Black and being a woman meant I would face a certain level of discrimination. But I didn't really understand the systematic depth of oppression until I started a self-study on Black history. Now this was after I got my Bachelor's degree. You would think that education courses at the university would teach about social justice issues. But my undergraduate course load in the education department was very traditional and only provided basic curriculum and instruction courses. My self-study came about after I started teaching. After my first year of teaching, my principal assigned the entire school a book to read over the summer. The book was one of Jawanza Kunjufu's books. Reading his books really changed how I perceived education for our children. *So* since I've become a principal I've implemented summer reading assignments for my teachers.

During the final interview, I shared the themes drawn from the data: self-actualization, socio political awareness and mothering of the mind. Tia expressed agreement with the themes and was particularly interested in discussing socio political awareness. She explained her impression of schooling for Black children as relying strongly on how teachers perceive their role as educators. She indicated that low expectations are directly linked to how teachers view their work. She stated [From Field Notes]:

Black kids are taught to need someone else to tell them that they are ok. They are taught to be validated by someone else. Many of the teachers and school leaders are enabling Black children… they are taught that excuses are ok, and the reason I say that, when they say they [students] can't do something, they have teachers that come up with non-academic factors of why they aren't successful. Teachers

need to focus on the factors they can control. Many teachers have extremely low expectations, and it impacts how they teach. In general the biggest issue is that so many so-called educators have low expectations for our children, which limits them to exposure to higher-level thinking. Based on my experience, having high expectations for kids means you have to do a lot of work. So teachers that view their job as a job are the teachers that have the low expectations for the students. Typically teachers who consider their work a service to their community and society as a whole have high expectations and consequently high results… I believe strongly we owe our students at the very least a dedication to their potential.

Summary.

…until the philosophy which holds one race superior

and another inferior

is finally

and permanently

discredited

and abandoned,

I say war…

(Marley, 1976, Track 9)

The above quote is equivalent to Tia's statement, "There are days when I go to work, I feel like I'm at war. I literally feel like a solider." Tia is very much emotionally driven to work hard and make a difference. Spoken with heartfelt compassion, Tia's current work life balance is a constant juggling act as she spends six to seven days a week

in her school building, bringing the concept of self-care to the surface for this study. Tia expressed her maternal approach with students as having grown out of a cultural tradition of mothering children in her family and neighborhood as described in the Black womanhood literature (Collins, 2009). In addition, Tia's socio-political awareness is evident in her attempt to counter discriminatory issues by selecting social justice based reading assignments to encourage discussion with teachers. In the narrative Tia described a teacher establishing counterfeit social capital, as Robert Ream describes, by aiming to be viewed as "cool" to middle school students. Ream asserts, "teachers may cultivate and nurture social relationships in the classroom for the purpose of maintaining classroom harmony, but at the expense of academic content" (Ream, 2003, p. 252). Tia acknowledges that building relationships with students that disregards academic achievement hinders the success of students. Situations such as this one serve as an indicator to further discussions of socio-political issues in schools.
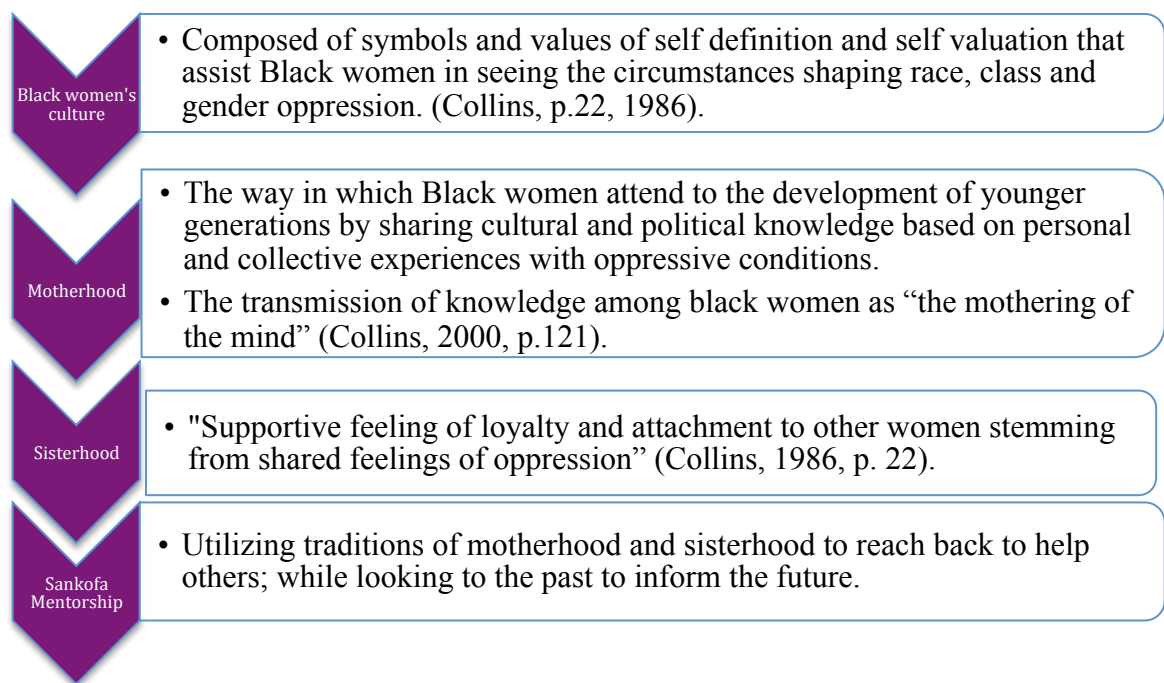
Thematic Analysis

> When I look at you, I see myself. If my eyes are unable to see you as my sister, it is because my own vision is blurred. And if that be so, then it is I who need you wither because I do not understand who you are, my sister, or because I need you to help me understand who I am. Lillian P. Benbow (Giddings, 1988).

The Black feminist thought literature describes sisterhood and motherhood as fundamental aspects of Black women's culture (Collins, 1986). Researchers have documented the political aspect of mothering among Black women educators (Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003; Dingus, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson, J. A., Mickelson, K.A., Hester, M. L., & Wyrick, J., 2011). However, literature among Black

women educators addressing sisterhood is not readily available. Yet, researchers have

explained the culture of sisterhood as supportive feelings of loyalty based on a

connectedness rooted in similar experiences of oppression (Collins, 2009). Further, these

findings claim the caring of Black children by Black women educators intrinsically

support Black mothers, hence is a form of sisterhood. Sisterhood and Motherhood

traditions spawned from a culture of connectedness with other Black women. This

section offers an analytically perspective on sisterhood and motherhood standpoints that

ultimately describe a form of mentorship among Black women educators.

Figure 2. Definition of Terms.

Black women's culture
- Composed of symbols and values of self definition and self valuation that assist Black women in seeing the circumstances shaping race, class and gender oppression. (Collins, p.22, 1986).

Motherhood
- The way in which Black women attend to the development of younger generations by sharing cultural and political knowledge based on personal and collective experiences with oppressive conditions.
- The transmission of knowledge among black women as "the mothering of the mind" (Collins, 2000, p.121).

Sisterhood
- "Supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from shared feelings of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. 22).

Sankofa Mentorship
- Utilizing traditions of motherhood and sisterhood to reach back to help others; while looking to the past to inform the future.

The portraits of Asha, Nia, and Tia confirm Collins' (1986) assertion that Black

female consciousness is influenced by Black women's culture of sisterhood and

motherhood. This project examined the viewpoints and experiences of three Black

women educators. In doing so, these educators were placed within the larger body of

Black feminist theory. These findings revealed the educators mentored and received mentoring from the essence of Sankofa. Sankofa, an African proverb meaning "go back to get" and/or "look to the past to inform your future," describes the essence in which these educators received *and* provided mentoring within the field of education. Further, this study answers the research question, "How does Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood, as defined by Collins (1986) influence the experiences of Black women educators, and how do those experiences impact their work as educators?" These women utilize the cultural role of sister and mother as a foundation of mentorship using the following guiding principles: (1) Self-Actualization, (2) Socio-political awareness, (3) Mothering of the Mind. As these principles are discussed in this section, some of the quotes from the narrative are restated to support the connection made during analysis.

This mentorship model is composed of three interrelated components that encourage self-actualization, political awareness and foster a mothering of the mind. These factors are distinguishable through the participants experience balancing political/personal issues, formal and/or informal dissemination of information on race, class and gender issues and the development of younger generations by sharing cultural and political knowledge based on personal and collective experiences with oppressive conditions. (Table 2).

Table 2: Sankofa Mentorship Themes.

Sankofa Mentoring Themes	Distinguishable by
1. Self Actualization	Fostering the balance of behaviors perceived as necessary to effectively

	pursue personal and politically charged career goals.
2. Socio-political Awareness	Formally or informally disseminating information on race and class issues that served to develop a critical consciousness. Critical consciousness in this context is defined by an awareness that fosters the ability to overcome oppression and transform socio-cultural reality.
3. Mothering of the Mind	Development of *younger generations* by sharing cultural and political knowledge based on personal and/or collective experiences with oppressive conditions.

The findings point to mentorship as an emergent theme because it highlights sisterhood and motherhood traditions within the context of mentorship. This study emphasizes the following interrelated components of the Sankofa Teacher Mentorship Model: (1) Self-Actualization, (2) Social-political awareness and (3) Mothering of the mind.

Figure 3: Sankofa Teacher Mentorship Model.
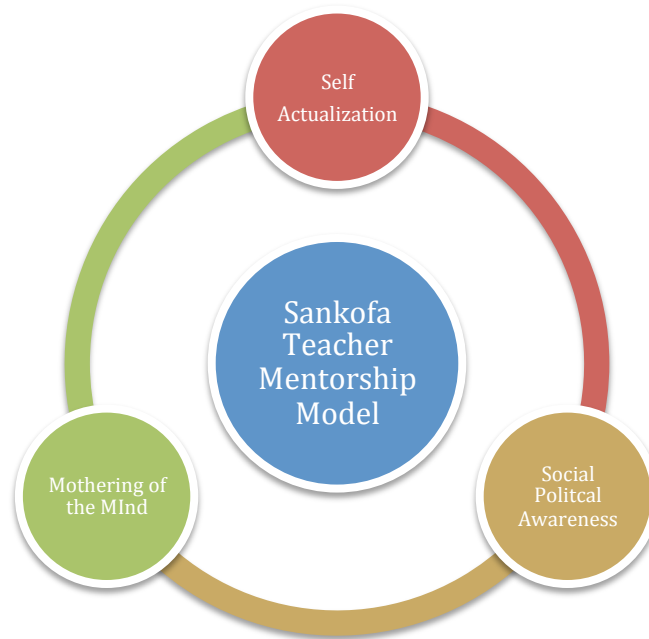
Self-actualization.

Self-actualization in this study became evident in the discussions on balancing the politically driven workload and taking care of personal needs. The term used in Abraham Maslow's human motivation theory refers to self-fulfillment and reaching ones highest potential (Maslow, 1969). In this study, self-actualization is used more specifically as balancing behaviors perceived as necessary to effectively pursue personal and politically charged career goals. Participants in this study shared viewpoints and experiences that demonstrated continuous attempts to balance the political and personal issues in their lives to feel accomplished. The sentiments expressed in this section suggest that as Black women, facing the political aspects of the field of education through daily encounters with discriminatory policies and/or ill-informed colleagues made for a stressful unbalanced experience. Collectively this group of women faced self-actualization when older Black women in the field drew their attention to self-care as a form of balance.

Fundamentally, the significance of engaging in the field of education with an awareness of self-care as a means of self-actualization was directly related to the overall mental and physical health of the educators and their ability to effectively participate in the field of education.

Nia and Tia for instance, struggled with balancing day-to-day responsibilities as school principals working well into the evening hours, and often six days a week. Asha's experience of balance was equally noticeable, yet she adamantly worked toward maintaining balance through physical activity on a day-to-day basis. Asha, with high-paced activity outside of the school building, thrived on her ability to stay healthy and maintain a social life. There was a continuous mention of work/life balance, suggesting internal balance needed to support self-care. Ultimately, self-care informed day-to-day emotional stability. Each of these educators acknowledged the necessity of balancing their personal and politically driven careers. Additionally, all three participants named mentors, all of whom were Black women, as the catalyst that brought this necessity to the forefront. These experiences confirm the context in which mentors address self-actualization through awareness of the essentiality of balancing the personal and politically through self-care. For each of these participants, their life experiences indicated their personal health was at stake due to their overwhelming stress of working in the educational field with a high level of commitment and care for the children they serve. Nia stated, "you must be in the role [as an educator] for the betterment of everyone including yourself." Aligning with the engaged pedagogy literature that stresses well-being and a commitment to self actualization among educators (hooks, 1984).

Additionally, repeated refrains were evident in the symbolism of elephants during the interviews. A collector of elephant figurines and artwork myself, over the years I have been told many stories of their symbolism, one of which is balance; surprising for such a large animal, elephants can balance on one or two feet. Therefore the presence of elephants in the home and/or office of the participants stood out during this study. Tia's living room was adorned by a vast collection of elephants. Asha's kitchen table base consisted of three large elephants holding up the glass top. Nia wore an elephant belt during one of our interviews. When asked if the elephants symbolized anything specific for them, the following list was derived from their responses: intelligence, motherhood, balance, wisdom, strength, power, success, good luck, and community building. The presence of elephants in the physical terrain during the study provided a collective symbol, reinforcing the significance of balance among the group of educators. The participants in this study engage in the field of education so whole-heartedly that they struggle with balancing their personal and political lives as educators. This struggle is acknowledged and deemed as an important area to remain cognizant of as an educator.

Socio-political awareness.

Borrowing from Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (1997) politicized mothering theory, this study is grounded in a "belief that theirs [educators] and the student's personal growth and development are critical to the process of education and central to the realization of social justice" (p. vi). Additionally, this study is influenced by Friere (1970) and hooks (1984) assertion claiming the development of a critical consciousness results in a critical awareness to overcome oppression and the ability to transform their socio-cultural reality. For this study, socio-political awareness is distinguishable by the formal or informal

dissemination of information on race and class issues in an effort to increase an individual's critical consciousness. The political stance taken by these educators, as described earlier in this chapter, confirm that the participants embody and support awareness of socio-political issues, which drive their actions and approach to education.

Each of the participants shared that a mentor had exposed them to either a conceptual understanding of socio political issues or directed them to books that addressed relevant issues in the community. One of Asha's experiences in developing self-actualization was formed when she learned of one of her close mentors rejecting Eurocentric standards of beauty. That experience led to a self-study of Black culture and an understanding of socio-political issues faced in the Black community. Based on Asha's growing understanding of the political climate of schooling, her work as a school social worker offers opportunities to discuss the connection between societal oppression and schooling. This awareness is demonstrated in her discussion of providing teachers professional development trainings addressing race, class and gender oppression in school settings. Additionally, Tia began a self-study after being exposed to the work of Jawanza Kunjufu by one of her mentors. Tia shared, she builds on the socio political awareness of teachers by assigning school wide readings and professional development trainings on social justice issues faced in schools. Additionally, Nia's experience as a special education supervisor placed her in a position of monitoring special education services for students; many of them she felt had been wrongly diagnosed. Nia believed strongly many Black students; boys in particular, were placed in special education because teachers lacked an understanding of culture and ways to engage students. Further, her stress level coping with this huge disparity was observed by a mentor. This mentor

provided her with race based professional development training material specifically designed for special education teachers.

These discussions reminded me of when I was in undergrad. I ran into one of my high school teachers, one of only two Black women teachers in my high school. Her classroom was a safe haven after school for a lot of girls. We talked to her about everything and she in turn listened and supported us. When I saw her that evening shopping in the mall, she hugged me and asked how school was going. I remember telling her, I was thinking of changing my major from Elementary Education to Psychology. She encouraged me to do what I felt was best, then looked in her purse for pen and paper. She wrote down, *The Mis-education of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson, and said, "When you get back to campus go to the library and check out that book." I took the piece of paper and thanked her for the book recommendation. Just as she had instructed, when I returned to campus, I checked out the book. Reading the text caused me to think more critically about society and caused me to recognize many of the same things Woodson discussed continued to be relevant. From that point, I read countless other books on the Black experience. Running into my teacher that day led to a discovery of literature that fostered my socio-political awareness.

Socio-political awareness in this study is expressed by providing and receiving information that served to develop a critical consciousness. Critical consciousness in this context is defined by an awareness that fosters the ability to overcome oppression and transform socio-cultural reality. All three of the participants in this study shared that other Black women educators ignited the development of their critical consciousness on some level. In the tradition of Sankofa, all three of these women aimed to cultivate the

socio-political awareness of other educators in the form of professional development trainings and readings on race, class and gender issues.

Mothering of the mind.

Specifically for this study, mothering of the mind is defined as aiding in the development of younger generations by sharing cultural and political knowledge based on personal and/or collective experiences with oppressive conditions. I found it fascinating that each educator in this study, including myself, accredited the advancement of some of our work and ideas about society and oppression to our interactions with older Black women in the community. When I asked the participants, "Who supports your work?" conversations moved naturally into conversations about "older" Black women. Each participant spoke of their biological mother or grandmother in addition to older Black woman educators whom they worked with over the years. The participants actually referred to the older educators as motherly and described their connections as supportive and caring.

Asha named her mother, a principal and a physical education teacher, all Black women as having encouraged her to continue advancing her work in education. Nia named four Black women principals who actively taught her cultural and professional lessons. Similarly, Tia named two Black women principals who influenced her work as a school leader. Tia stated having a Black women mentor made a difference in her school leadership training. Expressing the match in gender and ethnicity allowed a space for cultural lessons connected directly to her work in the district as a Black woman. Stressing she taught her lessons not available in a textbook, but ones drawn from life experiences.

Although the participants did not always label these influential women as othermothers or mentors, they clearly recognized the role of older Black women as influential in the development of their thinking. The connections described were pivotal life experiences that significantly influenced how they engage in the field of education. These finding are meaningful because they confirm a maternal aspect demonstrate in the form of mentoring. Specifically, these experiences utilized an approach that exemplified cultural lessons, intended to aid in the personal and political development of the educators and ultimately the children served. . These educators demonstrated "mothering of the mind" not only by their reports of having been mentored or mothered by older Black women educators but also by their role as othermothers in there respective school buildings.

Two of the three participants acknowledged their roles as othermothers and ultimately their role mothering the mind of students. Nia stated "I'm like momma or auntie to them… the more I learn about the politics of schooling the more I feel obligated to share this information with my students. Tia shared the following comment, "its natural for me to nurture students in a way they see and feel I care for them." Asha, however, adamantly rejected the terminology. Obviously referring to definitions associated with biological mothering instead of othermothering or mothering of the mind as described in this study. Her narrative expresses a familial approach as she states, she engages students from an "auntie approach" assuring them "we are family" in an effort to connect with students. When discussing negative media coverage of her school, Asha goes as far as to say, "Our poor babies have such a challenge in respecting school and school authority." This statement demonstrates a politicalized maternal concern for the children in the community.

This study highlights mentoring derived from a foundation of sisterhood and motherhood traditions in the Black community. As previously defined, sisterhood is a tradition of "supportive feeling[s] of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from shared feelings of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. 22). Similarly, motherhood is cultivated by a sense of loyalty and attachment that extends to all children in the Black community. Ultimately mothering and sisterhood are interrelated traditions. When educators mother children in the community from a political stance in an effort to teach cultural lessons of survival and resistance they are ultimately supporting the maternal work of Black mothers. Therefore, othermothering is an integral aspect of sisterhood and further demonstrates the multiplicity of the identity of Black women.

Lessons Learned

This study established mentorship in the form of Sankofa grounded in traditions of sisterhood and motherhood. This mentoring model, an aspect of Black women's culture, established self-actualization, socio-political awareness and mothering of the mind as interrelated components that spring from a tradition of sisterhood and motherhood. Although I've known these participants for several years, I knew little about their upbringing or particular aspects of their career trajectory. The participants did not consider themselves as Black feminists, yet many of their viewpoints were in line with Black feminist thought. The data revealed their political roles as educators were fundamentally linked to their experiences with race, class and gender oppression.

I fully anticipated the participants to share instances where they nurtured and cared for their students in the tradition of othermothering. What I did not foresee was the way the participants spoke of older black women as nurturers throughout their career.

Balancing the cycle of receiving and providing mentoring while mothering students was a consistent and valuable element for each educator. Although one participate rejected the label of mother, she embraced her role through a fictive kin model, stating she considers herself as an aunt. Acknowledging this role is in sync with the concept "mothering of the mind" as defined earlier in this section. Participants spoke highly of their mothers and/or grandmothers who encouraged them to work to their highest potential in school and encouraged their work as educators. In addition, they naturally spoke of older Black women who nurtured, mentored or motivated them in some way throughout their career. These older women not only shared wisdom through stories of their personal experiences, but also took the time to inquire about their mental and emotional stability.

Limitations of the Study

This study by design is not generalizable beyond the population used for this study. Based on the small number of participants and the specific geographical area of the United States where the study took place, it can only be consistent based on the participants in this study. Convenience sampling may be perceived as a limitation. I chose to use a small number of educators with whom I had personal relationships and are educators in the public school system. Of the five educators I know personally, three agreed to participate in this study. While creating these portraitures I was faced with wavering between my understanding of the literature and the experiences of the participants. One may argue that the limitation of the sample didn't allow the researcher to express dialogue in a more descriptive manner within the written portraits. Ultimately, portraiture allotted for a more creative way to present a research study; in combination

with a Black Feminist epistemology, this study provided space to analyze the

perspectives of Black women educators.

Conclusion

The idea that mentors of the same race and gender of their protégés offer a sense

of identification and connectedness poses a relevant question regarding mentorship

among Black women educators and further addresses the research question, "How does

Black women's culture of sisterhood and motherhood, influence the experiences of Black

women educators, and how do those experiences impact their work as educators?" These

participants reported relationships that "mothered their minds" by fostering development

of self-actualization and socio-political awareness.

Additionally, the embodiment of Sankofa was demonstrated in their receptivity of

this mentorship and their ability to provide similar wisdom to other educators, which was

not predicated on same-race relationships. Further, the findings demonstrate that the

women in this study engage in the field of education by utilizing the cultural role of sister

and mother, emphasizing their loyalty to the Black community through educating the

youth and mentoring educators in an attempt to encourage the development of a socio-

political awareness and self-actualization.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This project reveals deep-rooted cultural traditions of Sisterhood and Motherhood among Black women educators distinguishable by mentoring. These participants reported experiences with older Black women that encouraged self-actualization and shaped their socio political awareness. These findings reveal the interrelatedness of motherhood and sisterhood traditions. Both based in a sense of support and loyalty to other Black women by caring for children and working for the betterment of the Black community as a whole. These experiences encompass building political awareness and development of self-actualization through a mothering of the mind. Conceptualizing the finding of this study resulted in linking the essence of Sankofa to further explain the participant's experiences of providing and receiving mentoring in the field of education. This final chapter discusses literature relevant to the findings and is followed by a discussion contemplating potential research projects to build on this area of research.

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization in this study became evident in the discussions on balancing the politically driven workload and taking care of personal needs. Abraham Maslow's human motivation theory refers to self-actualization as self-fulfillment and reaching ones highest potential (Maslow, 1969). The educators in this study discuss fostering self-actualization by participating in dialogue where a mentor addressed an overexertion of work activity and a lack of self-care. The dialogue between the mentor-mentee align with Freire' problem-posing method. The problem-posing method is a process in which the relationship between the teacher and student is cultivated by engaging in dialogue and critical reflection together to make meaning (Friere, 1970, p. 81). This method is

believed to lead to critical consciousness, through which individuals acquire a critical awareness to overcome oppression and a critical view of their socio-cultural reality.

Participants dialogue concerning work/life balance demonstrated developing an acute awareness of the benefit of self-care. Thereby, developing a critical consciousness highlighting the necessity to counter stress, a byproduct of oppression, by implementing self-care habits. Furthering indicating how the developing a critical consciousness leads to critical thinking skills, necessary to transform socio-cultural reality (Friere, 1970). Although these learning experiences were not conducted in a formal classroom, they align with hooks' philosophy of teaching "in a manner that respects and cares for" the souls of those you teach. Self-actualization in this study was defined as balancing behaviors perceived as necessary to effectively pursue personal and politically charged career goals. Self-actualization in this study stressed implementation of self-care to initiate and maintain balance between work and personal life.

Socio Political Awareness

The lack of a teaching population that represents the student population was a political theme that came up quite a bit in this study. These participants reported a lack of Black educators in the schools where they have worked over the years as problematic. At the very least, teachers of Black students must understand the great history along with the current plight of the Black community in an effort to aid in students' awareness of their socio-political environment. Although research has been mixed in regard to the outcomes of same race teacher-student pairing, cultural synchronization as described by Irvine (1991) suggested Black teachers are more likely to teach cultural lessons that are essential for maneuvering in an oppressive society. In the tradition of storytelling, Black

women tell stories of community relationships and ways of acting in the world

(Thompson, 1998). The current data from the local public school demonstrates Black

students make up 56% of the student population; yet only 18% of the teachers are African

American (Figure 1).

Similarly, culturally relevant pedagogy recommends that students be provided an

educational environment that affirms their cultural identity, allows them to develop

academically and stimulates dialogue that supports a critical consciousness. Culturally

relevant pedagogy has three standards, (1) An ability to develop students academically,

(2) A willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and (3) Development of

socio-political or critical consciousness. These standards are distinguishable by (1)

Examining how teachers exhibit and conceptualize themselves and others, (2) Social

relationships and connectedness and (3) A fluid concept of knowledge (Ladson-Billings,

2009). These educators addressed cultural relevancy through creating professional

development trainings addressing race, class and gender oppression. Consequently, this

work supports the idea that cultural synchronization is a relevant concept to consider in

restructuring the teacher population.

Mothering of the Mind

Mothering as it relates to characteristics of the women in this study borrows the

terminology "mothering of the mind" from Collins, who explained it as the transmission

of knowledge among black women (Collins, 2009, p.121). Collins emphasized the way

in which Black women attend to the development of *younger generations* by sharing

cultural and political knowledge based on personal and collective experiences with

oppressive conditions. This type of transmission of knowledge is not limited to

interactions with children. Rather it includes the transmission of information from elders to younger adults, transparent in the narrative in the pervious section.

The project was also influenced by the politicized mothering concept, distinguishable by viewpoints that are maternal, political and embody a moral understanding of education. *The Maternal* aspect in this study was clear in that the participants discussed how their mothers or other older Black women nurtured and influenced their lives as educators. Much of the literature on the maternal aspects of Black women educators focuses on how educators mother their students in some way. Mothering serves as a role that supports the life of the community's youth. In order for communities to survive, there must be continuous new life that is nurtured and taught fundamental survival skills. Mentoring from a maternal standpoint provides educators a standpoint to make connections grounded in nurturance, support and political awareness.

The Political aspect recognizes schools as political institutions and educating as a political act. A Black feminist aspect gives attention to the interlocking elements of oppression, offering a stance that addresses humanity as a whole. The experiences of race, gender and class oppression in many ways represent the systematic oppression of all minorities in this society. Black Feminist thought suggests a need for a holistic vision of humanity, including equality for all people (Cooper, 1890; Collins, 1986). The participants in this study employed traditions of loyalty, nurturance and giving back to the community. Their commitment to mentoring by sharing information on race and class provokes critical thinking among educators and exposes the historical oppressive nature of schools in our society. The dissemination of critical literature on race and class among educators serves as a challenge to the mindset that may justify mediocre

instructional practices. Consequently, it may encourage a broadened awareness of socio-political issues, thereby exposing attitudes and polices which perpetuate a substandard schooling experience for poor children of color.

The Moral aspect encompasses "an intimacy with and not an aloofness from other people that motivates one to see personal fulfillment in working toward the social good" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997, p. 148). I believe the concepts of moral understanding of education and *caring* are synonymous in the literature about Black women teachers. Morality is shown through a sense of interdependence and knowing. This knowing creates a sense of confidence that the work of educators benefit the community as a whole. Demonstrating caring includes emotional labor, political labor, physical labor and intellectual labor (Thompson, 1998). While in White traditions, caring takes place intimately in the home or in "pink collar" jobs such as nursing or teaching (Thompson, 1998, p. 533), caring in the Black community is linked to justice and creating an environment in which all people can flourish. It does not entail retreating into innocence. Caring for Black children and their survival requires that children be taught to face racism with resilience. Caring is not strictly based on family support; the community as a whole participates in caring and nurturing. This caring transfers to older women mentoring younger women as was discussed in this study. In addition, this caring extends to the broader school community through the sharing of knowledge to increase awareness of self and society. Along with maternal and political aspects, the moral aspect of caring implies that Black women engage in the teaching profession from a socio-political stance despite the overwhelming oppression positioned against them and

their students. These educators work towards equity across the board for all students to have access to a quality education.

Discussion & Future Research

The interrelated themes of socio-political development, self-actualization and mothering of the mind demonstrate a connectivity that verifies a desire to serve the community in ways that also serves the individual and society as a whole. This research did not document extensive stories of peer mentoring relationships that represent sisterhood. Instead, the results lend strong support to the tradition of mentoring through the interrelated traditions of motherhood and sisterhood. This work makes the case that othermothering or caring for students inherently establishing sisterhood, demonstrating support for the mothers of children being served in schools. In other words, these participants used their positions of influence to aid in the development of self-actualization and the socio-political awareness of other educators in an attempt to positively affect the schooling experience of urban students; thereby aiding and assisting the parent in the intellectual development of their child. This is the essence of Black women's culture: sisterhood and motherhood.

There are similarities between the findings of this study and the politicized mothering literature, suggesting that mentoring teachers is a political act. This finding confirms a collective experience and valuation of mentorship among Black women educators. These educators demonstrate actively working towards increasing the socio-political awareness of educators. Supporting the development of socio-political awareness aims to invoke critical thinking skills that break down barriers of inferiority and condemnation based on race, gender or class. When educators use a political stance

as one that drives their engagement in the field of education they are tapping into social activism at a very basic and pivotal level.

Utilizing Black Feminist thought as a theoretical lens widens the platform to discuss values Black women bring to the field of education and how those values influence their experiences in the field; hence, encouraging the necessity of creating a diverse teaching population and culturally relevant mentorship models. While the initial findings are promising, further research is necessary among other groups of Black women educators across regions of the United States. Comparable studies can build on and/or further confirm the themes found in this project. Additionally, a wave of research specifically exploring the viewpoints of veteran and/or retired educators can offer a wealth of insight. Such research could delve into the life experiences and values that influenced their mentoring practices. It is plausible that intergenerational relationships similar to the ones experienced by these participants are common among other Black women educators. Future research in this area may provide an untapped source of mentorship that may aid in the development of cultural relevant mentoring programs supporting retention of Black women educators. In addition, studies such as these may generate discourse on how fundamental messages of survival and progression are transferred to younger generations as a means of resisting structural oppression.

Conclusion

I present this study with hopes that it provides a platform for the ideas and values of the mothers and sisters of the Black community, a platform to express our concerns grounded in a tradition that is not merely maternal and sisterly, but also political as it promotes an education that does not reside solely in passing tests, but in the development

of self-actualization and socio-political awareness among teachers and students. This work builds on literature that centralizes the work of Black women educators. It challenges how Black women educators are perceived and ultimately illuminates the passion many Black women educators bring to the field of education. This work resists the standardization of knowledge and linear epistemology claims. It aims to shake complacency in regard to the mediocre education available in urban schools across the country. It is my hope that this work will challenge school leaders and policy makers to make a concerted effort to diversify and retain a diverse teaching population.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Interview Guide

1. Where did you attend high school? College? Graduate school?

2. What level of education does your mother/father have?

   a. What is your mother's current occupation?

   b. What is your father's current occupation?

3. Did your siblings attend college?

4. Did your parents encourage high academic achievement?

5. Did your parents encourage college?

6. What is your most memorable educational experience?

7. What was your first job after college?

8. Why did you choose to go into the field of education field?

9. Why urban schools?

10. Explain your general impression of the state of Black education today.

11. Did anyone/ or a particular experience encourage you to become an educator?

12. Since you have been in the field of education, what are your biggest successes/disappointments?

The second interview will focus on Voice. These interviews will build on the first. Purposely pulling out pieces from the first interview to provide the participant an opportunity to clarify her beliefs, perspectives, experiences, challenges as well as successes in the field of education discussed in Interview one. The focus of the third interview will be Relationships. Although relationships serve as the medium between the

participants and myself, this interview will serve to gain insight on how other relationships serve in support of their work as educators. Here I will give the participant an opportunity to speak on what's good in the realm of education. Participants will be asked:

1. Who or what supports your work as an educator?

2. Do your family or friends support your work as an educator? If so, in what way?

3. What inspires you to continue this work?

4. Do you have other teachers who you mentor? If so what generated those relationships? Do you still keep in contact with those mentees?

5. Do you feel mentorship is important for younger teachers?

After the accumulation of data, coding, and pulling out Emergent Themes, those themes will guide the questions for the final interview. Here I will provide the participant with questions specific to the emergent themes to gain her perspective on my analysis. Here I will work to co-create meaning with the participants. For example, if themes of giving back to the community emerge, I will ask participants if they view their role as educators as one that is political. I am not looking for their agreement, but their perspective on how their beliefs inform how they engage in the field of education.

Curriculum Vitae

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