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Environments of Excellence: Two Literate Homes and Teachers' Perspectives

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ENVIRONMENTS OF EXCELLENCE: TWO LITERATE HOMES AND TEACHERS'
PERSPECTIVES

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Language and Literacy

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2013

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Richard and Francis Swinton, who struggled and sacrificed so that I could achieve my dreams. I feel so blessed to have you in my life and so happy that you are here to celebrate this accomplishment with me. I also dedicate this paper to the families living in Gardners Corners who opened their homes to me and allowed me to become a part of their lives for a season. It has been an honor and a privilege to spend time with you. Thank you for sharing your experiences and your insight and for going that extra mile to provide *environments of excellence* for your children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

African American children and other children of Color and children living in low-income areas are not performing at the same academic level as their European American counterparts. Some educators have blamed those children and their families for their failure. However, studies show that teaching and learning is happening in all familial settings, and that *environments of excellence* where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices support student academic success are being established and maintained in all communities, including low-income African American communities. Disregard for this fact has led to a challenge for marginalized children and a widening of the gap between home and school. School districts and Colleges of Education must get involved. Addressing this problem, this study used qualitative methods to explore *environments of excellence* in a predominantly African American low-income community. Findings were: (1) In *environments of excellence,* parents incorporate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy, (2) The race, experience, and habitus of teachers influence the ways in which they sort students into categories, and (3) While there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibility for critical conversations. The study examines both teacher and parent perspectives, and offers implications regarding the lessons learned about *environments of excellence,* as well as pedagogical strategies for teachers and teacher educators.

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Dubois, 1903/1994, p. 2)

From the days of slavery to the days of the Civil Rights Movement and through the age of this country's first African American president, African Americans have struggled against seemingly insurmountable odds in order to obtain reading and writing skills. Abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass' (1845/1995) account of being denied the opportunity to learn to read by plantation owners characterized the intellectual brutality of the society in which he lived. Yet, Douglass and countless others like him continued to strive toward achievement in literacy, and Douglass went on to author a book about his struggle. This story is emblematic of the high esteem with which poor African Americans have historically viewed education and literacy development. Rituals such as the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the Negro National Anthem, in segregated schools demonstrated a love for America as a nation coupled with a strong identity with the struggles associated with being African American. The prevailing narrative inside these schools, though, rested on the pillars of extraordinary achievement for African Americans as a counter-narrative to the ideology of African American intellectual inferiority (Hale 2001; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003).

African American scholars in the wake of Douglass' writing delve deeply into the notion that excellence in education is a key factor in obtaining economic freedom for marginalized groups -- which in the United States means any group that is culturally, linguistically, or economically different from the dominant group (Taylor, 1997*)*. Researcher and educator Dr. Carter G. Woodson (1933/2012) exemplifies this sentiment and stated, "In the long run, there is not much discrimination against superior talent" (p. 54). Woodson's belief that education, talent, and hard work trump discrimination is echoed in the work of Dubois (1903/1994) who calls on talented and successful African Americans to invest in the educational opportunities of those within the community who have not yet had the opportunity to succeed. Ladson-Billings (2009), Hale (2001), Gay (2010), and others build on this tradition by calling on teachers to see themselves as members of the communities in which they work, and help students embrace ways to enhance the community with knowledge gained in school.

This study explores the legacy of excellence that is sustained in communities of Color and poses opportunities for what I have termed *environments of excellence* in communities to be recognized and emulated in classrooms and schools. The term *environments of excellence* refers to settings characterized by practices and conditions that lead to the acquisition of the skills needed to successfully solve problems and negotiate life's demands. In other words, *environments of excellence* set learners up for success in their current circumstances and future situations as well. The significance of this phenomenon lies in the fact that in every society individuals use strategies to

maintain or improve their social position, as well as their children's position (Bourdieu, 1977). Although these strategies are different for children who face different challenges, the ability to read and write is a common thread in the lives of people considered to be successful by society at large. Reading and writing, however, are not the only practices involved in literacy and are not the only important aspects of *environments of excellence.* Instead, *environments of excellence* assist learners in gaining multiple literacies.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Before I began this research, I had an interesting conversation with the superintendent of Lewisburg County Schools. I had arranged a meeting with the superintendent, in order to inform her of a program I had established and ask for feedback. In my opinion, the superintendent's expert advice could help us make informed decisions that would eventually benefit the children with whom we worked. This was not the first time I had contacted the superintendent. About a year before this particular conversation took place, I invited her to come and see the program, *Freedom Readers*, in action. She took me up on my offer and visited the closing celebration at Gardners Corners, a public housing community in Freetown. This gave the superintendent an opportunity to meet the volunteers, watch the students recite poetry, and listen to parents talk about the intellectual growth they had seen in their children as a result of their participation.

When the meeting convened one brisk fall morning, there were four of us at the table in the superintendent's conference room. I invited a university professor who had been working closely with me at that time, and the superintendent invited the principal of a school where some of the children participating in the program attended. Despite her background knowledge about the purpose of the program and its impact on children, on this occasion, the superintendent sat across the table from me and asked what *Freedom Readers* (Bailey, 2012; Sabota, 2011) had to do with schools. This question came after I

had spent an hour explaining that our work brought trained volunteers into low-income communities and, in particular, those populated by families of Color, to read and discuss literature with students in grades kindergarten through sixth and to give away free books. I had also explained that I had chosen the name *Freedom Readers* in order to pay homage to scholars such as abolitionist, orator, and freed slave, Frederick Douglass, who wrote, "Once you learn to read you are forever free." I emphasized the fact that our name was often confused with the program portrayed in the movie *Freedom Writers*, but our program was very different in that the *Freedom Readers* approach to learning was more culturally responsive.

I shared ideas for an expansion of our work that involved working with middle school students on academics and strategies for reading and discussing complex texts. I hoped to share the *Freedom Readers'* vision of partnering with families to work toward achieving their academic goals, but I did not get the chance. The administrator told me that my work in low-income communities had nothing to do with schools and said that she preferred to spend her time discussing initiatives that were being carried out within the boundaries of the school. I was stunned by her comments because I believed that it would be clear to any superintendent that spending time reading outside of school would have a direct impact on in-school student achievement (Allington, et al., 2010; Brandt, 2001; Tatum, 2009). In this case, however, the students' practice of reading outside of school, their recitations of poetry, and the parents' perspectives all fell on deaf ears. Once again, as is documented widely in current research (Baker, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2007; Cushman, 2010), the voices of the children, their families and communities were silenced.

The conversation I described above is emblematic of a documented and systemic unwillingness of school officials, teacher education programs, and programs of professional development to recognize, embrace, and utilize the wealth of learning experiences taking place in low-income neighborhoods and the communities of students of Color (Banks, 2007; Darling Hammond, 2009; Tatum, 2009). The superintendent's comments reflected a lack of appreciation for the skills and expertise that exist in communities like those included in this study and are a direct contradiction to the call of African American scholars and activists for "schools to become the coordinator of community support for children" (Hale, 2001, p. xxii; Edelman, 2008).

Research Purpose and Questions

This dissertation is a study about the literate practices adopted by parents in two low-income homes who created environments of excellence for their children, i.e., environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support student academic success. This dissertation is also about the perspectives of teachers who work with children who live in these homes, and the stark differences between their perceptions of the children of Color and the literate practices taking place within these environments of excellence.

Although children from middle and upper class homes often struggle in schools, children of Color from low-income communities face especially challenging odds (Hale, 2001; Nieto, 2010). Like scholars of Color from days gone by such as Frederick Douglass, Carter G. Woodson, and WEB DuBois, these children must negotiate a society where misconceptions and prejudgments of the poor and of African Americans are prevalent. However, these obstacles do not guarantee failure. Many families -- of days

gone by and today -- that face challenges place a high value on formal education, and because of this, marginalized students are achieving academically at high levels all the time (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mahiri, 1998; Martin, 2012).

Freedom Readers is held in neighborhoods where economic poverty, referred to in this study as *low-income[1]*, is a main concern of the residents. The families that choose to participate in *Freedom Readers* are largely African American, and despite some scholars' assertion that we now live in a post-racial society (Bell, 1995; Nieto, 2010; Wilson, 1978), critical race theorists and scholars of African American history and education still maintain that a racial division exists between Whites and people of Color in America (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefanci, 2001; King, 2005; Lareau, 2011). This assertion becomes particularly significant when considering the fact that the majority of America's teachers and pre service teachers are predominantly White, middle-class, and female (National Council of Education Statistics (National Council of Educational Statistics [NCES], 2010). The persistent separation of racial groups in this country makes it likely that many educators have had little experience interacting with families of Color and families living in low-income communities. The likelihood is also great that this lack of interaction may lead teachers and teacher candidates to develop narrow perspectives concerning the literacies that are being developed in communities of Color (Hale, 2001). Those phenomena led me to ask three significant research questions:

- In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence*, or environments where the

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[1] The term low-income is used here to reference the lack of monetary resources only. Terms such as "poor", "deprived", and "low-wealth" have been avoided because their use would suggest a lack of knowledge and expertise.

characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and
community settings support student academic success?

- What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live
  in this low-income community who benefit from an *environment of*
  excellence in their home?

- What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two
  participant families and their teachers about transforming classroom
  practices to reflect an alignment of home and school practices in
  support of marginalized children?

To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative study, through which
I considered possibilities for building bridges between home and school. I
collected data to describe the home and community environments in which
students are learning, and interviewed teachers about their perceptions and
expectations for families living in low-income communities. I did this from my
position as the founder and executive director of *Freedom Readers,* a non-profit
organization that connects community volunteers with children living in low-
income areas for the purpose of practicing school literacies using a culturally
responsive approach.

Significance of the Study

Many of the programs designed to sensitize parents to their role as teachers of
reading and writing provide them with specific suggestions on the "how to" of
reading instruction, yet there is nothing in the literature to suggest that children
who successfully learn to read and write are specifically taught by their
parents…Literacy is deeply embedded in the social processes of family life and is
not some specific list of activities added to the family agenda to explicitly teach
reading. (Taylor, 1983, p.93)

As I spend more and more time talking with family members of the young scholars, as children enrolled in the program are called, informally observing their literacy practices, and studying current research in the fields of critical and sociocultural theories, I recognize the wealth of learning and teaching that was already going on in the low-income communities targeted by the *Freedom Readers* program. I developed *Freedom Readers* in 2010 to bring traditional school literacies, e.g. reading and writing, into communities, but as a result of my continued reading in literacy through my Ph.D. program, it is now clear to me that literacies already exist and need to be tapped into as we consider the transformation of classroom teaching to better support all learners. I see a clear need for educators associated with school districts to also develop these insights and use them to generate more equitable practices so that students of Color and those who live in low-income areas will not continue to be left behind in schools.

African American Children from Low-Income Communities in Schools

The changing demographics of the Southeastern United States, the site of this study, suggest that, although poverty is not exclusive to students of Color, a large percentage of the children in our schools who live in poverty are from families of Color. A report released by Frontline in 2013 stated that African American children were more likely to live in poverty than children of any race. The report goes on to cite the U S Census Bureau's 2011 official poverty measure and notes that "the poverty rate among black children is 38.2 percent , more than twice as high as the rate among whites" (Frontline, 2013). According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kid's Count (2009) report, the percentage of African American children living below the poverty level in the state in which this study was conducted was 71.2% in the year 2000. The number was

69.2% for Latina/o children, compared to 33.4% of European American children. These statistics on poverty are rendered even more important when placed alongside the changing demographics of our country over the past thirty years. The European American population has dropped from 80% of the total population to 66%, and the Latina/o population increased by 6 percentage points of the total to 15%. The African American population remained the same at about 12% (NCES, 2010). Students of Color are projected to comprise 41% of the population by the year 2020 (NCES, 2010). Without a doubt, educators must address these changes in demographics or run the risk of failing a majority of its clientele (Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2003).

This study focuses on African American children living in low-income areas in particular because research indicates that they are failed by educational systems and educators more often than any other group (Lewisburg County Schools Report, 2011). Practices such as unintentional and intentional tracking into lower level classes (Lucas, 1997; Oakes, 1985), overrepresentation in special education (Nieto, 2010), unequal distribution of punishment (Monroe, 2005), and a lack of highly qualified teachers and accountability for administrators (Hale, 2001) continue to have a negative impact on the academic success of African American students. In addition, research points to a bias in schools against the race, language, culture, and socioeconomic status of poor, African American children (Boutte, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Irvine, 2003, Mahiri, 1998). Despite these highly documented realities, African American children from low-income areas and their parents are consistently blamed by school officials for their academic underachievement (Taylor, 1997; Woodson, 1933/2012).

Although the educational situation for African Americans as a group may be dire, these statistics do not provide the complete picture. Despite the impediments to success that are a part of the current educational system, there are African American students who consistently prove that "not all African Americans are 'substandard,' 'deficient,' or 'challenging' to work with in education" (Milner, 2012, p. 3). Some children are supported by their educational experiences and succeed because of them, while others succeed in spite of their experiences in schools. Indeed, there is a wide variation in the stories of all African Americans, and that is no less the case when it comes to pinpointing the reasons for and conditions that lead to academic success or failure in schools.

The education debt. Studies show that as a whole African Americans as a group are not performing as well academically as their European American peers, a phenomena commonly referred to as "the achievement gap" (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In this study, however, I refer to the disparities in academic achievement as an "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 10) to emphasize the fact that schools are failing to deliver a quality education to African American students living in low-income areas. The literature to support this claim is voluminous (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Cushman, 2010; Dantas & Manyak, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Chung & Frelow, 2002; Delpit, 2012) and has begun to be taken seriously by more and more local school districts (Lewisburg County Schools Report, 2011). National test data show that minoritized and marginalized children in America perform at a rate of achievement that lags well behind their European American, middle-class counterparts (Tatum, 2009). This trend is expected to continue since the number of students of Color in our schools is increasing rapidly, and research reports

have indicated that students of Color and those living in poverty are already the majority in the South (Southern Education Foundation, 2010).

African American Children in Literate Communities

The communities where African American children live are rich, complex, and lively places in which children have always adapted their literacy skills to meet their individual needs. These communities are made up of specific spaces and places where family members and important others engage in literacy practices. Historically and currently, these spaces have revolved around African American churches, segregated schools, and informal and formal mentoring programs.

African American churches. A strong advocate for the advancement of reading and writing in these communities has historically been African American churches, which were once a major sponsor of literacy in African American communities (Brandt, 2001). As the nation moved further away from slavery and more firmly into the Civil Rights Movement, the school assumed more and more of the responsibility for producing African American citizens who were well versed in school literacies such as reading and writing (Spring, 2011).

Segregated schools. Another historically important sponsor of school literacies in African American communities has been segregated schools. Before the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision mandated that children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds be educated in the same classrooms to ensure equal access to quality teachers and educational resources, segregated schools provided a place where African American children learned to read and write. Beyond school literacies, however, children taught by African American educators had the opportunity to learn the importance of

community, respect for themselves and others, and working together as a team (Peery, Steele, and Hilliard, 2003; Hale, 2001).

Parents, relatives, and community mentors. Finally, it is important to note that parents have historically taken responsibility for the education of African American children living in low-income areas (Anders, 2011; McGee & Martin, 2011; Robinson & Werblow, 2012; Taylor, 1997). In addition to parents, community members who had achieved a measure of academic success themselves have often felt a responsibility to give back to the community by sharing their expertise and new found cultural capital. Community mentors such as choir directors, Sunday School teachers, and pastors continue to invest in the lives of the next generation both on an individual basis and through programs that touch the lives of large numbers of children (Ladson-Billings, 2010; Delpit, 1995).

Literacies and Cultural Values in Communities

In addition to research that documents the nature and significance of literacy practices amongst families in low-income communities, other scholars have compared the literacy practices of low-income families and their middle-class counterparts. In her important and groundbreaking study, Heath (1983) examined the literacy development of children of different socioeconomic and ethnic groups in the Carolinas. Heath's findings confronted the idea that literacy learning takes place in identical ways across various groups of people. In her study, African American children were surrounded by language, but the communicative patterns used differed from those in schools. The European American working-class and middle-class children in the study, by contrast, were taught by their parents in ways that mirrored the way teachers interacted with students. Heath

concluded that the African American children experienced a school environment that was vastly different from their home environment in terms of language usage. Valdés (1996) and other researchers (Dantas & Coleman, 2010; Monzo, 2010; Rios, 2010; Sarroub, L, 2010) who have written ethnographic portrayals of Mexican American, Chinese, Hmong and other families of Color, have found that the discontinuities between the structure of school and the structure of home life referenced by Heath are not unique to African American children. Many scholars in this field (Hill 2009; Kinloch 2010; Nieto, 2010;) maintain that children of Color who fail to succeed in school suffer not because they are victims of poor parenting or intellectual deficiencies, but because they experience a form of culture shock when their school environments fail to validate, recognize, or celebrate their ways of being.

Since Heath's (1983) work compared the literacy development of children from different socioeconomic groups, a number of scholars and researchers have conducted studies that bring to light the ways that cultural values and the differences in families impact a child's educational experience (Valdés, 1996; Compton-Lilly, 2003, Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey Gaines, 1988). Lareau (2011) noted that a difference exists between the parenting styles of working-class families and middle-class families. For example, the middle-class parents in Lareau's study explicitly taught children how to participate in middle-class discourse. Working-class parents, by contrast, gave children more directives and fewer opportunities to negotiate and persuade.

Teachers in Today's Schools

Given the current trends in the demographics of our nation's student population, the high percentage of European American and middle-class teachers serving those

students presents a stark contrast. The current teaching pool in the United States consists of about 83% European American middle-class teachers (NCES, 2011) and the majority of our future teachers and teacher educators are European American and middle-class as well (Picower, 2009). A large number of these teachers claim to hold a "colorblind" view when it comes to their students, and when they make this statement they mean that they treat children of all races and backgrounds the same (Irvine, 2003). However, critical race theorists define this "colorblind" stance as the failure to recognize or value the expertise and wealth of resources that exist beyond dominant cultural/racial groups. By denying that significant learning and teaching is taking place in all homes, such attitudes perpetuate racism and undercut the possibility of building on the strengths of children of Color who live in low-income areas (Sleeter, 2001). When educators fail to acknowledge that race matters, European American culture, language, and ways of being are normalized and become the standard for everyone else. However, professional literature (Cushman, 2010; Gay, 2010; Tatum, 2009) has shown that students of Color and students living in low-income areas are not receiving the same access to education as European American students (Lewisburg County Schools Report, 2011). In fact, they are being marginalized in school settings, and their wealth of knowledge and skills is being ignored (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Long, Anderson, Clark & McCraw, 2008; Milner, 2008; Nieto, 2010).

Furthermore, teachers of African American children from low-income areas often have a deficit mindset in regard to parents (Hale, 2001; Taylor, 1997). Research (Valdes, 1996) has shown that teachers often view parents as their helpers whose primary job it is to support the development of school literacies with little regard for home literacies. This

negative attitude has often been identified by researchers as an obstacle to strengthening

the relationship between the community and the school (Edwards & Turner, 2010; Rios,

2010). For example, Brian and Reid (2010) noted that although the ten schools involved

in their study of family involvement had a stated aim of including parents in all levels of

governance and decision making, none of the schools studied actually involved parents.

The educators in the study "portrayed parents as lacking the educational knowledge,

parenting skills and supportive attitudes necessary to ensure their children's educational

success" (Brain & Reid, 2010, p. 294). In addition, educational consultants such as Ruby

Payne (1998), who has presented numerous seminars and workshops for teachers

employed by Lewisburg County Schools put forth a "grossly overgeneralized and deficit-

laden" list of characteristics with which to identify children living in low-income

communities (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 365). Payne's (1998) list of "behaviors related

to poverty" includes such stereotypical statements as the following: "Poor children: laugh

when disciplined as a 'way to save face in matriarchal poverty'; argue loudly with the

teacher; make angry responses; make inappropriate or vulgar comments; and physically

fight because they do not have language or belief systems to use conflict resolution" (p.

79). By characterizing low-income children as immoral and less intelligent than other

children, Payne (1998) and others perpetuate deficit models and negative attitudes

amongst teachers who believe that "low-income" equals "inferior."

Disconnect Between Home and School

Exacerbating the challenge of educating all children is the fact that knowledge

and expertise that exist in African American communities continue to be undervalued in

spite of a large body of research demonstrating these resources are plentiful (Delpit,

2006; Gay, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Haight & Carter-Black, 2004). For example, Haight and Carter-Black spent time observing African American children in Sunday School and found that they were extremely motivated to complete meaningful tasks and used language effectively to communicate ideas (2004). In addition, the researchers found that storytelling was a powerful tool for teaching and learning in the community. As a result of not taking such research into account, educators consistently fail to take advantage of opportunities to capitalize on those bodies of knowledge in schools (Allen, 2007; Milner, 2012; Gay, 2010). Instead, children of Color are required on a regular basis to step out of their comfort zones into what some students consider to be a foreign and unwelcoming learning environment.

Some school officials maintain that we have nothing to learn from home and community life when it comes to education in schools (Dantas & Coleman, 2010; Edwards & Turner, 2010; Long & Volk, 2010). This may be a valid argument when applied to European American, middle-class students whose culture and language map directly onto the culture and language valued in schools. In fact, vast bodies of critical sociocultural research demonstrate that school officials, along with many teachers from dominant culture backgrounds, often believe that their way of doing things is simply the norm (Allen & Chung, 2000; Fiske, 2004; Long, Lopez-Robertson, & Turner-Nash, 2010). This is likely due in part to the fact that programs of teacher education and literacy education programs, rarely focus on the issues of race and class as topics of study and consideration (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Why This Study?

Because of the pervasive and ongoing disconnect between homes/communities and schools *and* the continued failure of schools to successfully educate children of Color and children of poverty (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009), this study focuses on two literate homes and the perspectives of teachers who work with children who live in these homes. Unique to the majority of work in this field, this research provides opportunities to compare the perspectives of the families with those of teachers who work with their children. I will also offer suggestions for using information gained from parents and teachers to create sites of possibility where critical conversations can take place.

Despite the number of high quality ethnographic studies that have shed light on the environments of teaching and learning excellence and the existence of rich literacy traditions in the homes and communities of children of Color and children from low-income households (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Cushman, 2010; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), the overwhelming majority of schools of education housed in colleges and universities fail to incorporate this research into their curriculum. Furthermore, there is little evidence of this knowledge-base in programs of in-service professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Dilworth, 1992; Irvine, 2003). As a result, the vast majority of teacher candidates and practicing classroom teachers continue to ask why certain children underperform while consistently assigning blame to families and community members rather than seeking real partnerships in the education of children (Hilliard, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2010; Perry, Steele & Hilliard,

2003). These educators fail to understand and incorporate culturally relevant practices that support all children.

In addition, despite the overwhelming body of research highlighting the effective teaching and learning taking place in African American and low-income communities, we see very little impact from it in school reform or in programs of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Nieto, 2010). Even with examples of practices that build on home and community knowledge (Allen, 2011; Boutte, 2004; Hill, 2009; Long et al, 2008) there is little documentation of practices that might be generated through teacher-family collaboration in which the family voice is as honored as the teacher's voice in understanding educational excellence..

This study addresses this gap by focusing not only on telling the stories of and highlighting *environments of excellence* in homes, but going a step further to investigate ways that sites of possibility can be established where family members can inform and shape classroom practice in conjunction with their children's teachers. In the process, this study, in amplifying the voices of some of the most maligned and misunderstood members of the educational community, holds great promise for stimulating further dialogue between each child's first wise teacher --which includes parents, family members and guardians -- and those who work with students in schools.

Definition of Terms

These terms and definitions are specific to this study:

Academic Success (Gay, 2010) Many scholars (Ford, 2011; Ladson-Billings; 2009; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) have addressed this issue, however, for my definition I relied heavily on Gay (2010). This term refers to a complicated and

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multi-faceted issue that can be defined in various ways. Academic success can refer to students' development of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and other school related literacy skills and can be evidenced by high marks received on report cards and teacher made tests, invitations to participate in gifted and talented programs, and/ or documented demonstrated ability observed by trained professionals in structured learning environments. In addition, academic success is characterized by non-cognitive attributes such as persistence, resilience, ability to cope with stressors and challenges, and belief in one's own ability to excel.

The Achievement Gap (Tatum, 2009) This term refers to the disparity that exists between the academic performance of European American students and students of Color. Because this terminology tends to place blame and responsibility for this disparity on students of Color and their families, I have replaced it with the term "the education debt," which is described below.

Counter-Narratives (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1989) Counter-narratives (or counter-stories) are stories aimed at countering the legitimacy of pejorative myths, narratives and dominant view about people of Color.

Culture (Milner, 2012 p. 10) This term can be defined as "a group of people who possess and share deep-rooted connections such as values, beliefs, languages, customs, norms, and history. Culture is dynamic and encompasses a range of concepts that relate to its central meaning such as identity (race and ethnicity), class, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and religion (among other categories)."

Culture of Power (Delpit, 1995, p. 25) This term is specifically defined as "linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self" that are adopted by those who make decisions for others.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy This term is defined as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically, by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20).

Cultural Capital (Bordieu, 1986) This term refers to the cultural characteristics, practices, and mores possessed by different cultural groups.

Disadvantaged (Taylor, 1997 p. 3) This term is specifically defined as "a name for the process by which one group of persons -- the "advantaged" -- suppresses another group of persons, disadvantages them, and then blames them for the degraded situation."

The Education Debt (**Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 10**) This term is used instead of the term "achievement gap," which is described above. "In this study I refer to the disparities in academic achievement as an "education debt" to emphasize the fact that schools are failing to deliver a quality education to African American students living in low-income areas.

Funds of Knowledge (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986) These funds include languages, literacies, and complex problem-solving capabilities that all families bring to *every* learning situation.

Habitus (Bordieu, 1977) This term refers to the comfort adults feel when in settings that mirror the ways in which they were socialized as children.

Marginalized The term, as used in this study, describes the act of confining or relegating a certain group of people to the edges or outskirts of society. Marginalized groups are generally considered to be the opposite of normalized groups (Banks, 2007).

Minoritized The term, minoritized, refers to the way that dominant groups regard, depict, and portray marginalized groups to maintain control of those groups (Gay, 2010).

Normalized The term is used in this study to refer to the acceptance of one culture, way of being, language, and/or lifestyle as standard required discourse. In America, the standard continues to consist of European American, upper/middle-class cultural values which are rarely examined or questioned (Nieto, 2010).

People of Color, Black, African American These words are capitalized throughout this dissertation in order to highlight the importance of race.

White Privilege (McIntosh, 1991) This term is defined as "an invisible set of privileges conferred upon European Americans" (p. 134).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

AND REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The framework grounding this study grew out of my personal experiences as an African American female, student, educator, family member and parent. Throughout my educational experience I was aware of the differences that existed between my experiences with literacy in my community and literacy practices presented to me at school. Along the way, I had adopted the notion that my school experiences were valuable, but the learning I was doing at home and in my community was not. For instance, I wondered why my teachers placed a great deal of emphasis on memorizing and reciting Shakespearean sonnets but did not give me credit for the Easter speeches my mother required that I memorize and recite each year. In retrospect, I suspect that my teachers had no knowledge of the rigor, challenge, and growth opportunities afforded me in my home and community. As a child, I did not enjoy working on those yearly presentations and did not recognize the value of them until I was required to call on those public speaking skills years later in my roles as teacher, professional development associate, and executive director.

In my early years of doctoral study, I became fascinated with the work of social and cultural theories of language researchers (Boutte, 2007;Edwards & Turner, 2010; Haight & Carter-Black, 2004; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) who

described the literacy practices employed in African American homes in rural communities that resembled my own home town. For the first time, I encountered a way of understanding my culture that did not disparage it but sought to remove the pejorative connotations that had been attached to it for centuries.

I entered this study with the belief that as children's first teachers, parents, grandparents, and other family and community members represent the heart and soul of teaching and learning. It is at the mother's knee and in community settings that youngsters learn to speak, use literacies, and interact with others effectively (Brody & Flor, 1998; Compton-Lilly, 2004; Long et al, 2008; Lopez-Robertson et al, 2010; Rogoff, 2003). I see these as *environments of excellence* in families and communities.

Because of my convictions that many of the families living in low-income communities have created *environments of excellence* where they support the literacy learning of children, I was compelled to learn about and share their stories and the contexts in which they teach and learn. The purpose of this endeavor is to provide counter-narratives to those who believe otherwise and to enrich our understanding about how knowledge of home excellence might inform school practice. I feel certain that all classroom teachers can design lessons that will engage and inspire young learners, but to do so, they must first value the learning relationships that have been forged between families, community members, and their children and the learning and teaching that occurs through those relationships.

Knowing what is relevant to the learner is of great benefit to classroom teachers who seek to convey information in effective ways by connecting new understandings to what is already known by the students (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010;

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Ladson-Billings; 2009). This can lead to a heightened level of enthusiasm for learning that can make underperforming students less likely to become non-completers (Banks, 2007; Irvine, 2003; Mahiri, 1998; Nieto; 2010). These same students will be more likely to develop proficiency in the skills and habits of the dominant culture needed for economic survival, while maintaining pride and expertise in their own culture (Ford, 2011; Hale, 2001; Woodson, 1933/2012).

I am further urged to do this work because of my grounding in sociocultural theory, focusing in particular on two elements of this theory, the notion of funds of knowledge, and the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy/pedagogy. Sociocultural theory takes into account the myriad social and cultural factors that shape the environments in which my data were collected, providing a holistic lens for gaining insights into the environments that are positively impacting the academic growth of children consistently marginalized in schools.

The notion of funds of knowledge resides under the umbrella of sociocultural theory and gives me insight into the existence of community expertise. For example, the fact that some family members possess knowledge of cooking that is vast and linked to the heritage and traditions of an entire group is an illustration of funds of knowledge. In addition, culturally responsive pedagogy also resides within the sociocultural theory domain and assists me in conceptualizing a school environment that builds on the strengths and funds of knowledge that exist in the home and community.

Sociocultural theory satisfies my research needs to a point but lacks the critical perspectives needed to adequately address the issues of race, power and equity in education which are under investigation in this study. Therefore, underlying these ideas is

my belief in the basic tenets of critical sociocultural theory, which urges educators to consider the inequities in terms of issues of power and privilege that impact students' opportunities to learn. Sociocultural theory satisfies my research needs to a point but lacks the critical perspectives needed to adequately address the issues of race, power, and equity in education which are under investigation in this study. Therefore, underlying these ideas is my belief in the basic tenets of critical sociocultural theory, which urges educators to consider the inequities that impact students' opportunities to learn in terms of issues of power and privilege. Although critical sociocultural theory is the primary critical theory essential to my theoretical framework, I was also inspired by the critical race theory notion of counter-narratives, which challenge dominant myths of African American inferiority. Counter-narrative are particularly useful in research because they legitimize the stories that African American tell about their experiences of racism. This notion is applicable to this study because one of its main purposes is to challenge inferiority myths about African American families living in low-income communities. As they are relevant to my theoretical frame, concepts from sociocultural theory with special attention to funds of knowledge; culturally responsive pedagogy, critical sociocultural theory, and concepts associated with critical race theory (Figure 2.1) are described briefly below.

CRT notions of counternarratives

funds of knowldege

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Critical Approaches

Critical Socio cultural Theory
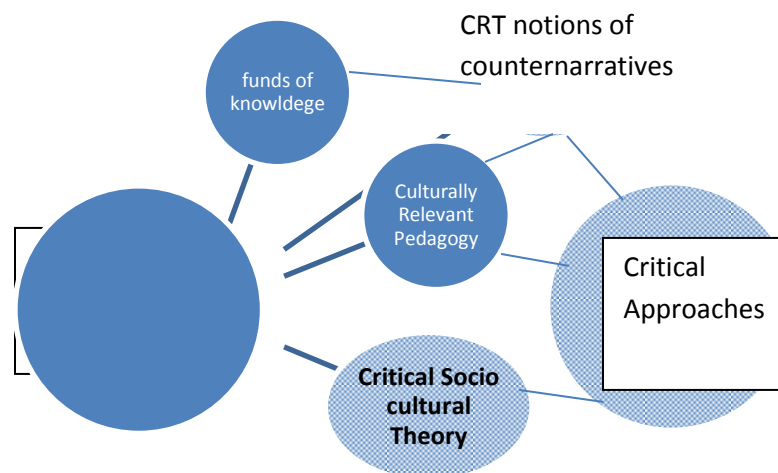
Figure 2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

Sociocultural Approaches

While much of the talk surrounding the art and science of teaching focuses exclusively on the interactions and practices that take place in classrooms while the teacher is teaching, sociocultural theory takes into account all aspects of the learner's experience both inside and outside school walls. Sociocultural theory can be defined as "an approach to understanding human development as it occurs in and is shaped by social and cultural contexts" (Dantas & Manyak, 2010, p.9). In considering the influences that have affected and continue to influence individuals from birth, sociocultural theorists within education maintain that the investigation of learning opportunities and the contexts in which they occur, not just what is happening in the minds of learners, is a key component to understanding the ways in which learning happens.

One of the most influential thinkers in this field, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), asserted that individuals do not acquire knowledge, skills, and identities exclusively in isolation, but instead acquire skills and expertise in the course of

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carrying out various roles and responsibilities alongside others. Whether that interaction is considered formal education or not, the entire realm of social contact between individuals is relevant because as a byproduct of human development, people come to see themselves as members of a particular group. As such, they take on the cultural, historical, and social practices of that group. In other words, all learning, especially the acquisition of literacy, and the development of the human mind, is socially mediated. Both the culture and the social context in which a learner develops have a profound impact on the ways in which information is received, processed, and retained. Therefore, sociocultural approaches generally include an extensive consideration of not only what the learner knows and can do alone, but what he can do with the help of extended family members and peers in community settings (Dantas & Manyak, 2010).

How sociocultural approaches apply to this study. In developing this study, I am guided by a sociocultural approach because, as Gregory, et al. (2004) phrase it, I am interested in doing work that "transcends academic disciplines and focuses on the inextricable link between culture and cognition through engagement in activities, tasks or events (p. 7)." To put it simply, the belief system guiding this study draws heavily on Vygotsky's (1978) notion that learning takes place in a particular environment as human beings interact with each other as learners and teachers. Vygotsky (1978) further asserts that both a student's surroundings and his or her experiences outside the school are learning resources that must be taken into account to support the school-based education of that student. An exclusive consideration of test scores and isolated skills by classroom teachers provides an incomplete picture of what students know and can do because the focus is only on the rate at which academic cognition is taking place. This narrow view

offers teachers limited knowledge to support their construction of curriculum and instructional practice.

Sociocultural theory also influences the way in which I choose to frame this study's focus on the teaching techniques observed in homes with an equal treatment of insights gained from classroom teachers. Drawing from a sociocultural perspective, my intention is not to problematize the mother or the teacher, but to share stories that will deepen our understanding of significant experiences, characteristics, dispositions, and influences on students' learning (Haberman, 1995; Heath, 1983; Mahiri, 1998; Street, 1984). The framing of the problem presupposes that the home and the community are just as or even more important than the institution we call school, which is a basic tenet of much sociocultural work (Brandt, 2001; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Delpit, 2006; Hill, 2009) as researchers take every aspect of the learner's lived experience into account. Looking at Ladson-Billings' (2007) notion of the education debt -- what is owed to students by their school and educators -- takes into account a more global and inclusive view of learning and teaching than would have been considered outside the realm of sociocultural theory.

Scholars who subscribe to sociocultural theory have written extensively about family literacy, and this body of literature makes a strong case for the involvement of educators in the lives of students beyond the classroom. Findings from these studies (Dantas & Manyak, 2010; Haight, 2004; Nieto, 2010; Taylor, 1997) suggest that teachers' awareness of students' experiences outside school is an important approach to addressing the disparity between the ways in which learning takes place in the home and at school. Shirley Brice Heath's classic, *Ways with Words,* (1983) is an important demonstration of the legitimacy of language and communicating styles in homes and

communities and a foundation to key concepts put forward in this body of literature, which seeks to prove that different does not mean deficient. These works are foundational to the approach I take as I consider the problems this study hopes to address and the design of research.

Funds of knowledge. An important concept that is found within the sociocultural domain is funds of knowledge. As stated above, sociocultural approaches examine the interplay of culture and cognition, and the notion of funds of knowledge also examines the interplay of culture and cognition.

What are funds of knowledge? The term funds of knowledge refers to a theoretical concept that brings to the forefront the skills and expertise that exist in homes and communities but may not be considered valuable in traditional educational settings. The notion of funds of knowledge (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986) came out of a study that "documented knowledge that exists in students' homes" (p. 89), asserting that every family member has a particular set of skills which have been acquired through social interactions with others. Moll (2001) defines funds of knowledge as "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). These skills are naturally transferred to the younger generation when families go about their daily routines.

This notion has major implications for educators because it points to a new horizon for teaching and learning in schools. Since Moll and others (Long & Volk, 2010; Moll & Gonzalez, 2005; Sarroub, 2010; Taylor, 1997) who subscribe to this concept have documented that underperforming students in schools possess strengths that have been previously unrecognized and appreciated in school settings, it follows that a broadening

of the school-based definition of valuable knowledge would have a profound impact on the academic careers of all students (Banks, 2007; Moll, 2001). As Nieto (2010) asserts, not only would previously underperforming students begin to achieve at higher levels academically, but students who have historically known success in schools would have access to a more well-rounded and diversified educational experience.

Funds of knowledge, though laden with enormous potential, is limited by the willingness of educators and the opportunities presented for spending time in the homes and communities of students whose cultures and experiences may be different from their own. Although a number of scholars (Long et al, 2008; Lopez-Robertson, et. al., 2010) have followed the lead of Moll and his colleagues by spending time in the homes of students of Color and documenting their own experiences, many educators have not. Time constraints and a general feeling of discomfort have been cited as reasons that more educators have not ventured into low-income communities and communities of Color (Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2010; Long & Volk, 2010; Long et al, 2008; Lopez-Robertson, et.al 2010) to take advantage of what Moll (2001) himself describes as a "potential major social and intellectual resource for the schools" (p. 22). Schools will need to develop ways to tap this resource as the population of students of Color grows.

How the concept of funds of knowledge applies to this study. My theoretical frame draws heavily from the body of literature that utilizes funds of knowledge but also other work that gives more attention to the voices of family members than the voices of classroom teachers and other educators. In particular, I am drawn to and guided by work such as that of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) who demonstrate the many ways in which people become literate and use literacy outside schools. Their portraits of inner-

city communities, families, and children highlight the funds of knowledge that exist in every home. Similarly, Taylor's 1997 work challenges the notion that family literacy can be defined by outside forces. I am also drawn to more recent studies conducted in this area such as Haight and Carter-Black's (2004) work addressing the importance of African American churches in the literacy development of students.

This study follows in the footsteps of researchers who have sought to offer a counter-narrative to the prevailing myth that the homes and communities from which marginalized students hail are dysfunctional and deficient. I entered this study with the belief that the data would demonstrate that there are rich funds of knowledge in every home and that children are being taught both effectively and purposefully in community settings. It is the various and numerous funds of knowledge that have been previously documented, and exist in the homes of participants in this study, that provide the pillars on which *environments of excellence* are constructed.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Another significant sociocultural approach to shape my thinking is culturally responsive pedagogy. In keeping with the tenets of sociocultural theory, culturally responsive pedagogy takes into account the whole lived experience of the learner, not just what takes place inside school walls, and incorporates those lived-experiences into methods of teaching.

What is culturally responsive pedagogy? Gloria Ladson-Billings (2002) writes extensively about culturally relevant pedagogy and offers a succinct definition for the tenets on which it rests:

- Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement.

- Successful teaching supports students' cultural competence.

- Successful teaching promotes students' critical consciousness (pp. 110-111).

According to Ladson-Billings (2010), these tenets describe the disposition of teachers who consistently inspire academic progress in the classroom regardless of the student's race, ethnicity, gender, or religious belief. This approach is especially beneficial to underachieving students of Color whose culture is routinely misunderstood and neglected in school. As Ladson-Billing states, culturally relevant pedagogy is more than just a set of strategies, but a way of going about the business of teaching that honors every student and the multiple identities and literacies brought into the classroom. Nieto (2010) confirms this line of thinking:

> Culturally responsive pedagogy is not simply about adding a few cultural pieces to the curriculum, but rather about taking into account the experiences, perspectives, and values of students and their families in both the curriculum and the pedagogy and, in fact, about reforming the entire climate for student learning. (p. 210)

Gay's (2010) work provides a detailed and comprehensive picture of the usefulness of culturally responsive pedagogy and the ways it is employed to create *environments of excellence* in school settings. Like Gardner (1983), Gay asserts that such environments in schools take learning styles, or the practices and approaches that fit best with the learner's culture, experience, personality, and preference, into account. She further maintains that when classroom teachers utilize information about the learning styles of marginalized students, the alignment of home and school culture or "cultural congruity in teaching-learning processes" (Gay, 2010, p. 174) is achieved, making academic achievement more likely for students of Color.

How culturally responsive pedagogy applies to this study. Research has shown that culturally responsive pedagogy is an effective tool for improving the academic

performance of students of Color (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Hill, 2009; Kinloch, 2010).

However, in order for this approach to be utilized to its highest potential, teachers must have both the pedagogical knowledge to reach students and the institutional support of schools that value this type of teaching. These concepts are foundational to my own work as I seek to influence the creation of school environments that promote academic success for all students. Drawing on the strengths and expertise exhibited in *environments of excellence* in low-income communities of Color can lead educators to create and sustain *environments of excellence* in schools. Once established, these settings will exemplify the characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy, "which are validating, comprehensive, empowering, multidimensional, transformative, and emancipatory" (Gay, 2010, pp. 32-37).

Critical Approaches

At the heart of the educational process is the question of knowledge and how valuable information is transferred from one person to another. Therefore, in order to strengthen our understanding of education we must reflect on the meaning of knowledge. Where does knowledge originate? Whose knowledge is acceptable and whose is not? Who stands to gain from the successful transference of what Apple (2000) refers to as "official knowledge" (p. 1)? Critical approaches take on these considerations by dealing with issues of race and power as they relate to education (Freire, 1970/2005; Kincheloe, 2008). In addition, critical educational theorists such as Kincheloe (2008), hooks (1994) and McLaren (1997) maintain that schooling is never neutral, but is always driven by some perspective or political agenda (Kincheloe, 2008). The questioning of the dominant perspective is important because, as Freire (1970/2005) and Macedo (2000) demonstrate

in their work, close examination through the lens of critical educational theory can unveil hidden agendas which can cause schooling to be harmful to some students.

Critical Sociocultural Theory. Like sociocultural theory, critical sociocultural theory addresses the cognitive development of learners as it is mediated by social and cultural influences. Critical sociocultural theory, however, takes the discussion one step further by not only examining the nature of social interactions, but also taking into account the inequities that exist and are perpetuated during these interactions (Apple, 2000; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970/2005). Theorists subscribing to this school maintain that it is important to investigate instances where race, power, and privilege influence the environments in which children learn and grow.

What is critical sociocultural theory? An intensive focus on power structures is mandated by the *critical* component of critical sociocultural theory. Power structures can be defined as those systems which enable the delivery of education, goods or services, but afford more opportunities to one group than another. Educational decision makers, gatekeepers, authority figures, and policy-makers constitute a part of the power structure in education, and thus they are in a position to make judgments about what knowledge is celebrated and what knowledge is ignored in society (Apple, 2000). Critical sociocultural theory facilities a deeper understanding of the various ways of being in the world and how teachers can support the diverse customs, practices, and cultures represented in the classroom. Furthermore, critical sociocultural theory leads to an appreciation of the ways that literacy skills are gained and utilized in a variety of different social and cultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Long et al, 2008; Dantas & Manyak, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

How critical sociocultural theory applies to this study. Critical sociocultural theory shaped the way I approached this study because it allowed me to consider the differences that exist in parenting and teaching styles. Although parents, family members and classroom teachers all communicate and transfer knowledge to children, the ways in which this is accomplished, and the value family/community knowledge is given, can be substantially different. In keeping with the tenets of critical sociocultural theory, I believe that the disparities that exist in academic achievement between groups of students can, in part, be credited to the differences in what is considered valuable knowledge in the home and what is accepted in schools (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2010; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

A view of education through a critical sociocultural lens emphasizes the recognition of home and community culture as a starting point for educational endeavors, yet schools routinely ignore and devalue this valuable information (Banks, 2007; Hale, 2001; Nieto, 2010; Tatum, 2005). Thus, in this study, I investigated the critical teaching practices and counter-narratives about injustice and educational inequities parents living in a low-income community of Color shared with their children. My intention was to document these practices so that classroom teachers could incorporate not only the specific practice, but the pedagogy behind it. At the same time, teachers who adopt this approach may become more critically aware of issues of power and privilege that have hindered the academic success of marginalized students up to this point. Teachers who have created *environments of excellence* in their classrooms also have a wealth of knowledge to share with parents. My intention was document these insights as well so that they could be shared with parents.

Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has deep roots in the field of law where scholars such as Bell (2009), acknowledged as the father of CRT, examined the role of race in the relationships of individuals, institutions and other components of society. Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1995) maintains that the major goal of CRT is to understand how a "regime of White supremacy and its subordination of people of Color have been created and maintained in America" (p. 23). In so doing, CRT calls attention to policies and practices that protect the power and privilege of European Americans.

What is critical race theory? Educational scholars such as Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) have taken up CRT and define it in terms of the ways that race, power, privilege, and white supremacy are enacted in schools. In her groundbreaking article, "Just What is Critical Race Theory, and What's it Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?", Ladson-Billings (1999) draws connections between the fields of law and education in an effort to demonstrate the potential utility of adopting a CRT framework as a viable tool for conducting race-based analyses of educational inequities. CRT can be defined as a movement, not simply a theory, consisting of activists and scholars who seek to alter the way power and privilege around issues of race and racism operate in educational institutions (Solranzo & Yosso, 2002). CRT is comprised of at least five central tentets that shape its basic premise: 1) CRT acknowledges the centrality of race and racism; 2) CRT challenges the dominant ideology – the institutional and societal claims of color-blindness, and meritocracy. Critical race theorists maintain that these claims serve to disguise the continuation of power and privilege of dominant groups; 3) CRT promotes social justice and the elimination of racism; 4) CRT acknowledges the

experiential knowledge of people of Color as legitimate. As a result, critical race theorists draw on storytelling and narrative methods (Lynn & Parker, 2006); 5) CRT embraces an interdisciplinary perspective by analyzing race and racism through various historical and contemporary lenses. Although all five of these CRT tenets have influenced my thinking, CRT's focus on the experiential knowledge of people of Color is most significant to this study.

Educational scholars and researchers (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2012; Sleeter, 2002) have taken up CRT in a number of significant ways. They have engaged in the pursuit of naming practices and policies that lead to inequity and eliminating unjust structures. For instance, critical race theorists identify the practice of tracking children in schools as one that is harmful to children of Color because a large number of these children are assigned to the lowest level of classes offered. The identification of unjust practices is followed by advocacy in the form of writing, teaching, speaking, and helping children themselves recognize and address unfair practices.

One way to achieve the goals of CRT is to contextualize instances of racism through the use of storytelling, another important tenet of CRT. For instance, in CRT, people who have experienced racialized obstacles to their educational success such as being tracked into a lower level learning group are encouraged to tell their stories so that they may name their own experiences. Historically, these kinds of stories have been told from the perspective of the dominant racial group, leaving victims of racial disparities silent and ignored. By using narrative to reveal experiences of racial oppression, CRT diminishes the voice and power of the established elites and gives voice and power to those who have been oppressed (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

How critical race theory applies to this study. I am influenced by CRT's commitment to the notion of storytelling as a means for developing counter-narratives; stories aimed at countering the legitimacy of pejorative myths, narratives and dominant view about people of Color (Delgado, 1989). I believe that giving voice to those who have been silenced for many years is an important part of the work of educators in schools. In my opinion, all people have the right to speak for themselves and tell their own stories from their own perspectives. For too long, we have allowed those in power to frame the realities of others while they draw on their own limited points of view. With those beliefs in mind, I attempted to document the voices of family members in a low-income African American community who have not yet had the opportunity to make their teaching pedagogies and beliefs about education public. By doing so I attempted to honor their voices and the family and community knowledge they share with their children.

Introduction to Review of Related Literature

This review of literature encompasses key works organized around theoretical concepts that inform this study: (a*) environments of excellence* in schools, (b) *environments of excellence* in communities, and (c) alignment of home, community, and school *environments of excellence*. The term *environments of excellence* can be defined as the practices and conditions that lead to the acquisition of the skills needed to successfully negotiate life's personal and educational demands. In other words, this term captures the essence of what takes place in literate settings that promote the academic excellence and personal success of all children. This review focuses primarily on African American students (with mention of other students of Color) because the participants in the study -- all of whom live in a low-income community -- are African American.

Environments of Excellence in Schools

This review offers a close examination of *environments of excellence* in schools which demonstrate the characteristics of formal learning environments where the entire lived-experience of the learner is taken into account, not just individual cognitive skills. Research has shown that successful educators who are able to draw from knowledge that exists across a range of cultural and linguistic communities exhibit a particular set of dispositions which undergird pedagogical approaches that sustain *environments of excellence* in schools (Banks, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Haberman, 1995; Irvine, 2003). In some cases, marginalized students succeed because educators have made a conscious effort to provide support for their success (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1970/2005; Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In other cases, however, student success in schools can be traced back to factors other than those associated with paid educators who assist students with learning in formal educational contexts (Milner, 2012), For example, the internal resilience and will to succeed of the student coupled with the support provided by family and community members turn ordinary school settings into *environments of excellence* (McGee & Martin, 2011*)*.

In the following paragraphs, I review studies that provide examples of *environments of excellence* in schools and describe two approaches to the creation of *environments of excellence* in schools: culturally relevant pedagogy, which can lead to success because of school-based literacy practices, and resilience and networks of support, which can lead to success in spite of school-based literacy practices (Gay, 2010; Long & Volk, 2010).

Illustrations of *environments of excellence* in schools. Examples of *environments of excellence* in schools that take learning styles, cultural preferences, and real world skills into account are abundant. Compton-Lilly's (2004) study documented her work with elementary school students in a school-based *environment of excellence.* As the teacher/researcher, she assisted her students in identifying negative situations in the communities in which they lived. Students named societal ills such as violence, crime, and poverty, and were guided in the use of their emerging literacy skills to address these issues. For example, first graders wrote letters to gun shop owners and their local newspapers to express concerns about a shooting that had taken place not far from school. Compton-Lilly (2004) found that, despite the young age of her students, they effectively engaged literacy in a critical way with the support of an adult who was familiar with the community in which they lived and listened to their interests and concerns. This utilization of developing skills to impact the world and solve real-life problems is a hallmark of *environments of excellence* in schools.

Like Compton-Lilly (2004), Hill's (2009) study involved urban youth and incorporated elements of life beyond school walls. Hill (2009) created a class in an alternative high school initially designed to attract learners over the age of 18 who wanted to come back to school to finish the requirements for a diploma. By the time Hill (2009) conducted the study, however, the Philadelphia alternative high school program known as Twilight served teen mothers, students identified by the day school as behavior problems, and other "students who do not fit comfortably in the day school environment" (p. 15). The curriculum consisted of the lyrics of popular hip-hop songs which were referred to as texts in order to emphasize their literary merits. Instead of referring to

rappers as "artists," the teachers of the class called them "authors." The main objective of the course was to assist students in gaining understanding of literary themes and terms. Class time was devoted to reading texts and engaging in analysis and discussion. The initial discussion typically focused on the students' lives and the connections they made between the texts and their experiences. Students were also required to write responses to readings in journals, share responses during group discussions, and create unit projects that demonstrated a deep understanding of the texts and creative use of the literary terms discussed.

The students in the class identified with it as a "Black space," or a place where they felt most comfortable to bring with them their cultural traditions and ways of communicating. For students who faced challenges in connecting with school, even hip-hop texts that were not immediately familiar to them still represented a genre that was closely aligned with the out-of-school world. Students in Hill's (2009) study commented on the feelings of connectedness they experienced when texts referenced their local surroundings. Hill (2009) found that attendance numbers and test scores improved because of this unique curriculum and the way he used his knowledge of the genre to engage with the students on a personal level. In addition, Hill (2009) also found that the hip-hop based program led to improvements in classroom academic performance, class participation, and self-esteem for the learners.

Research has also shown that *environments of excellence* which utilize cultural knowledge exist at the middle school level as well. For example, Hudley's (1995) work with African American male students in a segregated academic class demonstrated the positive impact of an exclusively African American setting which utilized the school

district's curriculum with some additions. The researchers supplemented the sanctioned course of study with materials that emphasized such culturally relevant topics as African history, the contributions of African Americans to the political and economic development of this country, and an analysis of racism, classism and sexism. Also discussed were the rights and responsibilities of members of a democratic society (p. 46). After studying 20 sixth to eighth grade African American males placed in this specialized, self-contained program and comparing their self-perceptions with 20 African American males who remained in a mainstream academic setting, Hudley found that the students in the self-contained program reported a greater sense of academic competence. In addition, they reported a stronger feeling of attachment to the school and attended classes on a more regular basis. The students in the segregated setting also reported that they believed that their instructors and school officials were more vested in their success than did the students in the mainstream setting.

The characteristics, dispositions, and institutional support needed to create *environments of excellence* in schools can be best understood in the context of culturally responsive pedagogy. This philosophical approach can lead to the creation of learning spaces that are structured to value the contributions of all groups and inspire learners to excel academically (Gay, 2010).

Excellence generated by school-based practices: Culturally relevant teaching/pedagogy (CRP). One of the forerunners of the CRP movement, Boykin (1982), inspired conversation about culturally relevant pedagogy with a study examining learning styles and how a variation of styles can lead to higher academic achievement for African American students. Boykin tested 32 European American and 32 African

American students with the aim of investigating their response to a variation in stimulation in four areas. The European American students generally came from middle-class homes in Staten Island, NY, while all of the African American participants hailed from a working-class, low-income, multi-family housing project in Harlem. The identification of the areas from which the students came was important to the construction of the two major aims of the study.

First, Boykin predicted that, based on the preceding literature and his own observations, African American students would perform better when given a series of tasks that were varied constantly. Boykin also set out to examine the connection between the level of stimulation experienced in the homes of European American children and African American children. Based on survey results and prior research, Boykin concluded that the home life of African American children was generally "characterized by relatively high ambient noise levels, high household population density, and considerable and varied physical activity" (p. 471). Given this consideration, Boykin posited that immersion in such an environment would result in "heighten responsiveness to stimulus change" (p. 471), a hypothesis that suggests a strong link between a learner's home environment and the learner's preferred style of instruction.

After presenting the 8-year-olds in the study with a series of age appropriate tasks involving color-matching, listening, scanning, and schema-reproduction, Boykin found that the African American children performed significantly better on the tasks when they were varied. In addition, he found that there was a correlation between the increase in performance due to variation of task and the level of stimulation the children experienced at home.

Also supporting the idea that effective instructional approaches can be linked with the home environment is a study involving Latina/o students (McCullough & Ramirez, 2012). In order to "investigate how [pre service teachers'] participation in [a family-oriented science activity] affected their perceived ability to develop and teach culturally responsive science lessons/presentations to diverse student populations, (p. 445)" McCullough & Ramirez created a community based component to accompany the readings and discussions required in their teacher education course.

Working in an institution they called "University Science," the researchers targeted Latina/o families and invited them to engage in a day of science learning to be facilitated by the pre service education students. The pre service teachers created lessons that reflected the language and culture of Latina/o students and provided pamphlets and presentation boards in both Spanish and English. Before doing so, however, the pre service teachers took a survey in which they reported on a number of factors, including their confidence in working with minority students and their perceived competence in developing lessons that these students would find engaging and effective.

In order to allow the pre service teachers an opportunity to share the lessons they designed with students and their families, the researchers created what they describe as a "relaxed and enjoyable environment where everyone was dignified as important" (McCollough and Ramirez, 2012, p. 445) where small groups of family members and pre service teachers engaged in science learning activities. In this environment, pre service teachers led students and their families in engaging and hands-on explorations that related directly to their individual experiences. For example, one lesson focused on the health implication of diabetes, an issue with which many families involved in the study faced.

Pre service teachers investigated the causes of the illness, the foods that exacerbate the problem, and the effects of those foods on the body's organs. The instructors emphasized the importance of "bringing the science forward" (p.446) and using materials that were inexpensive and easily found so that families could continue the investigations at home.

After the lessons were created and presented, pre service teachers took the survey again. Results demonstrated that the pre service teachers reported (a) an increase in confidence in their ability to utilize culturally responsive pedagogy strategies, (b) an increase in confidence in their ability to engage elementary and middle school parents in science education, and (c) an increase in their perceived competence when presenting science lessons to students of Color.

Another important study highlighting the characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and how its implementation can lead to *environments of excellence* in schools is Ladson-Billings' (2009) study of eight successful teachers. Like the previous study, Ladson-Billings' work emphasized the importance of presenting curriculum that was reflective of the learners' culture, however, this study took the discussion away from the preparation field into the classrooms of experienced, practicing educators who were selected for participation in the study by nominations from African American parents. After conducting interviews and classroom observations, Ladson-Billings reported on the reasons that the teachers involved in this study had helped African American students achieve academic success.

Ladson-Billings found that the race of the teachers in her study was less important than the principles by which the teachers worked. In addition, the number of years the teachers had been teaching as well as the transformative experiences they

reported impacted the way they conducted themselves in the classroom. For instance, a number of the teachers reflected on their own education during the study and identified teachers that impacted them in indelible and positive ways. As a result, one teacher in particular commented that she adopted not only her favorite teacher's impeccable style of dress but his unwillingness to accept failure as an option.

All of the teachers in the study operated under the assumption that they were part of the community in which they taught and that their primary objective was to "dig knowledge of out of students" instead of fill them up with information (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 56), an approach that echoes Friere's (1970) endorsement of transformative teaching over the banking concept of teaching. In sum, the data demonstrated that the teachers incorporated five key concepts of CRP by (1) treating students as competent, (2) scaffolding them in acquiring new knowledge and skills, (3) keeping instruction as the focus of the classroom, (4) extending students' thinking and abilities, and (5) acknowledging that knowledge of the students must be as rich and in-depth as knowledge of the subject matter.

Research conducted by Cooper (2003) supported Ladson Billings' (2009) findings that the race of culturally relevant teachers was less important than the concepts they incorporated in helping African American students achieve academic excellence. After interviewing and observing the classrooms of three European American teachers who had been nominated for participation in the study by their administrators and parents of students of Color, Cooper found that many of the characteristics they exhibited mirrored those of successful African American teachers in the existing literature. For instance, the European American teachers demonstrated an explicit teaching style as well as "high

expectations for self" and "the ability to help children achieve" (p. 420). One major difference between the African American teachers represented in the literature and the European American teachers interviewed for this study, however, is that the European American teachers did not focus on race in the classroom at all. In Cooper's (2003) view, the failure to have this discussion marked a weakness in the teachers' ability to effectively educate the whole child, but it did not override the importance of the other positive attributes of these teachers.

Studies show that culturally relevant pedagogy has a positive impact on student achievement, involves high-energy teaching by caring and experienced teachers, and takes into account the reality that race and culture are mitigating factors in the way children process information (Gay, 2010). When considering the school context, one of the most important things educators and officials can do to create and sustain *environments of excellence* is to make a serious commitment to the tenets of CRP. Nevertheless, many African American students from low-income areas who attend schools that do not embrace CRP still achieve at high levels. These students succeed in spite of their school and by their own personal resilience, fortified and cultivated by the members of their networks of support (Long & Volk, 2010).

Excellence generated in spite of school-based practices: Resilience and networks of support. McGee and Martin's (2011) work, though deeply concerned with the environments that lead to excellence for marginalized students, turned the discussion away from factors outside the students' control and shined a spotlight squarely on the individual student. In a study of 23 successful African American college students, the researchers investigated what it meant to be African American and successful in the field

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of mathematics. Using an augmented life story interview format, McGee and Martin (2011) later narrowed their focus to one African American male, Rob, whose story revealed the unique insight and humor with which he dealt with racial issues during his journey toward a Ph.D. in applied mathematics. They found that resilience played a major role in his success, and although he experienced periods of discouragement and dejection in the face of racist practices, ultimately Rob returned to the principles of high academic performance instilled in him by his mother when he was young.

This study, in its analysis of personal identity and agency, challenges the notion that the answer to the education debt rests solely in the hands of school officials. The exclusive examination of teacher practice taken up by Ladson-Billings (2009), Haberman (1995) and others is incomplete because this body of research suggests that teachers and school officials alone are responsible for the educational journey of African American students. This perspective, though, fails to address the question of why some students succeed in the absence of teachers who acknowledge cultural difference. McGee and Martin's (2011) findings suggest that the establishment and maintenance of *environments of excellence* are ideally achieved through a semi-balanced approach consisting of both culturally relevant pedagogy and valuing the personal identity of learners with a larger portion of the responsibility for creating an *environment of excellence* resting on the school. Including personal responsibility in the discussion of excellence is not meant to blame families or students for their failure, nor is it an attempt to absolve schools of all responsibility. Instead it is a call for excellence in every area of the educational domain.

The consideration of the impact on achievement exerted by mothers, peers, family members, and other teachers in the lives of students is defined by Long and Volk (2010)

as networks of support. Not only can these other teachers be responsible for the creation of *environments of excellence* in homes and communities, but their influence can be so strong that even in their absence, their influence transmutes Eurocentric and sometimes hostile school environments into *environments of excellence* (Brain & Reid, 2003). This transformation is achieved through the individual student and the messages given to him/her in the community that replay themselves inside the student's head while in school (Nieto, 2010).

Robinson and Werblow (2012) investigated "the relationship Black mothers share with their sons and how these relationships influence the educational success of their sons" (p. 55). In so doing, the researchers purposefully set out to offer a counter narrative to the prevailing story that exists in the literature about single African American mothers which suggests that they do not care about their children's education (Payne, 1998). Robinson and Werblow (2012) found evidence to the contrary. Using a qualitative case study design, these researchers closely examined three of twenty-five themes that emerged from the data. They found that the single mothers who participated in the study, all of whom had sons in eleventh grade with a GPA of 3.0 or better, were willing to be involved in their child's education and had as their ultimate goal "turning their boys into successful men who could care for themselves" (p. 63). The mothers went about achieving this goal by finding mentors for their children, committing themselves to their children, and speaking to their sons directly about the importance of doing well in school. This was the case regardless of the educational level the mother had achieved.

Brody and Flor (1998) also investigated the impact of mothers on the academic success of African American students in their focus on the parenting practices of rural

single-parent families. The researchers conducted home visits to 156 homes of African American families in Georgia and found that the majority of the single mothers in the study were deeply religious. According to Brody and Flor, "greater maternal religiosity was related to more use of no-nonsense parenting, higher mother-child relationship quality, and more maternal involvement in the child's school" (p. 812). These findings suggest the attributes and personal preferences of members of the child's network of support can have a strong influence on the way the child views and engages in school.

Environments of excellence in schools can be created in a number of ways and are complex spaces of learning and teaching. The investigation of school life, however, is only the beginning of learning more about children of Color and their pathways to success. Communities also provide rich illustrations of the settings and dispositions that lead to *environments of excellence.*

Environments of Excellence in Homes and Communities

In this part of the review of literature, I conduct an investigation of *environments of excellence* in communities that explores the practices, dispositions, and characteristics of settings that support the interplay among home, community, and schools. Many home and community settings are contexts for excellence as youngsters are provided with vast opportunities and support for developing school-based literacies such as the reading and discussions of the Bible in homes and churches, and the use of print literacies to interact with institutions and government agencies (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Cushman, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Heath, 1983; McCarty, 2002; Gonzalez, et al., 2004; Gregory et al, 2004; Purcell-Gates, 1996). The following paragraphs provide a review of literature documenting *environments of excellence* in home and community settings.

Current contexts of excellence in homes and communities. Further

demonstrating the social nature of literacy development and the power of teaching and

learning that occur in homes and communities, a wide range of studies provide

ethnographic descriptions of youth and their families as they engage in literacy practices

at home. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) conducted one of the first such ethnographic

studies examining the practices of five families living in a low-income community. They

found that literate practices such as reading and writing were being used in a variety of

contexts for a variety of purposes. For instance, family members used literacy to keep

lists, navigate the bureaucracy of institutions, explore the world around them, read the

Bible and other stories, and write personal journals. In addition, members of these

families read magazines, recipes, and directories and helped children with homework on

a regular basis. This study challenged the idea that urban families do not engage in

literacy practices in the home and also demonstrated the rich diversity of families in low-

income communities. For instance, findings demonstrated that some families placed a

strong emphasis on reading picture books, while others did not, further supporting the

idea that there is no one right description of families living in low income areas (Taylor

& Dorsey-Gaines, 1997). In the final analysis, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) asserted

that literacy development takes place not only in schools, but in homes and communities

as well.

In addition to research that documented the nature and significance of literacy

practices amongst families in low-income communities, other scholars compared the

literacy practices of low-income families and their middle-class counterparts. In her

study, Heath (1983) observed the literacy growth of children of different socioeconomic

and racial groups in the Carolinas. Heath's data and conclusions defied the idea that families from different ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic classes approach literacy learning in identical ways by noting that children of Color living in low-income areas in the study were kept close to adults and were integrated into the fabric of family life. This is to say that small children were not allowed to wander off from their parents. Instead, children sat in the room while adults talked but were not generally invited into the conversation. Very young children were carried from room to room in the arms of caregivers as they performed household tasks such as cooking meals or hanging laundry on a clothesline to dry.

The European American working-class and middle-class children in the study, by contrast, were taught how to answer direct questions, label items in their environment, and engage in conversations with adults as equals. Heath concluded that the way the children used language should be viewed as having been "issued from contrasting, deeply held beliefs on the nature of childhood, childrearing, and community life" (p. 348). Heath also concluded that the African American children in the study faced a world that was vastly different from their own when they entered school, which brought a "sudden flood of discontinuities in the ways people talk, the values they hold, and the consistency with which the rewards go to some and not others" (p. 348). When rewards are handed out to some students and not others, questions arise about whether the purpose of schools is to educate students or affirm parents.

Valdés (1996) and other researchers who have written ethnographic portrayals of Mexican American (Monzo, 2010), Chinese (Li, 2010), and other families of Color found that the discontinuities between the structure of school and the structure of home life

referenced by Heath are not unique to African American children. Many scholars in this field (e.g., Hill 2009; Kinloch 2011; Nieto, 2010) maintain that students of Color who fail to succeed in school suffer not because they are victims of poor parenting, but because they experience a form of culture shock when their school environments fail to validate, recognize, or celebrate their ways of being.

Heath's (1983) work compared the literacy development and communicative style of children from different socioeconomic and racial groups, and subsequently a number of scholars and researchers have conducted studies that bring to light the ways that cultural values and the differences in families impact a child's educational experience (Compton-Lilly, 2003, Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey Gaines, 1988). Lareau (2011) noted that parenting styles are an important aspect of the discussion and argued that middle-class parents often engage in "concerted cultivation," a process by which parents apprentice their children into the middle-class by engaging in literacy practices and activities that are unique to the middle-class. For example, the middle-class parents in Laraeu's (2011) study explicitly taught children how to question authority figures, a practice that is strongly discouraged in some low-income homes where obedience to authority is an important value. In the working-class families studied, children were given directives, and they were expected to comply without complaint or further explanation. In her study of Mexican American families, Valdes (1996) found that strongly held cultural values like obedience to authority, work ethic, and family networks conflicted with the style of teaching in the classroom.

In terms of parenting styles, Lareau (2011) confirmed Heath's (1983) assertion that parents of students of Color and classroom teachers often value different approaches.

This disparity can lead to misunderstandings, a breakdown in communication, and hostile feelings between teachers and parents. Lareau (2011) also found that in her study, the disparities between home and school were based more on socio-economic class than race. African American and European American middle-class children exhibited many of the same traits which resulted from their parents' concerted cultivation. Children in the study from low-income communities, however, exercised more control over their own schedules and spent more time interacting with friends.

These studies provide a multi-faceted view of literacy use in the homes of culturally and linguistically diverse families. In addition, they shine a light on the vast array of purposes for which literacy is used in low-income communities, dispelling the myth that literacy is only valued in middle-class and affluent homes. In sum, every learner comes to school having utilized literacy in ways prescribed by the contexts in which he or she lived. This body of work recommends that greater effort is made by schools to connect to homes to explore the potential for leading to higher academic achievement for students who have been historically unsuccessful in schools. However, as discussed in the following section, the literature also posits that serious obstacles exist that impede the facilitation of a stronger connection between home and school.

The Mis-Alignment of Home, Community and School Practices

The mis-alignment of the practices utilized in communities and in schools has been a topic of interest for a number of researchers who are concerned with social and academic equity and who suggest ways that schools can pay their education debt to marginalized students (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Dickar, 2008; Haight, 2002; Hecht, Ribeau and Alberts, 1989; Hill, 2009; Mahari, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 2000; Walker 1996). The

areas of communicative patterns and parent-teacher relationships are key to the concerns of these researchers.

Communicative patterns. In order to achieve the alignment of home and schools the issue of language use must be addressed. Phillips (1983) addressed this issue of language use in her study of four first and sixth Oregon classrooms, two of which were in a school on a Native American reservation and two of which were in a nearby predominantly European American school. In addition to classroom observations, Phillips observed students in community settings and events that took place outside school. Relying on ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, Phillips (1983) collected data concerning the ways in which teachers interacted with students in this classroom. Primary attention was given to the linguistic styles employed including the types of questions asked and the pattern of these questions. After observing children and adults interacting on the Native American reservation as well as interactions between European American children and parents, Phillips (1983) found that a significant disparity existed. According to Phillips (1983), children who lived on the Native American reservation developed a verbal speaking style that was much different from that of their teachers, a concept that had also been a key finding of Heath's (1983) research. By the time the children entered school, their socialization into their particular language community was all but complete.

This study suggests that a firm understanding of the communication patterns that exist in various cultures is an important component of the successful teacher's repertoire. Without this knowledge, miscommunication between teachers and students and teachers and parents can be rampant. When these disparities are addressed, however, speakers can

make allowances for each other's cultural preferences and agreement can be more easily achieved (Delpit, 1995).

The cultural preferences of language users was also a factor when written texts were considered. Ball (1992) studied the communication patterns of African American adolescents with special attention to the shift from informal language to academic language required in written displays of classroom knowledge. This study drew heavily on a previous study conducted by Ball (1991) in which she named three patterns of organization that might emerge in the expository language of African American students: circumlocution, narrative interspersion, and recursion. The circumlocution pattern was described as "a series of implicitly associated topics with shifts that are lexically marked only by the use of *and"* (Ball, 1992). Although this pattern may sound like a random set of ideas with no cohesive element, Ball (1992) describes in detail the logic and order inherent in the communication. For instance, she interviewed a student that talked first about a trip to Mexico would have liked to take, but could not because she had not yet earned a license. Finally, the student talked about the hours she had to work during the summer in order earn money. These three seemingly disconnected thoughts can all be traced back to the overarching theme of summer. Ball made this implicit connection explicit through the use of linguistic analysis.

 The narrative interspersion pattern was characterized by embedding narratives into expository speech or writing. Ball (1992) noted that "the use of this pattern in the expository writing of many African American students differed from the use of a narrative as an example or as a kind of evidence in the academically accepted mainstream

pattern" (p. 511). This difference led to lower achievement for African American students in the area of expository speaking and writing.

The recursion pattern can be defined as one in which the speaker discusses a topic and then expands on that topic using a variety of different images or words. According to Ball (1992), the writing and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King and other African American preachers exemplify this pattern in that they contain significant statements such as "no wave of racism can stop us" and go on to repeat these ideas a number of times in order to drive the point home.

During the study, Ball (1992) taught these patterns along with two mainstream academic-based organizational patterns to a group of one hundred two students from five urban classrooms. Participants were both male and female and represented a wide range of ethnic groups and academic levels. Her research questions were (a) What organizational patterns did students from varying ethnic backgrounds say they preferred? and (b) How successful were these students at identifying organizational patterns?

Using short passages that were based on topics of high interest to the students as indicated in a survey, Ball (1992) asked students to identify the organizational pattern of each piece. She found that none of the students had trouble identifying the organizational structure of the piece, however, "all students reported a preference for using the vernacular based organizational patterns when completing conversational tasks" (p. 517). One hundred percent of the African American students preferred vernacular-based organizational styles when completing writing tasks as well, but some students from other ethnic backgrounds chose the mainstream academic-based organizational structures as their preference. According to Ball (1992), this study suggested that attention to the

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shift into formal writing in the classroom might be better facilitated by the inclusion of African American students' preferred writing style into academic settings. The introduction of formal writing could then be seen by the students as an addition to the style in which they were most comfortable.

Parent-teacher relationships. Also relevant to the discussion about aligning home and school practices is the perceptions that parents and teachers hold in regard to their roles and responsibilities in terms of children's education. Although the importance of parents' involvement in children's schooling has been well documented (Edwards & Turner, 2010; Gonzalez et. al, 2002; Allen, 2007) schools struggle to find meaningful ways to include parents of backgrounds different from the dominant culture of the school because home cultures are not understood, appreciated or validated (Botelho et al, 2010; Dantas & Coleman, 2010; Long & Volk, 2010; Nieto; 2010).

For example, Valdes (1996), in her study involving ten Mexican immigrant families, noted that early attempts to connect with the Mexican American community have not been widely successful because the efforts of practitioners have not taken into account the lived experiences of the families and their communities. After years of observation and interviewing, Valdes (1996) described the ways that the participant went about their daily routines and prepared their children for life as contributing and self-supporting adults. She found that teachers often expect parents to be their helpers at home, an idea that sometimes completely disregards the values and lessons that parents teach their students culturally. When asked, Mexican American parents in Valdes's study routinely expressed respect for education and said that they want their children to excel in school, but often times these parents were not familiar with the way American schools

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worked and did not possess the knowledge, money and confidence to contribute to the school in the ways that some European American, middle-class parents did. Because of their immigrant status, some Mexican-American parents in Valdes's work were less likely to be successful fundraisers and did not have teachers in their social network, leaving them in the dark about the nuances of parent-teacher associations.

Edwards and Turner (2010) conducted a study involving African American parents of children in a middle school that was experiencing academic challenges. Many of the students at the school were Latina/o or African American, so these parents represented a statistical majority in terms of school population, However, the teachers in the school, much like the teachers across the United States, were predominantly European American (Nieto, 2010; Picower, 2009), and school officials came to realize that tensions between teachers and parents were growing. To address this concern, the principal contacted Edwards who had previously written a book about parent-teacher relations. During their initial meeting the principal expressed a desire to have parents share their stories with teachers.

The researchers then worked with the school's parent consultant who served as a liaison between parents and teachers. It was through this informant that Edwards and Turner (2010) contacted African American and invited them to speak about their experiences with the school. They found that parents consistently shared stories that addressed four major themes: (1) about the depth of their care for their children and their education; (2) concern that their children had already been through so much; (3) the need for parents and teachers to trust each other and (4) the desire to have teachers work with them. These findings indicated a desire on the part of parents to partner with teachers in

the support of children. The stories that parents shared also gave school officials insight into ways that welcoming invitations could be extended to African American parents.

The very definition of the term "parental involvement" was the central question of Brain and Reid's (2003) study which involved an evaluation of a group of schools known as the Education Action Zone. The parental involvement project conducted inside the Zone consisted of nine primary schools, one Early Excellence Centre and one secondary school. The researchers conducted a case study of this project after it had been in operation for nine months, utilizing a variety of methods including participant observations, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of records.

Brain and Reid (2003) found that there was a disparity in the way that various educational stakeholders defined parental involvement. One group of respondents who were school administrators described parent involvement as anything that had to do with contacting parents. Most educators were in agreement that school involvement would increase student achievement, but, as the researchers pointed out in their discussion of the data, there is little empirical evidence to support that claim. Key findings of this study demonstrated that although the schools' stated aims involved incorporating parents into the fabric and structure of school life, in actuality none of the schools included the input of parents into their governing or design of the parent involvement project. Initial documents portrayed parents as poorly educated and lacking in the ability to ensure children's academic success.

These findings suggest that the practices of communities and schools can only be aligned when parents are viewed as true partners in the educational journey of children. According and Brain and Reid (2003) programs to include parents must be built on a

philosophical foundation of equity and respect. These findings further suggest that schools must study their current attempts to reach out to parents and identify and remove barriers to increased parental participation.

Conclusion to the Review of Related Literature

There is a wealth of research to suggest that *environments of excellence*—places where students of various backgrounds and experiences achieve educational and personal success--- exist in both home and community settings as well as school settings and are characterized in school settings by the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and by the influence of personal resilience and networks of support. *Environments of excellence* in homes and communities draw on traditions that can serve as exemplars for teaching and learning today. Finally, the literature demonstrates the potential for the alignment of home, community and school practices in the areas of language, parent and teacher roles, and learning experiences that are relevant to learners' lives.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The major ideas, theories, and concepts framing this study include sociocultural approaches and critical sociocultural theory. My study dictates a close examination of learners as they negotiate challenges and solve problems in their day to day experiences, making a sociocultural stance appropriate. In addition, the critical component of the theoretical frame requires a consideration of power structures, race, and social class and how these factors impact the learning opportunities that are available to individuals. With these thoughts in mind, I will address a pilot study that I conducted that shaped the methodological decisions I have made for my dissertation research.

Pilot Study

The semester prior to conducting this dissertation study, I conducted a pilot study in order to determine the feasibility of my dissertation research. This report of findings from the pilot study provides insight and background to the rest of this chapter. The research questions guiding the pilot study were: (1) What are the pedagogies currently being utilized by young African American mothers living in a low-income community in the rural south? (2) How are these mothers' pedagogical practices linked to their life histories as learners? (3) How are the mothers making meaning of the world around them, and how do written texts play a role in that meaning making? (4) What is the relationship

between the mothers' literacy practices and events and the funds of knowledge (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986) their children bring to school? I wanted to conduct this pilot study because I have been intrigued by the disparity between the literacy achievement of European American students and African American students since my days as an undergraduate English Education major. My concern over this glaring difference ultimately led me to become a high school English teacher. This concern is also part of the reason that I started *Freedom Readers*. Although I fully understood that one group of students was not inherently more intelligent than the other, I had not identified the factors leading to the gap in achievement between African American students and European American students. National statistics (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009) as well as literature I encountered during my graduate studies (Southern Education Foundation, 2010) suggested that poverty and low rates of parental involvement both played a role in the difference in literacy achievement between racial and ethnic groups. I later came to the understanding that although many have tried to offer simplistic explanations, the education debt is complicated and multifaceted. This initial knowledge, however, along with my own experiences as a student within the public educational system helped me generate research questions for the pilot study and form a foundation for further exploration.

The pilot study took place from August, 2011, through December 2011, in the context of an after school literacy program and non-profit organization known as *Freedom Readers*. I developed this program during the first year of my doctoral studies after having spent six years as a high school English teacher. After I left the classroom, I was asked to return as a long term substitute for a class of seniors whose teacher had

taken maternity leave. Despite the fact that she had been gone for five weeks, the school had not found a suitable replacement. That meant that these students were being "taught" by a substitute every day. I was called after the students talked the situation over and sent two representatives to the principal demanding that he do his job and find a suitable teacher to help them finish their Senior Projects, a multi-genre research paper and presentation , the successful completion of which determined whether students graduated.

I was moved by the agency exhibited by the students, about half of whom were African American, so I signed on to take the class. The students and I bonded quickly, and I enjoyed my time with them, however, I left the building every day troubled. There were too many students in that class who struggled to write one coherent paragraph. Reading ability was also low. One of the most memorable students in the class, Stephanie, was the African American seventeen-year-old mother a two-year-old son. As I tried to help her complete the school wide requirements for the Senior Project, I noticed that her writing skills were in need of improvement. It was obvious to me that she had been passed along for many years by teachers who failed to do their jobs. She sat before me, a senior in high school, without having been prepared to seek and acquire the kind of job she would need to provide a comfortable existence for herself and her son. It did not take me long to realize that her teachers were guilty of what I call educational malpractice and offered to tutor her outside of school for free. She refused my offer, saying that if she had gotten along fine so far, she would be alright.

I have never forgotten Stephanie. It was her story that convinced me that school systems were failing their students and something had to be done. As a result, six years later I developed *Freedom Readers* in order to assist families in reaching literacy goals

for their children as I implemented theories and strategies that I learned while completing my coursework. Participants, one of whom was also a participant in the dissertation study, included two African American mothers, Freeda Phillips and Shameka Ballinger whose children attended weekly Freedom Readers sessions offered in the community center of the low-income community where they lived. Freeda and Shameka were both between the ages of 25 and 30. The interviews and observations took place at the Gardners Corners community center, in Freeda and Shameka's homes, during a church service, and during the Freedom Readers program.

During the pilot study, I conducted one hour-long group interview with both mothers and then spent the bulk of my time conducting observations and interviews in Freeda's home. I kept field notes in my weekly journal where I recorded Freeda's reactions to my questions as well as my feelings, reactions, and interpretations regarding this initial attempt at employing ethnographic methods in Freeda's home. I conducted a pattern analysis (Graue & Walsh, 1998) to construct categories that were reoccurring.

This study's findings surprised me in some ways and confirmed my hypotheses in others. One finding indicated that the mothers involved in the study appeared to have a systematic approach to their parenting. This approach appeared to be based on the mothers' experiences as children. A second finding demonstrated that although Freeda and Shameka were not working outside the home, they seemed to be highly skilled in a number of areas, and that (a) some of their knowledge would possibly be considered valuable in traditional classrooms and (b) and other knowledge would not. For example, Freeda seemed to know a great deal about technology and had begun taking classes in this field at a local technical college, which came as a surprise to me because I was

unaware that some residents of the public housing community were college students. Despite Freeda's extensive knowledge in this area, she told me that she had never been invited to share that knowledge at her daughter's school, but she did observe her sharing her skill with her daughters in the home. She also seemed to be a skilled cook, and passed her knowledge along to her children by allowing them to help her in the kitchen.

After the implementation of the pilot study, I began the research that this dissertation describes. The opportunity to conduct a prior study gave me insights that informed the development of the interview questions and observation techniques used in the second study. For instance, my method of interviewing evolved greatly. During the pilot study I was able to hone and fine tune my approach to conducting interviews. My initial thought was that I needed to assume a detached posture and conduct highly structured interviews in order to avoid contaminating the data. After learning more about the subjective nature of qualitative data collection methods and after several meetings with Freeda, however, I realized that a less formal approach would lead to a more authentic sharing of ideas and insights. Because of this realization, I began to share some of my own stories with Freeda and employed a few planned engagements such as the creation of *Me Boxes* and *Community Maps* (Long & Volk, 2010). I learned about these and other activities which are used to facilitate the sharing of stories during a doctoral course. Although these planned engagements were enjoyable for me, they seemed to take Freeda back to a classroom mindset where she viewed me as an authority figure. After realizing that the planned engagements may have been intimidating, I decided to discard them in favor of less intrusive observation and interview strategies. I was able to collect the richest and most insightful data during the times when Freeda and I engaged in

informal chats guided by my prepared questions; therefore, I chose to use this approach during my dissertation study as well.

I also discovered that the types of questions I asked during the pilot study did not always lead to the data in which I was interested. Because of our work together at *Freedom Readers,* Freeda and I sometimes discussed aspects of the program instead of her role as the primary teacher in her children's lives. As a result, the questions I prepared for participants in the dissertation study were carefully crafted and strategically aligned with the research questions.

In addition, the outcomes of the pilot study led me to make important decisions about the types of participants I included in the dissertation study. I discovered that Freeda had a strong desire to see her children succeed, but I still was not able to discover what school-based obstacles might prevent her children from becoming high achievers in literacy. This led me to make an important addition to my dissertation study, the inclusion of two focus groups and individual interviews with teachers at the school the participants' children attend and teachers who knew the children from the *Freedom Readers* program. The voices of the teachers, who were predominantly middle-class and European American, alongside the insights gained from African American mothers living in a low-income community allowed me to examine issues of race and class while sharing stories from each context.

Finally, the fact that I walked away from the pilot study with only partial answers to my research questions led me to design a dissertation study that would include an in-depth examination of two families instead of one, as during the pilot study I focused my attention on Freeda. I made this methodological decision because I wanted to discover if

what I perceived to be Freeda's ambition and high expectations for her children would also be evident in other families living in the Gardners Corners community.

The Dissertation Study: Methodology

Guided by data from the pilot study described above, I developed the design for the study that was the focus of this dissertation. The research questions were:

- In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence*, or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support student academic success?

- What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live in this low-income community who benefit from an *environment of excellence* in their home?

- What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participant families and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home, community, and school practices in support of marginalized children?

I borrowed elements the ethnographic case study design which drew on ethnographic methods because these methods allowed for a contextualized and in-depth treatment of the research questions. In the following paragraphs, I explain my methodological stance, provide information about participants in the study, describe the contexts in which the study took place, and detail the methods I used to collect data. I also describe how I organized and stored data, methods of analysis, and the steps I took to ensure that my data were trustworthy and rigorously collected. Finally, this section will address my

subjectivity/positionality, ethical issues, limitations of the study, and a specific timeline for the study.

Rationale: Methodological Stance

Qualitative methods. I chose to employ qualitative research methods because this approach allowed me to collect data that made evident the social and cultural lives of the study's participants. In addition, the critical component of my study, which calls for an analysis of power structures, also fits well with the tenets of qualitative research because societal structures can be deeply understood through the analysis of interview and observation data involving people who hold power and people who do not. In the following paragraphs, I will offer a definition of this genre and address the broad spectrum of methodological approaches that fall within the qualitative research domain.

Introduction to qualitative research. Maxwell (2005) concludes the greatest strength of qualitative research is its focus on "specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers (p. 22)." To be sure, qualitative research and methodology allow the researcher to hone in on the specific nuances and peculiarities of a case which could encompass any number of phenomena including a decision, individual, process, program or event. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) support Maxwell's idea that qualitative methods emphasize people rather than numbers, and they go on to further characterize the genre: "Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters. A complex interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions surround the term qualitative research (p. 2)." Considering that qualitative methods have been so widely adopted in such various and far reaching areas as education, community development, health sciences and social work, it

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is safe to assume that this method is meeting the needs of and gaining popularity amongst a growing number of researchers. Because of this significant contribution to social science and to my dissertation study in particular, the field of qualitative methods receives extensive consideration in this section.

What is qualitative research? According to Rossman and Rallis (2003) there are several very distinct characteristics of qualitative research and the researchers who utilize this approach. The authors posit that this type of research (1) is enacted in naturalistic setting, (2) draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study, (3) focuses on context, (4) is emergent and evolving, and (5) is fundamentally interpretive. Since the qualitative researcher is the only instrument of data collection, these traits dictate that the researcher possess certain attributes such as the ability to remain aware of his or her personal identity as research studies are conducted and the ability to view the world and phenomena holistically and within particular contexts (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 8,10). Based on this definition, one can safely conclude that this field encompasses a wide range of methods of inquiry and is a "broad approach to the study of social phenomena" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) that allows researchers to engage in the analysis and interpretation of contexts, not just isolated events and people.

Types of qualitative research. Within the genre of qualitative methods there are a number of ways that research can be carried out. Duke and Mallette (2011) provide an extensive exploration of many types of literacy research methodologies, among them being discourse analysis, content analysis, historical research, narrative approaches, and ethnography. Discourse analysis, is a close study of the words used by research participants and how the arrangement and choice of words can suggest deeper meanings.

Morrell (2008) and others have conducted in-depth studies utilizing this approach. Content analysis, exemplified in the work of Marshall (2004) and Ross (2008), has been used to analyze such language offerings as book responses, student writing, and teachers' role in scaffolding classroom discussion (Hoffman et al, 2011). Monaghan (1991) utilized historical research to examine the literacy practices of early Americans. Narrative approaches have been made popular by Hankins (2003) and others who use story telling techniques as a means of understanding social phenomena. Finally, ethnography has allowed literacy researchers like Heath (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) to depict the ways that literacy operates as a social practice.

Of the numerous and varied types of qualitative research, ethnography was most attractive to me. While I did not conduct an ethnography, I was drawn to this approach because of its emphasis on the knowledge that people have acquired that in turn structures their worldview and their behavior (Merriam, 2002), in particular their knowledge of and actions toward literacy development in their families. As I conducted the current study, I utilized some ethnographic methods. Those methods are delineated in the following paragraphs.

What is ethnography? Ethnography can be described as "the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p 1). Ethnographic researchers seek to achieve an intense level of immersion into a society in order to fully understand it. The first step in this process is gaining entry to a social setting and becoming acquainted with the people there. For example, to achieve this goal, a researcher might join the religious group under study or assume an assigned and specific position in a village. Ethnographers go to these great lengths because

ethnography requires attention to the smallest details of people's lives in an effort to provide context for decisions they make and ways in which cultural practices are performed. Once the ethnographer has gained entry into the social setting, a systematic process of recording what is observed while participating in daily activities ensues. These two intertwined activities -- full participation in an initially unfamiliar world and the documentation of what is observed during that participation -- are the center of all ethnographic research (Emerson et al, 1995).

To capture the essence of this methodology, LeCompte and Schensul (1999) offer seven characteristics that help define and differentiate it from others: (1) natural settings, not laboratories are the environments used, (2) intimate interactions are required, (3) participants' behaviors and perspectives are reflected accurately, (4) recursive and inductive data collection and analytical strategies are employed, (5) sociopolitical and historical contexts are taken into account, (6) multiple data sources, including both quantitative, and qualitative, are employed, and (7) culture is used as a lens through which to interpret data. Many of these characteristics overlap with the attributes of qualitative research in general. Although a number of similarities exist between qualitative research and ethnographies, not all qualitative research can be considered ethnography due to ethnography's rootedness in the concept of culture (Purcell-Gates, 2011).

Furthermore, it is important to note that although literacy researchers may approach ethnographies from a number of angles, there are agreed upon elements that all ethnographic researchers must consider in order to ensure rigor and reliability of final interpretations. First, trustworthiness, or whether the data actually reflect what is going

on in the naturalistic setting, must be taken into account. Next, credibility must be considered. In order to conduct reliable studies, researchers should spend enough time in the field to ensure that behavioral patterns are truly being observed. This practice helps to diminish the likelihood of the researcher seeing only what was expected from the outset (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

In addition, Purcell-Gates (2011) explains that ethnography can provide a window into little-known areas of literacy research:

> If done appropriately, the results, or outcomes, of ethnographies provide critical understandings of language and literacy in situ. They offer hitherto unknown maps and perspectives on literacy learning and development, without which teachers and researchers would be operating more or less blindly, in the dark, as they plan for and implement instructional strategies that "should" work according to other research paradigms. (p. 135)

With the aim of improving literacy instruction, ethnographic literacy researchers provide descriptions that allow readers to visualize the spaces and places in which literacy development happen. This detailed record can provide insight into the influences and environments that promote or hinder a learner's success in school.

Ethnography and the current study. The study described in this dissertation is not an ethnography, however, certain ethnographic methods were utilized. To be specific, I afforded special attention to the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, conducted the research in naturalistic settings, used culture as a lens to interpret data, engaged in intimate, face-to-face interactions, and documented what I observed during that participation. The current study is not an ethnography because I was not embedded in the field as a researcher for an extended period of time and did not completely immerse myself into the social setting of the participants.

Trustworthiness and credibility. The current study was conducted after two and a half years of spending time in low-income communities working with African American family members and their children. At the time that the study began, I had not only completed a pilot study in that community but had also conducted two unofficial pilot studies in a neighboring low-income community. In all, I have interviewed, observed, and participated in the lives of five mothers with backgrounds similar to the two participants of the current study. In each of these cases, I collected and analyzed data and wrote about these findings in papers assigned by professors in my doctoral program. I intentionally laid this groundwork in order to ensure that my sensibilities as the research instrument would be fine-tuned. This extended amount of time in the field increased the trustworthiness and reliability of the current study.

Naturalistic setting. I spent time with mothers and family members in places and spaces they would normally frequent, such as their living rooms, front porches, churches, and *Freedom Readers* meetings. I spent time with teachers in classrooms where they held weekly meetings after school. One meeting with teachers was held at the county library. Ten of the eleven interactions were dictated by the schedules and preferences of the participants.

Culture as a lens to interpret data. Milner (2012) defines culture as "a group of people who possess and share deep-rooted connections such as values, beliefs, languages, customs, norms, and history (p. 10)." As I collected and analyzed data, I took into account not only the shared deep-rooted connections of the participants, but also the historical implications of their current situations. The data were not considered to be isolated from the contexts, both societal and personal, in which they were collected.

Intimate interactions. The majority of the data were collected as a result of face-to-face interviews and observations. A small percentage of the data were collected from text messages and exchanges on Facebook. The intimate encounters I had with participants allowed me to detail aspects of the *environments of excellence* in communities that lead to success in school.

Just as ethnographic research falls within the field of qualitative methodology, case study research is also found in that domain. Although a variety of research approaches utilize some ethnographic methods, case study is one distinct and unique genre of research that can be ethnographic in nature. The study described in this dissertation utilized some ethnographic methods and can also be considered case study research. In the follow section I will define case study research and explain how its methods were employed in the current study.

What is case study research? To begin the discussion of how best to define case study research, consider what case study research is not. Case study research has been confused with single study design -- an experimental approach which takes into account the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable -- and cases that are used to help educators understand practice, but are not empirical research studies. Both are valuable, but they fail to meet the standards outlined by case study experts such as Merriam (1988), Yin (2009) and Stake (2000). According to Yin (2003):

> The case study is but one of several ways of doing social science research. Other ways include experiments, surveys, histories, and the analysis of archival information. Each strategy has peculiar advantages and disadvantages, depending on three conditions: (a) the type of research question, (b) the control an investigator has over actual behavioral events, and (c) the focus on contemporary as opposed to historical phenomena. (p. 1)

Despite the ways in which research is conducted, none is infallible. Yin maintains that case studies can be better suited for social science research because they are intended to give rich descriptions of particular situations that can then be instructive in other settings. He refers to this as "generalizability toward theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p.10). In other words, the body of research that suggests certain theoretical similarities, properties and attributes in individual cases is enhanced whenever an experiment or case study is conducted, but neither can be relied upon to represent whole groups of people or determine the frequency with which an event will take place in the future. The choice of method and design must be based on the type of question the research sets out to answer and the nature of the problem under investigation. To answer questions about how or why a phenomenon occurs in its natural setting, case studies are recommended, and qualitative methods allow the researcher to contextualize the findings.

According to Merriam (1988), case study research is never experimental and is always descriptive. Stake (2000) and Yin (2009) add that case study research focuses on one unique and holistic system such as a child, a classroom, a school, or a parent. Merriam identifies four attributes of case study research that aid the understanding of this genre: Case study research is (1) particularistic in that it focuses on a particular situation, program, phenomenon or event, (2) descriptive in that the researcher gathers rich description of the object of study (3) heuristic in that it enhances understanding of the phenomena, and (4) inductive in that the data dictate the final interpretations that emerge from the study (Merriam, 1998, p.16).

Case study research is also conducted for three major purposes. Stake (2000) outlines these purposes as follows: The purpose of the research is (1) intrinsic in that the researcher is not attempting to building theory, but is merely seeking a better understanding of a case, (2) instrumental in that the case itself is a tool for understanding a larger issue, and (3) collective in that researchers may examine many cases in the quest to better understand a phenomena. Wolcott (1994) argued against this last purpose claiming that the use of multiple studies suggested a kind of attempt to simulate quantitative research, while Miles and Huberman (1994) claimed that the use of multiple cases leads to a stronger and more convincing body of evidence. I agree with Miles and Huberman (1994) that multiple cases strengthen the researcher's argument and have thus elected to include two cases in this study.

Case study and the current work. This qualitative study borrowed elements of ethnographic multiple-case study methodology, which has been used in a number of high profile studies where researchers want to "explore individuals or organizations, simple though complex interventions, relationships, communities or programs" (Yin, 2002, p. 5). Merriam (2002) defines ethnographic case study as "focusing on the sociocultural interpretations of a particular cultural group" (p. 179).The goal is not to provide a complete record of every event that transpired during the data collection period, but to establish a portrait of a particular setting so that further discussion and debate may ensue. Researchers have turned to multiple-case designed with more frequency over the years for a number of reasons. First, the expansive nature of the evidence presented makes the researcher's argument more convincing. It is one thing to present a single case that may be a simple anomaly or isolated occurrence, but it is quite another to present two or more

cases that have similar or quite disparate results. Multiple-case study design, however, generally requires a substantial investment in time and resources which has been cited as a limitation to this approach (Yin, 2003).

The study described in this dissertation is a multiple-case study adding to the robust nature of the overall study. Multiple-case study design is appropriate because the type of questions I investigated asked how *environments of excellence* in homes are constructed and how teachers perceive students who benefit from these environments. In addition, I began this study with an examination of two distinct cases—two *environments of excellence* -- that shared characteristics, but were also different in important ways. The collective nature of this research paints a more rich and nuanced portrait of the community than would a single case study.

This multiple-case study drew on ethnographic methods and investigated the ways in which *environments of excellence* were demonstrated in a low-income community and classroom teachers' perceptions about what constitutes an *environment of excellence*.

Background to the Study

My entrée into the community in which this study was conducted took place through the program I developed, *The Freedom Readers Afterschool Literacy Program* which met (and continues to meet) at the community center in the Gardners Corners community on Monday afternoons for ninety minutes. I designed and implemented *Freedom Readers* in 2010 after years of demonstrating and implementing culturally responsive pedagogy strategies as an educational consultant in urban school districts. The program exists in order to support parents in this and other nearby low-income areas as they assist their children in achieving their academic goals in literacy. Twenty students in

grades kindergarten through fifth were chosen on a first come-first served basis and are currently enrolled in the program in Gardners Corners. Because the *Freedom Readers* staff has conducted door-to-door canvassing events at Gardners Corners, I have been able to meet many of the residents and have been invited inside many homes. There are three other *Freedom Readers* sites offering services to twenty children each. Each of these sites offers three sessions each year: a spring session, a summer session, and a fall session, each approximately 6-12 weeks long. The weekly gatherings of tutors and young scholars at each site are referred to as "meetings." There are approximately twenty adults who work one-to-one as literacy tutors at each site.

The organization is funded by donations from local businesses and individuals as well as grants from larger entities like Target and United Way. The funding situation has fluctuated over the three years since the organization has been in existence, and the Board of Directors is working toward stabilized fundraising practices so that staff can be hired and the program can be extended.

Literacy volunteers, including the second group of teachers I interviewed, are trained by professionals such as university literacy professors and doctoral students on topics such as finding the appropriate book, keeping the scholar focused and engaged, and tips for working with young scholars in reading. Training meetings also focus on aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy and the expectations of parents who live in Gardners Corners. A group of these parents, known as the Community Action Board, meet regularly to discuss criteria for tutors, and they have made presentations of these criteria along with their expectations at training meetings.

One of the first training meetings was conducted by University of South Carolina Language and Literacy Professor, Diane DeFord, who shared techniques used in the remedial reading program for primary students, *Reading Recovery*, (Clay, 2000). Dr. DeFord discussed topics such as praising the child's approximation of words when the child does not pronounce each word correctly. Since the early days of establishing basic reading guidelines for tutors, training meetings have expanded to include discussions of what it means to be culturally responsive. Tutors read and discuss excerpts from books written by such culturally responsive researchers as Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Delpit (2002). During a tutor's first training meeting, they are told what to expect, and they are given background on the organization.

The mid-session training meeting gives tutors opportunities to share their unique experiences, ask for advice on how to help their specific young scholar improve in reading and how to situate the reading and writing in the lives of the young scholars. Importantly, tutors have are also encouraged to read and discuss *Many Families, Many Literacies* (Taylor, 1997) which assists them in understanding and avoiding the deficit thinking that has routinely plagued family literacy programs. For instance, a number of family literacy programs claim to teach parents and family members how to help their children with reading without acknowledging the ways that parents help their children with literacy before they ever enter school.

Team Leaders give short presentations on various topics such as the use of graphic organizers, reader response journals, and debates, all of which can be employed by tutors during the 45 minute one-to-one reading time. Tutors who work with younger scholars are given some guidance in how to vary activities so that scholars stay engaged.

Training is offered twice during each 6-12 week session during a three hour meeting for tutors only, and every tutor is strongly encouraged to read a handbook offering support for literacy tutors. *Help America Read* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1997) advises tutors on a number of topics, including how they should prepare for each meeting, and how to make a schedule for each encounter with the child. Tutors are also offered support from their Team Leaders who might offer informal verbal feedback or send an email to offer suggestions for making the time more productive.

Children enrolled in the program are told when they sign up that when the walk through the doors of the Gardners Corners Community Center, they are are no students or children, but young scholars. Tutors and Team Leaders are instructed to treat children as if each of them is a young scholar who is serious about the business of academic success. Young scholars are told at the outset that they are expected to behave in a manner that is respectful and respectable at all time while they attend *Freedom Readers.* There is one literacy volunteer assigned to work with each "young scholar," and the pool of volunteers consists of parents of scholars in the program, retired educators, community members, and professors and students at local universities. Tutors work with the same child at every meeting and the partnerships remain intact for at least the duration of the six to twelve week session. Some partnerships have remained intact for more than a year.

Each of the four *Freedom Readers* sites is led by a Team Leader who is trained by me on how to implement themed lessons during each meeting of the session. Team Leaders and tutors meet once a week before the scholars begin their work to discuss the session's culturally relevant themes, for example, "Presidents," "The Olympics" or "Perseverance," and become familiar with the lessons. I prepare the lessons with an eye

toward culturally relevant pedagogy as well as standards by which young scholars will be assessed in school. These lessons are written in a lesson plan packet and are distributed to Team Leaders along with supporting video clips and vocabulary words (See Appendix B). The Team Leaders at the Gardners Corners site are both professionals—one is a professor of Diversity Studies in the Education Department at the local university and the other owns her own legal transcription business.

Routines or rituals have been established for each weekly meeting. When young scholars enter the building, they are given name tags, and they sign in. Once "young scholars" have signed in, they participate in a whole group activity. These activities often incorporate the culturally responsive instructional strategy of call and response. For instance, during the session on perseverance, Team Leaders called the group to attention by saying the words "2 Legit" to which the young scholars replied in unison, "2 Legit to Quit!" This approach is borrowed from African American churches as a way to connect new learning to environments parents have told me are familiar to most of the children. This activity is followed by the viewing of various 2-3 minute video clips about the theme. The majority of these videos showcase talents African Americans who have achieved goals through hard work and a commitment to excellence. Team Leaders then comment on the video and introduce new vocabulary words each week. Young scholars learn these vocabulary words by singing songs emphasizing the meanings of these words. Songs borrow tunes that are played on local radio stations and are familiar to the students. A ten minute snack time follows where tutors and young scholars chat informally and prepare for one-to-one reading.

The next portion of the meeting is devoted to close reading. The Team Leader leads the group in reading short passages each week. Tutors then ask young scholars to read to them from books that they estimate should be at the child's reading level, and then the tutor reads to the child from a book that might be above his reading level, but within his area of interest. Students choose from a wide variety of books, a large portion of which focus on African American characters. Tutors are trained to determine which book might be best for the child. In other words, a tutor will sit with a scholar during the first meeting with a book suggested by the Team Leaders, but if that book is considered to be too complex, too easy, or of little interest to the scholar, tutors help them choose another book. Team Leaders suggest books for the first session that fall in one of four categories: pre-reading, simple texts, complex and advanced. A small number of books are set aside in color-coded bins to assist tutors in their selection. Young scholars discuss their interests in sports or singing and the careers they would like to pursue with tutors and these conversations guide the selection of books and activities. This portion of the meeting lasts 45 minutes, and during that time tutors and young scholars complete a variety of tasks including preparing for speeches and choosing a new book to take home each week.

The final 15 minutes of each meeting are set aside for young scholars to make presentations based on their reading, or make presentations based on questions posed by Team Leaders. Performance is always included in the meetings because this mode of learning has been identified as culturally responsive (Nobles & Nobles, 2011) In addition, the speeches young scholars are required to deliver harken back to the Easter speeches I was required to give as a child, and that many African American still require of their

children. Young scholars are provided with an outline for writing speeches as well as criteria for evaluating their own performance. No scholar is forced to participate in this activity, but they are strongly encouraged to do so. When the speeches are complete, the session ends and young scholars return to their homes, most of which are directly across the street from the Gardners Corners Community Center.

Although *Freedom Readers* is offered at three other locations, the participants in this study came from Gardners Corners public housing complex because of the high attendance numbers amongst scholars and parents in this area. Based on the response of the residents in this community, some of whom have now been participating in Freedom Readers for three years, there was a strong group of families who were concerned about the academic development of their children, and who wanted to take advantage of programs that they perceived would lead to academic success for their children. This fact contradicted much of the literature and training offered to educators in the school district where the study was held (Payne, 1998), and caused me to believe that there was the need for more exploration and discussion in this area.

Participants

Before selecting participants for this study, I established the specific criteria for selection of parents. Since my research question about parents addressed ways that families establish and maintain *environments of excellence,* or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home settings support academic success, I first considered my definition for academic success. I then scanned the list of all of the students who attended *Freedom Readers* at Gardners Corners and narrowed the list by focusing on those students who demonstrated fluency and comprehension in

reading. I then considered the parents of those children and considered the meetings they had attended. Parents who attended parent orientation meetings, and/or weekly meetings of tutors and young scholars were identified. Four parents of the fifteen parents whose children are involved in the *Freedom Readers* program at Gardners Corner fit the criteria. Two of those parents moved away from Gardners Corners before I began collecting data. I then approached Shameka, who had participated in the pilot study and whose children demonstrated reading fluency. I also approached Chaquita who actively participated in parent orientation meetings.

A set of criteria for suitable teacher participants was also established prior to the beginning of this study. Since my research question addressed the perceived identity of students who benefitted from *environments of excellence*, I initially focused my attention on teachers at Creekside Elementary School where all of the children of Gardners Corners attend school because they had firsthand knowledge of Shameka, Chaquita, and their children's literacy skills. This constituted the criteria for the first group of teachers. After realizing that the Creekside teachers consisted primarily of European American teachers, I interviewed a group of teachers of Color who had firsthand knowledge of Chaquita, Shameka and their children's literacy skills. The second group of teachers also had firsthand knowledge of Shameka and Chaquita's children and their parents through their work at *Freedom Readers.* Having both groups of teachers allowed me to gain a more robust and complex understanding of teachers' perceptions.

Parents. Shameka Ballinger is an African American mother living in a low-income community who does not have access to a large number of economic resources and has not obtained a high degree of formal education. She earned a General Education

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Development (GED) certificate after dropping out of high school at 16. She told me that after giving birth to her first child and trying to maintain her work, classwork, and daycare schedules, she found the demands to be too overwhelming, so she left high school. Shameka spent one year living in Germany as a self-described "Army brat," an experience that she said introduced her to the pleasurable escape that reading could provide. She enrolled all three of her daughters, ages 5, 6, and 8 in *Freedom Readers* three years ago, attended every meeting, and volunteered to work with the students. Because of her keen interest in *Freedom Readers,* I invited her to participate in a pilot study about the literacy practices of mothers living in low-income communities. In the process, I learned that she had high expectations for her children, encouraged them to do their best in school, and loved to read herself.

Shameka is the mother of four children: Diamond, a sixth grader, Jawana, a third grader, Tramice, a second grader, and Kyle who is one year old. Diamond and Jawana are both avid readers who emulate their mother in their love for books. Tramice did not show a love for reading early on, which is one of the reasons that Shameka wanted her to join *Freedom Readers.* All three of the girls are enthusiastic about learning and are generally upbeat in nature. During the course of the study, I interacted with other family members and close friends who played a major role in the girls' development. I observed Shameka's mother, Rose, as the girls participated in choir practice and at a friend's birthday party. I also observed Sarah, the girls' choir director, and Shameka's sister, Donna, who lived with them for three weeks during the study.

Chaquita is another parent whose children participated in *Freedom Readers* whose story intrigued me. Although I met Shameka during the actual meeting of the

program, I did not have an opportunity to interact with Chaquita until she attended a parent orientation. On the first day that Chaquita moved into the community, she walked to the community center to find out what we were doing and upon learning of our focus on literacy, registered her children for the program. At the time, the Team Leader at Gardners Corners was a European American, female education professor. Despite the fact that I met Chaquita at the door, welcomed her into the space and introduced myself as the Executive Director of the group, Chaquita bypassed me and directed her questions to the Team Leader. This action caused me to wonder if Chaquita felt more comfortable with authority figures who were European American, and I wanted a chance to explore this area with her. She made sure that her children arrived for each meeting on time, but she did not attend any of the meetings. She did respond to the invitation to meet with other parents at the orientation, and the nature and number of questions she asked intrigued me even further. For example, I asked parents of the scholars how they thought *Freedom Readers* could help their children achieve academically. Chaquita responded that neither she nor her children knew how to speak "good English" and that programs like ours could give her children the good English they needed. She talked for several minutes about this, using expressions such as, "We just don't talk right. We don't know how to talk right." I responded by explaining that there were many ways to get a point across, and we should ask ourselves who gets to decide which way is right and which way is wrong. Her feedback let me know that she was quite knowledgeable about the skills her children possessed and challenges they faced in school.

Chaquita Johnson is an African American mother of six. The older three children have been removed from her care by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and now

live with Chaquita's mother. Chaquita and her husband, Mike, were in the process of getting a divorce and did not live in the same household, but he visited the home twice while the study was taking place, suggesting that he had regular contact with his children. Mike lived in Gardners Corners with his mother, Barbara.

Chaquita's three children, Malik, Juwan, and Christina, ages 9, 8, and 7, participated in *Freedom Readers*. All three of the children enjoy reading; however, Christina's tutors reported that she was not as fluent a reader as other children in the program who were in her grade. Malik is the strongest reader of the three siblings, but was assigned to special education classes in school due to behavioral issues. When he participated in *Freedom Readers*, Malik's tutors often spoke to him about staying in his seat. He could often be seen walking from one room to the next, visiting the water fountain, or making trips to the restroom. He was athletic and loved to play football and ride his bike through the neighborhood.

Classroom teachers. In order to gain an understanding of the way that teachers identify children who benefit from *environments of excellence* in their communities, I interviewed two groups of teachers. The first group was comprised of the teachers of Shameka's and Chaquita's children. To gain access to the first group, I contacted a second grade teacher at Creekside Elementary School who had previously expressed interest in the *Freedom Readers* program. Since all Shameka's and Chaquita's children had completed second grade at Creekside, I determined that the second grade teachers all had firsthand knowledge of Shameka's and Chaquita's children and would satisfy my criteria for selection. The teacher who contacted me intially introduced me to the other Creekside teachers who participated in the study. The second group of teachers work at a

school nearby, Washington Elementary, and have all worked with the children in the study at *Freedom Readers*.

The first group of teachers consisted of five elementary classroom teachers at Creekside Elementary School who participated in one hour long focus group interview and three follow-up interviews, the purpose of which were to determine how they identify students who come from *environment of excellence* in low-income communities. I conducted two follow-up interviews via email and one follow-up interview was conducted by telephone. Before conducting the focus group interview, I explained that an *environment of excellence* is one in which learners are given the tools needed to solve the problems that they face on a day-to-day basis. These particular teachers were invited to participate because they taught Shameka and Chaquita's children, but I did not share this information with the teachers in order to protect the identity of the study's participants. The classroom teachers who participated in the study were Jamie, Carol, Sarah, Trish, and Diane who comprised the second grade team of teachers at Creekside Elementary School. The teachers came from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of experience. Information about each teacher can be found in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 Teacher Group 1: Creekside Elementary

Name	Years of Experience	Descriptive Information
Jamie	10	• European American woman • Previously taught middle and high school • Leader of the team
Carol	8	• African American woman • Previously taught fourth and fifth grade • Taking classes toward a degree in administration • Co-founded a non-profit organization focusing on increasing the graduation rate
Sarah	24	• European American woman • Previously taught in private schools in the Northeast • Three years at Creekside
Trish	11	• European American woman • Previously taught music, third and fourth grade
Diane	19	• European American woman • Always taught at high poverty schools

The second group of teachers consisted of four elementary classroom teachers at Washington Elementary School who participated in one hour long focus group interview and individual interviews. Because all of these teachers have been *Freedom Readers* volunteers, they also had first-hand knowledge of this study's participants. I conducted individual follow-up interviews with two of the teachers in this group because I needed clarification on some of the answers they provided during the initial interview. The second group of teachers who participated in the study consisted of Rebecca, Annie, Natasha, and Celeste. Information about each teacher in group 2 can be found in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Teacher Group 2: Washington Elementary

Name	Years of Experience	Descriptive Information
Rebecca	29	• African American woman • Currently teaching second grade • Previously taught fourth grade, middle school, special education and the arts • 27 years working in this school district
Annie	1 as a classroom teacher 7 years as a kindergarten assistant 10 years as a daycare owner	• African American woman • Married to a European American man for 5 years • Grew up in poverty stricken neighborhoods, one of which is currently served by *Freedom Readers*
Natasha	3	• Self identified Hispanic woman, German mother, Mexican father • In-school suspension

		teacher - Previously worked in a daycare for six years
Celeste	8	- African American woman - 3 years teaching Reading Intervention Groups - 5 years as a shadow for a student with behavior issues

Although I interviewed multiple teachers from both groups, I decided to focus on a representative teacher from each one of the groups. From group one, the teachers from Creekside Elementary, I focused on Jamie because she is a young, European American female. Studies (National Council of Education Statistics, 2003) show that the overwhelming majority of classroom teachers and teacher candidates are young, European American middle-class females. I felt that Jamie would be representative of many teachers in elementary schools today, teachers who are outsiders to communities like Gardners Corners. Jamie's perspectives also may havereflected colorblind perspectives in that she did not mention race as a factor in the instruction of children living in low-income communities. From group two, the teachers from Washington Elementary who were also volunteers in *Freedom Readers*, I focused on Annie, an African American woman who grew up in public housing developments like Gardners Corners. I believed that Annie's experiences with public housing environments as well as her experiences as a classroom teacher allowed her both insider and outsider perspectives on *environments of excellence*.

Contexts

The data for this study were collected in and around a public housing community located in a rural, southern town and in the school attended by children from that community. The specific contexts are described below.

Gardners Corners Housing Development. The Gardners Corners Housing Development is a forty year old public housing community consisting of 100 rent controlled apartments and is populated predominantly by African American families. Gardners Corners is but one development managed by the Housing Authority of Freetown. Families qualify to live there based on their income and all heads of household must pass a criminal background check. In addition, all residents must be in good standing with all housing authorities. As of July 2012, the Housing Authority of Freetown worked with 278 family members, 97 families, and the average number of members per family was 2.87. There were 12 male heads of household and 85 female heads of household. There were 4 couples living in apartments managed by the Housing Authority of Freetown.

According to the resident services coordinator at Gardners Corners Housing Development, the unemployment rate in the community was as high as 85% and the average age of the parents in the community was early twenties. The Housing Authority of Freetown reported that 31.96% of residents' primary income came from general government assistance and 34.22% of other income came from the same source. Other sources of income included child support, military pay, social security, and unemployment checks. In July, 2012, 73 children between the ages of 5-11, the ages *Freedom Readers* served, lived in a Housing Authority apartment. Of the 278 residents,

259 were African American, 15 were European American, 4 were mixed and there were no Latina/o people living there.

When riding down the highway leading to the community, a marble sign is easily visible. A relatively new playground is located to the right and children can be seen sliding down slides or engaged in a game of basketball at almost any time. The community center is located next to the playground, and this is the site of the *Freedom Readers* meetings. It is a single level brick building with glass doors. There are a few parking spaces in front of the building, and there is a parking lot a few feet away. In some areas, trash can be seen in yards, but for the most part, streets are relatively clean. It is not uncommon to see residents congregating together in yards and on porches when the weather is nice. Many hang their laundry on clothes lines that are located in the back yards of all of the units.

Creekside Elementary School. Creekside Elementary serves the children of Gardners Corners Housing Development and is a K-5, Title I school, which indicates that the school serves a high population of students living in low-income areas. The school is located in a district where 65% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2010, the most recent year that statistics were available, the enrollment was 620, and during that same year, the school received an absolute rating of average and did not meet AYP (adequate yearly progress). Of the 620 students enrolled, three were identified as Asian, two were Native American, 8.5% were Latina/o, 42.74% were African American, and 46.61% were European American. According to the school profile (Lewisburg County Schools District, 2010), 61.4% of teachers had advanced degrees and 99.7% of parents attended conferences with their students' teachers. Furthermore, of the teachers, students,

and parents who responded to an evaluation, 86% of teachers, 86.7 % of students and 100% of parents were satisfied with the school's learning environment.

Shameka Ballinger's home. Shameka lived in a two story apartment in the Gardners Corners Housing Development with her three daughters and son. The apartment consists of a living room, laundry room, dining room and kitchen on the first floor. Bedrooms are located upstairs. The main room or family room is small and well lit. Shameka has placed pictures on the wall and a large area rug on the floor. On the far wall from the door is a table with a lamp, and above it are family portraits. In the far corner of the room is a book case that contains novels, all of which Shameka told me she has read. The room also contains a couch, a chair, an entertainment center and a flat screen television, and a video game console.

Chaquita Johnson's home. Chaquita lives in a single level apartment in Gardners Corners. The living area is sparsely furnished, but immaculate. The smell of cleaning products often permeated the room. There is a television and a computer monitor in that room, but I have never seen them turned on. Heavy sheets are nailed to the walls to cover the windows and there is one overhead light in the room. The walls are decorated with certificates and awards the children have been given at school as well as family pictures, prayers, poems, and other memorabilia significant to the family. A great

deal of the family's time is spent on the front porch of the apartment, and a couch is positioned there. When sitting on the couch, it is easy to see the community center and comings and goings of children on the playground. The front yard of the apartment is landscaped by the Housing Authority of Freetown. There are trees and bushes near the steps. The children often park their bikes near those bushes or ride them up and down the street in front of the house.
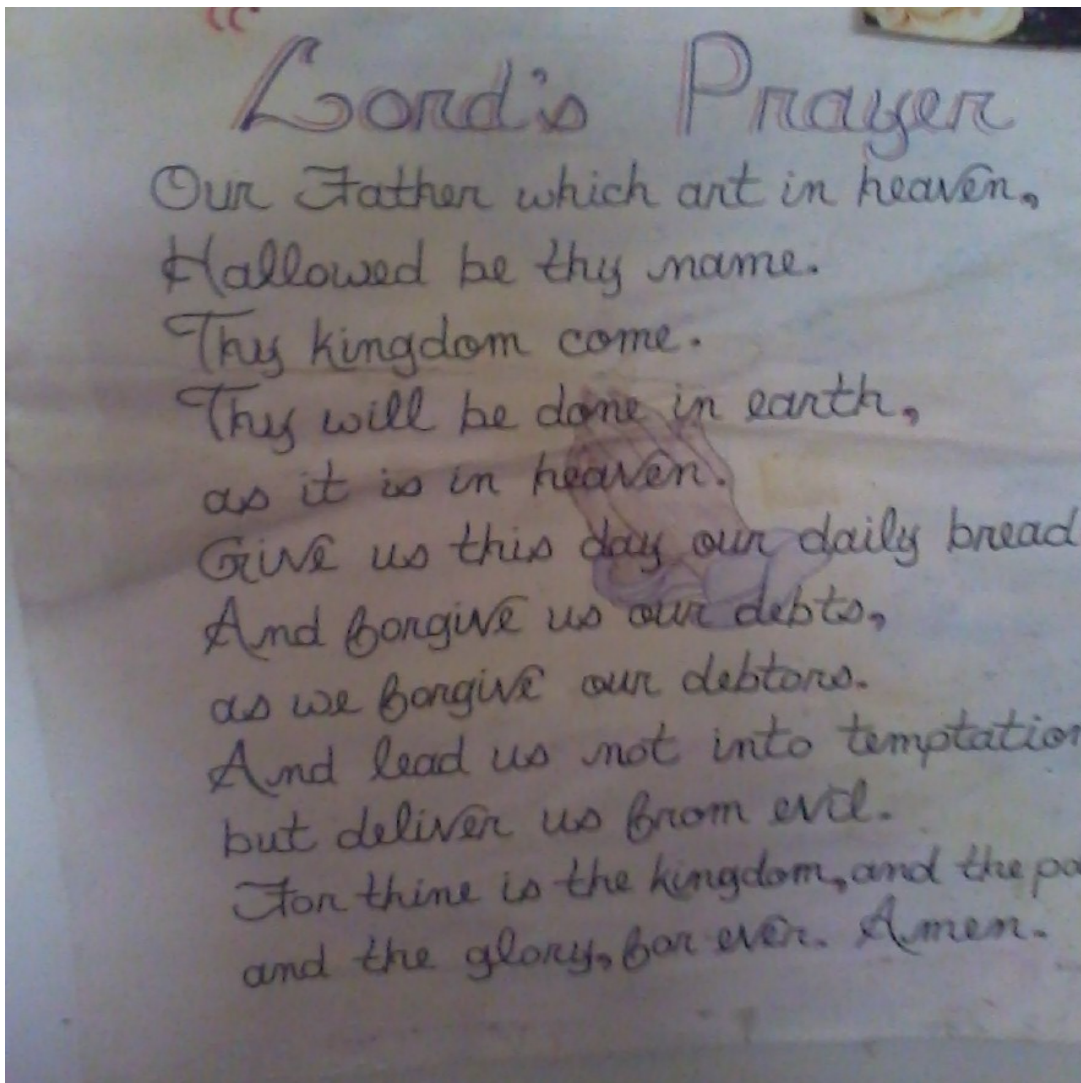
Figure 3.2 This artistic rendering of "The Lord's Prayer" hung on the wall in Chaquita's apartment.

Freedom Readers Afterschool Literacy Program. The Freedom Readers Afterschool Literacy program held in the Gardners Corners community meets at the community center each Monday for 90 minutes. The Center is located on the corner of the entrance to the community next to a relatively new playground and basketball court. This single level building has glass doors in front which often display information from various groups such as The Girl Scouts and local church outreach programs that hold meetings there for residents. Inside the main entrance is a small lobby with restrooms and a supply closet. The main meeting spaces consist of two rooms, a large meeting room and a small space where outdated computers and carts are stored. The smaller room also

contains two closets where more furniture, supplies, and equipment left over from years of discontinued programs sit unused. The large meeting space contains tables provided by *Freedom Readers* and chairs. A large closet contains more school supplies such as books and boxes of arts and crafts, and there are locked cabinets lining the walls. This room also has a stove, refrigerator, sink, and cabinets for storing kitchen supplies. One wall is covered with two tall wooden bookshelves filled with books provided by *Freedom Readers.* In order to facilitate my work with the program, the Housing Authority officials gave me a key to the building, and I have unlimited access to the space.

Data Collection Methods

I employed multiple data collection methods in order to collect the data needed to address this study's research questions. Those methods included: observations in the participants homes, at *Freedom Readers* meetings, and in community settings, participant interviews, focus group interviews with teachers, individual interviews with teachers and documental data.

Observations. I conducted seven weekly home visits in Shameka's and Chaquita's homes for the purpose of observing the teaching and learning that was taking place in the home. Each visit took about one hour. I documented literacy practices, and I observed what the children learned from their mothers or other family members. I looked for characteristics, behaviors, actions, and dispositions that Shameka and Chaquita used that they believed would assist their children in acquiring the skills and tools necessary to negotiate life's challenges. These behaviors and characteristics manifested themselves in a number of ways, but all suggested a high degree of parental involvement on the part of the study's parent participants. For example, on one occasion, I observed Shameka

requiring her daughters to finish their homework immediately after arriving home from school. She checked each of the girls' homework before they were allowed to go outside to play. Shameka explained to me that she believed that her emphasis on reading and academic excellence at home would translate to success in school and great opportunities for her children. In addition, I also observed Chaquita sitting in her yard tracking the comings and goings of her sons while her daughter stayed close to her. She told me that she made a point of knowing where each of her children spent their time in the community and that she was ready to step in if they ever encountered any difficulty.

I also conducted observations in community settings. I attended a choir rehearsal with Shameka's daughters to gain insight into the literacy practices taught by Shameka in the home and how they are supported and extended in community settings. In addition, Shameka's mother, Rose, took the girls to this choir practice, which is a regular occurrence. As an extension of the mother's active role in their children's lives, I observed all of their children during a meeting of *Freedom Readers* in order to gain insight into the ways that the lessons taught implicitly and explicitly in the home were carried out into community settings. As with observations in the home, I looked for dispositions and practices that constitute *environments of excellence* in the church and in *Freedom Readers.* Field notes were taken during these observations.

Participant Interviews. Using Graue and Walsh's (1998) structure for in-depth interviews, I interviewed Shameka and Chaquita in their homes twice, once at the beginning of the data collection period and again at the end. The initial interview focused on questions about the participants' history and experiences. The final interview focused on the participants' ideas about how they believed the gap between home and school

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could be addressed. I also conducted 3-5 additional informal interviews with Shameka and two additional interviews with Chaquita across the data collection period because further questions developed as I conducted observations. On four or five occasions, I submitted questions to Chaquita via text message, and I asked Shameka for clarification via private messages on Facebook. I audiotaped all visits with participants, and took field notes as well. The schedule for interviews and observations with parents and teachers was as follows:

- September 26, 2012: Initial Interview with Chaquita

- October 2, 2012: Initial Interview with Shameka

- October 4, 2012: Observation 1 at Chaquita's home

- October 11, 2012: Observation 1 at Shameka's home

- October 12, 2012: Observation 2 at Chaquita's home

- October 20, 2012: Observation 2 at Shameka's home and Christian Baptist Church

- October 24, 2012: Focus Group Interview with Creekside Teachers

- November 13, 2012: Observation 3 at Shameka's home and Chaquita's home

- November 29, 2012: Final Interview with Shameka

- November 30, 2012: Final Interview with Chaquita

- February 21, 2013: Focus Group Interview with Washington Teachers

See Appendix A for Interview Questions.

The purpose of these interviews and observations was to gather information about Shameka and Chaquita and their families' thoughts about their practices and how they support student success. For example, through interviews with Shameka and Chaquita I

learned that these mothers are willing to go to great lengths in order to stay informed about what their children are doing at school and to help them achieve academically. Chaquita did not own a car at the beginning of the data collection period, but she told me that she had just been called to the school the day before for a conference. The principal said that her son could not continue to attend school unless a parent met with her to discuss his behavior. After speaking with the principal, Chaquita set off on the forty five minute walk to the school. When the conference ended, she walked back home.

Teacher focus group interviews. I conducted focus group interviews with five second grade classroom teachers at Creekside Elementary School where Shameka and Chaquita's children are students. I conducted individual follow-up interviews with select teachers in order to have them clarify information shared during the focus group interview. In addition, near the end of the data collection period, I conducted a focus group interview, one individual interview and three follow-up interviews with a second group of teachers from Washington Elementary School who were also *Freedom Readers* volunteers. These teachers were selected because they have a wide range of experience as educators and have firsthand knowledge of Shameka's and Chaquita's children. The purpose of these focus group interviews was to allow the teachers an opportunity to provide descriptions of their practices and their ideas about the practices and dispositions of parents living in Gardners Corners. For example, by interviewing the teachers I learned that many of them have spent time in low-income communities and that the practice of having large groups of teachers visit communities had been adopted by the school. Individual teachers had also spent time with students on the weekend and have offered targeted suggestions to parents who want to see their children improve

academically. (See Appendix A for interview questions used during the focus group interview with teachers.)

Documental data. Finally, I collected literacy-oriented artifacts such as photos of prayers and poetry that hung on the walls of the home, Malik's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and certificates awarded by classroom teachers. Still photos of certificates hanging on the walls, trophies given to the children, and other artifacts used to decorate the apartment were also taken. I viewed these documents in conjunction with the other two types of data to reveal whether information shared with me about parents' perception of their children's academic performance aligned with or diverged from the perceptions held by school officials. Chaquita and Shameka both gave me a guided tour of the artifacts that decorated their walls. These guided tours were audiotaped and documents were described in field notes.

The following chart (Table 3.3) details the data collection used to address each of the research questions guiding this work.

Table 3.3 Research Questions and Data Collection Methods

	DATA	DATA	DATA
Research Questions	**Participant Group 1: Parents**	**Participant Group 2: Teachers**	**Documents**
In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence,* or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support student academic success?	Formal Interviews Informal interviews observations	Focus group interview	Photos Certificates Poems prayers

What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live in this low-income community who benefit from an *environment of excellence* in their home?	Formal Interviews Informal interviews observations	Focus group interview	Certificates Individualized Education Plan
What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participating families, and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home and school practices in support of marginalized children?	Formal interviews Informal interviews observations	Focus group interview	

Organization of Data

To organize data, I used Microsoft Word 2010 and NVivo. Using pseudonym labeled folders for each participant, I filed photographs, scanned documents, interview transcripts, and other artifacts to be easily retrieved during analysis. Field notes were collected in a notebook and then typed into an electronic journal. Formal interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. I listened to each recording repeatedly and transcribed them. All audio, video and text files were stored in NVivo.

Data Analysis

Throughout the data-collection phase, I employed the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach assists researchers as they organize information into identifiable patterns of behavior and social interaction. The goal of the constant comparative approach is not to focus exclusively on the words in the data, but instead to come to an understanding of the words on the page as expressions of lived experiences. In addition, this process involves a continuous, ongoing

procedure of comparing newly collected data with previously collected data. These comparisons allow the researcher to consider emerging ideas about what is going on in the data and enhance or discount those ideas as the data collection process unfolds.

Throughout the data analysis process, I was engaged in organizing data, transcribing interviews, writing theoretical memos from field notes, developing codes, generating themes and locating and constructing patterns.

Transcription. The initial organization of data was followed by interview transcription. After conducting each of the five interviews, I transcribed and coded each separately. As I transcribed each interview, I typed my ideas, reflections, and questions within the transcript in red. Later I wrote more detailed memos to summarize whole chunks of data. For example, in memos I noticed that the certificates hanging on Chaquita's walls announced the positive aspects of her children's school experience. As I wrote more about Chaquita's family, I realized that this was a reflection of her stance as a mother. She seized every opportunity to let me know about the things her children could do well. In another memo, I noticed that Shameka's family spends a good deal more time inside their apartment watching television, playing video games, and listening to music. Chaquita's family on the other hand, spent a great deal of time outside and interacted with the neighbors more.

The act of writing theoretical memos (Wolcott, 1994), in which I considered whether patterns in the data could be explained by the theories guiding the study, helped me keep track of my own thinking about the research process. This recursive process of preliminary data analysis which incorporated the review of field notes, transcribing interview data, and writing analytic and thematic memos to make sense of the data

allowed me to remain immersed in the data and become deeply involved with it (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) . In other words, analysis was conducted in an ongoing manner. Each set of data collected informed the next kinds of data I decided to collect and the questions I asked in interviews.

Developing codes. Once the transcription was complete, I read through the transcripts to get an overall sense of the voices represented within. During a second reading, I assigned codes to each line of the transcript that related to my research questions. In the following paragraphs, I describe how these codes were developed.

Predetermined codes. As a researcher working to come to an understanding of the ways that *environments of excellence* are established and maintained in homes of families living in a low-income community, I decided to rely on the theories and literature related to families and *environment of excellence* to address my research questions. After considering both the questions and the literature, I identified five major themes and coded based on them. These five broad themes were about the work of families who created *environments of excellence*. They were:

- Supportive actions -- I defined "supportive actions" as the things parents say or do that support academic achievement in school.

- Teaching-- The teaching code referenced the explicit and implicit ways that parents convey information to their children.

- Language-- The language code addressed the types of oral and written language used within the home.

- Resilience/coping-- Resilience/coping addressed the economic and social barriers that impede academic achievement.

- Connecting home and school-- The connecting home and school code covered issues of parent/teacher relationships and their perceptions of one another.

These codes guided my initial analysis of the data on all three levels.

For each of these codes, I made a list of the attributes and characteristics that I would look for in the data. I called the items in these lists *descriptors* and used them as further codes. For example, for the code "resilience/coping" the descriptors included "what parents said about the effects of racism on academic success" and "how parents said that they are viewed by teachers at their child's school." As I read through the data, I assigned a different code to each line using NVivo software. This software also created a list or code book of all the codes used to sort the data.

I used the pre-determined codes to guide my discovery of how *environments of excellence* are established in homes and teachers' perceptions about students who benefit from these environments. The codes also helped me to notice the ways that home and school environments are connected. For example, descriptors under the code of language included "the ways that parents communicate with children in the home," "how parents view language use in the home," and "how teachers view students' language use in the classroom" (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4 Theory-Generated Codes

Code	Descriptors	Data Source
Supportive Actions	Parents talk about helping the child achieve academic success How parents promote school-based literacy in the home How parents promote community-based literacy and survival skills	Interviews with parents Interaction during home visits
Teaching	How parents facilitate learning What parents said about effective teaching techniques Evidence of the relationship between lessons taught by parents and children's actions	Interviews with parents Interviews with teachers
Language	Parents' ideas about the use of home language in and outside school How parents use oral and written language to convey ideas and solve problems	Interviews with teachers Interviews with parents
Resilience/Coping	How parents identify obstacles to their children's academic success What parents said about overcoming obstacles What teachers said about obstacles parents face and how they overcome them	Interviews with parents Interviews with teachers
Connecting home and school	What parents said about transforming classroom practices What teachers said about transforming classroom practices Evidence that classroom practices and home practices are aligned	Interviews with parents Interviews with teachers Field notes

Codes developed through open-coding. I found that much of the data that did not fit into any of the theoretically-generated codes related to descriptions of the settings and the characteristics of the people involved in the action. I read through the data and developed two more codes based on the similarities within them: *physical descriptions and identity.* For instance, identity did not surface in the pre-determined themes because it contained characteristics and attributes displayed by individual participants.

In order to refine my understanding of the data, I grouped my codes into categories (Table 3.5). Putting my data into categories helped me to begin noticing possible patterns within them.

Table 3.5 Examples of Codes/Descriptors Grouped into Categories

Codes/Descriptors	Categories
Parents talk about helping the child achieve academic success How parents promote school-based literacy in the home How parents promote community-based literacy and survival skills	Educate Learn Facilitate Orchestrate Pedagogy
How parents facilitate learning What parents and teachers said about effective teaching techniques Evidence of the relationship between lessons taught by parents and children's actions	Teach Attributes Children's Actions
Teachers' ideas about the use of home language in and outside of school Parents' ideas about the use of home language in and outside school How parents use oral and written language to convey ideas and solve problems	Feeling like the Other Conflict Belonging

As I looked at related data from homes and schools I also followed a constant comparative process, and what I learned from analysis of the home data informed what I learned from the school data. Both of these informed my analysis of the convergence/divergence data. This was not a linear process, but a recursive process as I went back and forth among data during my analysis.

First entry into data analysis. In my first entry into data analysis, I began with an examination of data collected in homes for each of the two cases studied. Taken together, these data painted a detailed portrait of particular literacy experiences and practices for each of the two focus families. As I considered the full portrait painted by the data, issues related to the prevalent behaviors, dispositions, and practices that

Shameka and Chaquita used became apparent. I coded the home-based data using the pre-determined codes first. These codes did not address all of the data, so I constructed the codes *physical descriptions* and *identity* to describe these data. The codes were then grouped together into categories.

Second entry into data analysis. The second entry into analysis began with an examination of school-based data and included one group interview with five teachers, one group interview with three teachers, one individual interview with one teacher, and several other individual interviews and follow-up interviews with select teachers from both groups. Using constant comparative methods and categorical analysis, I coded data and grouped the codes into categories and then located patterns that led me to my findings. As this process proceeded, I expanded the list of codes to include new information and understandings about the teachers' perceptions, and these data provided insight into the perspectives of school representatives regarding families living in low-income communities and their literacy practices. Table 3.6 explains the theory and literature generated themes that guided my initial analysis of the school-based data.

Table 3.6 Theory Generated Codes for School-Based Data

Codes	Descriptors	Data Source
Deficit Model	Teachers' negative perception of behaviors of students and parents Teachers talk about the physical appearance of children Teachers express low expectations for students	Focus group and individual interviews with teachers
Teaching	Teachers talk about the attributes of effective teachers Teachers talk about their approach to teaching How teachers facilitate learning	Focus group and individual interviews with teachers
Expectations	Teachers talk about how and at what level they want parents to be involved Teachers talk about holding parents accountable	Focus group and individual interviews with teachers
Literacy	Teachers talk about the use of home language in and outside of school Teachers talk about the modes of literacy taught in their classrooms	Focus group and individual interviews with teachers

Third entry into analysis. The third entry into analysis involved identifying the areas of convergence and divergence between parents and teachers as I looked across all data. Characteristics of each of these larger categories were identified. I examined the categories into which codes for home-based data and school-based data were grouped.

This categorical analysis allowed me to determine the similarities and differences between the two lists of codes. The following chart (Table 3.7) describes these categories from home and school and how they are related to my research questions and the theories that undergird this research.

Table 3.7 Categories from Home and School Contexts

Insights from Homes and Communities	Insights from Perceptions of Teachers	Insights about Aligning Home and School Practices	Related Research Question	Related Theory
Multiple modes of literacy are utilized, taught, and valued.	Print literacy is utilized, taught and valued.	Schools must recognize a wider range of literacies.	How do teachers identify children who benefit from *environments of excellence?*	Critical Sociocultural Theory Critical Race Theory
Parents' pedagogy aligns with culturally relevant teaching.	The race, class, and habitus of teachers influence their pedagogy.	Teachers must incorporate culturally relevant teaching.	How do parents establish and maintain practices that support student success?	Sociocultural Theory Critical Race Theory
Some African American parents describe feeling like outsiders in school settings.	Some European American teachers approach parents from a position of power.	Parents must find a way to work together.	What can be learned about transforming classroom practices?	Culturally Relevant Teaching Critical Race Theory

After my careful analysis of the data I found that:

1. In *environments of excellence,* parents incorporate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy,

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2. The race, experience and habitus of teachers influence the ways in which they

sort students into categories, and

3. While there were both divergences and convergences between parents'

practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of

possibilities for critical conversations.

The findings and the research question each finding addresses are listed in the following

chart.

Table 3.8 Research Questions and Related Findings

Research Questions	Findings
In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence*, or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support student academic success?	In *environments of excellence,* parents incorporate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy.
What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live in this low-income community who benefit from an *environment of excellence* in their home?	The race, experience and habitus of teachers influence the ways in which they sort students into categories.
What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participant families and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home, community, and school practices in support of marginalized children?	While there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibilities for critical conversations.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

Prior to the data collection period, I spent two and one half years interacting with

parents in the community during the *Freedom Readers* program and officially collected

data for six months. This allowed me to develop an understanding of the contexts in which the data were collected without overemphasizing any one event or occurrence that was simply an anomaly. A broad range of data collected in two contexts allowed me to consider various contexts from dual perspectives to triangulate findings and name themes. Often a parent's report about an interaction with the school was contradicted by a teacher's account of a similar incident. At other times, parents and teachers echoed each other's sentiments about the way schools and communities should work together. Triangulation was achieved as there were multiple reference points of data collected from multiple participants in the study. These included reflections, interviews, and audio recordings. Finally I discussed my findings with my dissertation committee chair and a colleague in the Language and Literacy Ph.D. program who assisted me in assuring that the conclusions I drew were grounded in the data.

Subjectivity /Positionality

This study is strengthened by the fact that an African American educator is telling the story of African American families. This is not to say that all African American educators have the same feelings and experiences. My particular background caused me to see things through a particular lens, one that may be different from my participants'. But, I also feel that I have told the stories in ways that are most empathetic because the parents participating in the study and I have had some similar experiences that can be traced back to race, gender, age, ethnicity, and culture.

Also, I am passionate about this topic because I have a vested interest. My own children will benefit from this research if the results are well-received and widely embraced. I have had conversations with my son's teachers who informed me that he has

a hard time staying focused and being organized. I did not disagree with their assessment of his classroom behavior, but I wondered how their experiences as European American women affected the ways in which they viewed and interacted with my African American son. One of my son's teachers emphasized to me that she loved all of her students the same whether they were purple, blue green, black or white. By making this claim, she negated the importance of her students' heritage and the cultural differences that exist between racial and ethnic groups. By adopting a colorblind approach, this teacher failed to acknowledge or honor my son's lived experiences. Just the asking of the question, though, felt awkward because I did not want it to seem as if I was suggesting that the teacher was racist. I have found it extremely difficult to broach these issues with people who seem uncomfortable talking about race. In settings where others seem uncomfortable, I am also uncomfortable talking about race. Therefore, I understand that I am invested in this work emotionally and professionally.

It is also important to note that the study was influenced by my assumptions about families living in low-income areas, such as my belief that single mothers that did not hold a job outside the home did not have a strong work ethic, and this may have had an influence on how I perceived what I heard and saw. I have to admit that I am also influenced by mythical narratives about African Americans that have been circulating for hundreds of years. For example, I have heard a number of myths about the lack of involvement of parents living in low-income communities in their children's education. I carry with me preconceptions I learned from having seen films about people who live in the "projects" and having been told by people in positions of authority in those "projects" that the families would never respond positively to an afterschool reading program. That

bias remained prominent in my thinking and had the potential to skew my interpretations about what I documented, wrote, and reported. I have been told all of my life that I have to work hard so that I can live in a comfortable home. I have pursued higher education so that I can be accepted into the mainstream. In many real ways, I have attempted to distance myself from the lives of the study's participants. That distancing came into play when I examined how I viewed the families and how they viewed me.

My passion may be both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, this passion drove me to continue working on the research, and I was at all times determined to ensure that the study was conducted at the highest possible level of quality. On the other hand, this same passion caused me to struggle with being open to the possibility of proving my assumptions wrong.

The issue of power is another important one. I had to be willing to confront my own potential to abuse power as the person in charge of the after school program in which my participants' children learn. I recognize that my roles of researcher and leader may have become confused, and in so doing, I may have asked questions that were not related directly to this current study. I may have failed to ask many of the right research questions in an effort to look for validation of the program. In addition, I recognize that my position as director may have been perceived by the participants in the study as threatening or intimidating, thus influencing the way participants answered questions.

Ethical Issues and Reciprocity

I abided by the ethical requirements of the university by submitting the appropriate paperwork to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and as such had all participants sign letters of consent. (See Appendix G for letter of consent.) After I

submitted my research proposal, I received a letter informing me that no further oversight by the IRB was required.

Families participating in the study received the benefit of having tutors work with their children at no cost to them. Although this was not direct reciprocity for participating in the study, because families were a part of *Freedom Readers*, this made access convenient, and therefore, I believe that participating in the study did not constitute an added burden in their lives.

Table 3.9 Timeline for the Study

September, 2012	• Proposal defense • Applied for IRB approval • Study deemed exempt; no further review by IRB needed.
September/October	• Focus group interview with Group 1 classroom teachers at school at Creekside Elementary. • Initial Interview with Shameka Ballinger • Initial Interview with Chaquita Williams • Weekly observations in Shameka's home and in community settings • Weekly observations in Chaquita's home • Field notes, audio recordings, and video collected
October	• Weekly observations in Shameka's home and in community settings • Weekly observations in Chaquita's home • Field notes, audio recordings, and video collected
November	• Weekly observations in Shameka's home and in community settings • Weekly observations in Chaquita's home and community settings • Final interviews with Shameka and Chaquita • Field notes, audio recordings, and video collected.
December, 2012; January, 2013 February, 2013	• Analyze Data • Focus group interview with Group 2 teachers who work with Shameka, Chaquita, and their children through *Freedom Readers*, • Individual, and follow-up

	interviews with participants • Field notes, audio recordings, and video collected
January, February, March, 2013	Write the dissertation

CHAPTER FOUR

"LIFT EV'RY VOICE AND SING": THE FINDINGS FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF *ENVIRONMENTS OF EXCELLENCE* IN A LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings regarding the ways that two extraordinary African American mothers used a range of sophisticated strategies to facilitate their children's participation in language and literacy communities. It also presents the findings regarding how teachers perceived students and the ways that teacher perceptions and parental pedagogies examined together can transform classroom practice. These core questions were examined:

1. In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence*, or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support student academic success?

2. What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live in this low-income community who benefit from an *environment of excellence* in their homes?

3.   What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participating

families and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an

alignment of home and school practices in support of marginalized children?

I utilized the performance ethnography format (Marshall & Rossman, 2011),

which portrays and illuminates the "staged re-enactment of ethnographically derived

notes" (Alexander, 2005, p.411). This type of representation allowed me to characterize

culture in performed, embodied ways rather than merely the traditional textual ones.

McCall (2000) argues that the notion of performance is derived from the idea that

ethnographic data and cultural understandings can be presented as drama with scripts,

props, and costumes. In this tradition, representation of lived experiences is not only a

text, but a living, breathing depiction of cultural knowledge (Conrad, 2008) ranging from

a staged production to dance or storytelling.

The type of performance ethnography in which I engaged is known as Reader's

Theater (Coger, 1982), consisting of dialogues and monologues. The particular variation

of Reader's Theater that I have created for this chapter also included ethnopoetics

(Hymes, 2004), a movement shaped by the work of researcher Dennis Tedlock and poet

Jerome Rothenberg in the 1960s. Ethnopoetics is defined as a method of recording texts

that uses poetic lines instead of prose passages, an approach which emphasizes the strong

poetic tendencies of various cultures. All of the ethnopoetics in this chapter consists

exclusively of words spoken by participants during interviews. No words were added or

deleted except when indicated in the text. The primary source of data is the words of the

participants. Through this format I show how each Act in the play addresses each of the

research questions guiding this study, as well as the theory that supports each finding.

The script is presented in past tense, as I am retelling the participants' stories as they were told to me. The Reader's Theater was constructed through data from interviews with the participants as well as my field notes and analytic memos, which include my reflections on the interviews and observations I conducted.

There are three Acts in this play/chapter, and each Act explores a different research question. Act I and Act II are represented through Reader's Theater. Act I addresses and explores research question number one, and Act II addresses and explores the second research question. Act III, which is in ethnopoetic format, addresses the third research question. Supporting data from documents are interspersed throughout the chapter where appropriate. Finally, analysis of the data is integrated throughout the dialogue presented and at the end of each Act. In the unpacking I will draw on the larger data as well as data included in the Reader's Theater script. This approach is appropriate for this dissertation because my core area of inquiry is *environments of excellence* in low-income communities, which I found to be lively and dynamic spaces. These spaces included a diverse range of cultural perspectives, beliefs, and communicative styles. This rich diversity of thought is reflected through the use of the multiple genres of representation contained within these pages.

Findings

The key findings of this study are:

(1) In *environments of excellence,* parents incorporate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy.

(2) The race, experience and habitus of teachers influence the ways in which they sort students into categories, and

(3) While there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibilities for critical conversations.

In presenting these findings, I allowed the women who participated in the study to speak for themselves as much as possible. Making room for the participants to tell their own stories in their own words and question issues of equity in their children's education is appropriate for this study, and is in the traditions of sociocultural and critical sociocultural theory, two of the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011) one of the main purposes of ethnographic case studies, an area from which this study borrows elements, is to take the reader into the setting "with a vividness and detail not typically present in more analytical reporting formats" (p. 267). The use of Reader's Theater allowed me to breathe life into the data, offering to the reader an experience of *environments of excellence,* rather than merely an intellectual encounter with data. The Reader's Theater approach is also consistent with sociocultural theory because this theory takes into account aspects of the participants' *lived* experience. I allowed the mothers and teachers in the study to speak because they were the experts on their experience.

Critical theorists question issues of power and privilege which are addressed in this report, and they also integrate experiential knowledge in an effort to unmask and expose racism in its various forms (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Adopting those critical beliefs, when participants spoke using Black English Vernacular, I reported those voices exactly as I heard them in order to honor Shameka and Chaquita's life stories as much as

possible. This choice allowed me to maintain the integrity of the report and sustain my

commitment to authentic inquiry and high ethical standards.

Table 4.1 Playbill for "Lift Ev'ry Voice: A Play in Three Acts"

P L A Y B I L L	
LANGUAGE AND LITERACY THEATER	

LIFT EV'RY VOICE:

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

Characters and identifying fonts	
Chorus Voices in Dialogue (bold text) Shameka's, Chaquita's, Jamie's, Annie's and Tracy's Voices in Dialogue (plain text) ***Shameka's, Chaquita's, Jamie's and Annie's Ethnopoetics (bold, italic text)*** *Tracy's interior responses (plain italic text)*	
Prologue	**Act II: Traditional Teacher/Transformed Teacher** (Reader's Theater) – Research Question: What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live in this low-income community who benefit from an *environment of excellence* in their home? Finding: The race, experience and habitus of teachers influence the ways in which they sort students into categories Scene 1 – European American Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs Scene 2 – African American Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs

	Dénouement
Act I: Lifting Their Voices (Reader's Theater) Research Question: In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence* or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support academic success? Finding: In *environments of excellence,* parents incorporate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy. Scene 1 – Academic Achievement Scene 2 - Cultural Competence Scene 3 – Critical Consciousness Dénouement	**Act III: Parents and Teachers: Words Juxtaposed** (Ethnopoetics) Research Question: What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participating families and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home and school practices in support of marginalized children? Finding: While there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibilities for critical conversations. Voice 1 – Parents Voice 2 – Teachers Dénouement

Characters

Chorus: In the tradition of the classic Greek Chorus, which served to

                     formulate, express, and comment on the moral issue that is raised

                     by the dramatic action, the Chorus gives voice to historically

                     significant African American scholars such as Carter Godwin

                     Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Frederick Douglass. These

                     scholars are the intellectual and cultural fathers of the study's

                     participants, and their comments represent a legacy of literacy in

                     the African American community.

Shameka:	Shameka is an African American woman in her late 20's who is the single mother of four children whose ages range from 12-years-old to 1-year-old. She has lived in low-income communities most of her life, but also spent time as a child living in Germany with her father, who was in the military.

Chaquita:	Chaquita is an African American woman in her early 30's who is the mother of six children. She has always lived in the southern state in which the study takes place. Chaquita grew up in rural low-income areas, however, this is her first stay in a public housing development.

Jamie:	Jamie is a European American teacher of African American children who live in a low-income community. She is in her mid-30's, married, and is the mother of three young children. Her voice represents the European American and Traditional Teachers who participated in the study because many of her views mirror that of the dominant, mainstream culture, and many of her comments reflect a colorblind perspective.

Annie:	Annie is a teacher of Color in her late-30's who teaches African American children living in a low-income community. She grew up in several different low-income communities and is the mother of three children. Her voice represents the Transformed Teachers who participated in the study because her perceptions of children of Color have are heavily influenced by her experiences. She

seems to consider race and class to be important factors in how

children are educated.

Tracy: A doctoral candidate in her early 40's who is interested in

exploring the world views and pedagogical practices of Shameka

and Chiquita. She is also interested in teachers' perspectives about

families living in low-income areas and how the bringing together

of these two worlds can improve the educational prospects of

marginalized children.

Prologue

Chorus: **You have come such a long way, yet there is such a long way to go. You have forgotten us, forgotten the sacrifices we have made so that you might have access to opportunities and advancement. You have been looking forward, but you have forgotten to look back. Give us back our voice. Lift ev'ry voice.**

Tracy: *I know. I have forgotten. But I will re-member. I will right this wrong. I will speak your names in the classrooms where a Eurocentric perspective has dominated the conversation. I will speak for you and for the marginalized children and families struggling to achieve in schools. I will make earth and heaven ring with the harmonies of liberty. From the universities where teacher candidates are preparing for the field, to the classrooms where teachers are saying that race doesn't matter, to the low-income communities where parents are learning and teaching. I will lift my voice.*

Chorus: **We will trust you with this. We will take you at your word because we have seen you making the attempt to honor us. We will hold you to the highest standard, yet we will encourage you along the way. No one understands the struggle as we do, so we will not sit in judgment. Lift ev'ry voice, and let your rejoicing rise! The skies are listening.**

Act I: Lifting Their Voices

The scenes in Act I correspond to the first research question:

In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence* or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support academic success? The discussion is dominated by the voices of Shameka and Chaquita. A close examination of data collected from both mothers led me to the following key finding: In *environments of excellence*, parents incorporate the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy. According to Ladson-Billings (1998) the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy are:

- Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement,

- Successful teaching supports students' cultural competence, and

- Successful teaching promotes students critical consciousness.

Scene 1: Academic Achievement

This scene demonstrates the parents' focus on their children's academic success. Shameka's skill in this area is brought to light first, followed by a demonstration of Chaquita's expertise.

Setting

This scene took place on a warm October day. Shameka and I were in the living room of her house. We were sitting on separate couches having a conversation. Shameka's older children were at school, but her young son was asleep on her lap. The scene began after I asked Shameka about her children and how they were doing in school.

Shameka: Diamond's doing great. She doesn't like the school, but grade wise, she's doing good. Um. I love that school. They text me her test grades. It's the weirdest thing. I've never heard of that before. They text me her test grades so I mean they keep in contact with me more than Creekside (*the elementary school Diamond attended last school year)* did. So I like that.

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Chorus: (to Tracy) Already you can see that what they have been saying about our children is not true. They care about education and about what is going on with the children. It is our legacy, and what we have passed down has not fallen completely away. Look for these counter-narratives, these stories that speak back to the mythologies about African Americans who live in low-income communities. The stories of African American inferiority have been around since the first day enslaved Africans set foot on American soil. Some have said that we are lazy and that we don't have much money due to a lack of ambition. We reject that ideology and the shame that comes with it. Our children are still dragging the chains of mental enslavement, and racism still exists. They say that our children underperform because we don't value education and because all of us are victims of generational poverty. They have placed a crown of thorns on our heads….a single story (Adichie, 2009). But we are many and our stories are many.

Tracy: *I will listen. I will provide the counter-narratives that challenge dominant mythologies about African American families living in low-income communities.*

Tracy: All of her teachers do that?

Shameka: Umm Hmm.

Tracy: Wow. That's good. Why doesn't she like the school?

Shameka: I don't know. She won't tell me. I think there's a bully. She's asking me to let her go to Freetown Middle. I'm tempted to go ahead and let her do it because academically that school is better than Lincoln Park. I don't know. I'm still thinking about it.

Tracy: How do you know that Freetown Middle is better?

Shameka: They sent out a letter. Lincoln Park (*the middle school Diamond currently attends*) did.

Tracy: So what would the transportation issue be?

Shameka: None. They actually have a bus that comes out here now. I didn't want to do it because I didn't know about that. But, now that I know, I'm like OK. Hey. School is better there. I'm down.

Tracy: Do you think the teachers will be as responsive?

Shameka:	I don't know. I hope so.
Tracy:	So you're seriously considering doing it just because you think it would make her more comfortable?
Shameka:	Right. You know, if she is not comfortable, I'm pretty sure her grades will start dropping at some point. And you know we can't have that. She's been an A/ B student all her life. We gotta keep it like that.
Tracy:	She got an interim (*mid-term grade report)* the other day. How did she do on the interim?
Shameka:	Great. Great. All A's I believe. Like one B. I believe that's right.
Tracy:	How about Tramice? I know you said she wasn't feeling reading.
Shameka:	She wasn't. She's doing much better now, though, as far as her reading category. She took some tests too. On her interim she got one C.
Tracy:	What was the C in?
Shameka:	Math. So I'm like OK. I can handle that. I wasn't great in math. We can work on it. But outside of that, she's A and B all through there except for that one C.
Tracy:	*I can also see the emergence of the first tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy: Students must experience academic success. All three of Shameka's daughters are making excellent grades in school. Diamond, who is in middle school, is in the honors program, and Tramice is being considered for the Gifted and Talented program at her school. She was initially selected for further testing because she received high scores on standardized tests. When the last report cards were issued, Diamond and Tramice made the Honor Roll. Jawana received one grade of Needs Improvement (NI).*

Stage Directions: *Shameka's living room scene goes dark. Lighting is raised on the*

second half of the stage where Chaquita's living room furniture is placed. I am sitting

across from Chaquita, and I have asked her to discuss her son's academic performance.

She speaks the following words in a loud voice filled with emotion and intensity.

Chaquita: And they ..May 23rd they put him (*Malik, a fourth grader*) in special education. With special needs. And she (*the school's principal)* was like when he go to school next year, he'll be with Ms. Easley, the same lady that be putting him in the class this year and we need to do another IEP meeting. At the IEP meeting the only thing that was basically said was about his behavior. But, when I had let your team (*from the Freedom Readers program*) look at his IEP meeting sheet, like the results of what came out of the IEP, they said they didn't understand the IEP results because the reading level and everything…his reading level is very high and basically, they were just talking about his behavior, and one of your ladies had looked at another sheet of paper, and she was like, she didn't understand it because they was like, he needed an increase in reading. But it only had a two number difference, so she was like she didn't know why that was up there if they just want him to gain two words. Two words. If he already can read fast. Saying that he read too fast. They want him to take his time. Your lady was telling me he read pretty well when he's at *Freedom Readers* to me.

Tracy: How is Malik doing with his reading at home? How do you know he is learning in school?

Chaquita: Like sometimes I don't understand homework, like what it be saying, "Do the vowels and do the consonants" and I be helping Christina. I'll be like, "I don't understand that" and Malik will come right on the side of me and he'll be like, "Ma, it's this…that…that… The A silent or the E long and sometime the y", and I be like "Malik, I don't understand nothing you talking about." And the next time I'll be like, "Come over here and sit with mama and explain this to your sister and brother again." So, he's very smart.

Chorus: They have taken our sons and thrown them into the dungeons just as they did with our fathers. We can see Goree Island and the castles that housed them until there were enough of them gathered to fill a ship. They brought them in coffles from every corner of the continent. And today, they send them to the classrooms that are intellectual dungeons. Our sons are relegated to the dungeons of academia because their culture is not the culture of the gatekeepers. They hail from the land of the talking drum and inexhaustible dancing and uncontainable

laughter. They send them there because they are active and because they are alive and the Authorities don't know what to do with them. They send them there from every corner of this country. You have come such a long way, but there is such a long way to go.

Tracy: *Such a long way to go before African American boys receive positive recognition in schools for more than just their athleticism. Their intellectual prowess will be celebrated as well. They are overrepresented in special education classrooms (Noguera, 2003) and underrepresented in honors programs (Ford, 2010). But I will re-member you, and, alongside many others and with the support of the spirit of our forefathers, we will right this wrong.*

Unpacking Scene 1 and Culturally responsive pedagogy

CRT Tenet Number 1: Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement.

Teaching by example: Staying in touch with the school. In the first section of the scene, Shameka appeared to make sure that Diamond experienced academic success in school by keeping in contact with Diamond's teachers and making sure that she was focused and comfortable in the school setting. According to Ladson-Billings (1995) successful teachers in *environments of excellence* must demand that children work to their highest potential. Although having high self-esteem is an important aim of many educators, she writes that teachers must never allow academic achievement to take a backseat to activities and practices that make the learner feel good. African American students must be able to read, write, calculate, use technology and relate to others at high levels. Current double digit unemployment rates amongst African Americans demonstrate the necessity of gaining skills and becoming qualified applicants in America's competitive job market.

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This concern has historical roots, as Frederick Douglass, Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B Dubois wrote extensively about the importance of education in the fight for racial equality and social justice. The classroom is no less a battlefield today than it was while they were writing and speaking on behalf of African Americans. The crucial component of this demand for excellence is to find ways to motivate students to choose academic excellence instead of forcing it upon them. In this scene, it seems that Shameka supported the academic progress of her daughters, and appeared to provide each of them with opportunities to choose academic excellence for themselves. By staying in touch with her daughters' schools, Shameka seems to be teaching her children indirectly that academic excellence is important.

Explicit teaching: Motivating children to excel. Shameka seemed proud of her daughters' academic achievements and appeared to see herself as a primary motivator in her children's lives. As is demonstrated in the larger data set, she often spoke to her daughters about the jobs that they could obtain if they worked hard in school and made good grades. Shameka reported using specific language about motivation when speaking to her daughters: "Giving them that motivation, that's all they need. That's all my kids need. I keep telling them about all the different colleges and all the different things you can go to school for, all the different things you can become." By voicing her desire to see her daughters achieve specific goals, Shameka explicitly taught lessons about the importance of academics.

Teaching by example: Going the extra mile to keep grades high. Shameka seemed to be concerned about her children's education and appeared willing to go to great lengths to see her daughter succeed. In scene one, Shameka contemplated sending

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Diamond to a school that had been deemed educationally superior to her current school. Because she was concerned about Diamond's grades and her socio-emotional well-being, Shameka considered making the switch so that Diamond could be comfortable. She weighed the pros and cons, considered the evidence sent to her by the school along with her daughter's attitudes about the situation, and was poised to make a decision based on those factors. This scene demonstrates that Shameka seems to be sensitive to her daughter's academic needs. She appears to be a tuned-in mother. In this part of Shameka's story, I see the emergence of the cardinal virtues of sociocultural theory: a family's experience is important to the learners' cognitive development, and the environment in which the learner develops can hinder or promote academic success. By considering changing Diamond's school, Shameka seems to teach her daughters the importance of academics by example. Shameka constructs an environment that promotes academic success, and her children benefit from this *environment of excellence.*

Teaching by example: Understanding the school system: The second part of the scene includes Chaquita's words in regard to Malik's academic progress. Instead of speaking to me about his report card grades as Shameka did, Chaquita mentioned the fact that Malik had been placed in a special education class at the end of the previous school year because the school had determined that his behavior problems were severe. She shared with me the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that was written for Malik, and I made a copy of the fifteen page document which consisted of an IEP/Staffing Meeting Summary and an assessment of his academic and functional strengths and needs. According to Malik's IEP, he is "currently in a Self-Contained Emotionally Disabled classroom. He was placed in this setting in May of 2012." The document goes on to state

that "at times Malik can be easily distracted and has to be redirected to the task in the group. Malik tends to have difficulty with comprehension in class discussion." In regard to Malik's academic progress, the report noted that in reading, "the student is functioning well below that of his grade level peers." The levels reported on the Oral Reading Fluency test given on April 30, 2012 were reported as 128 words per minute (between the 82nd & 83rd percentile on a second grade passage, 98 words per minute (43rd percentile) on a 3rd grade passage, and 102 words per minute (32nd percentile) on a 4th grade passage. Malik was a third grader when the test was given. In regard to Malik's math performance, the report reads: "The student is functioning will (sic) below that of his grade level peers. He does seem to like math."

Chaquita told me that she was most concerned about the goals and objectives. They were: (1) By June 2013, the student will increase his oral reading fluency from 98 words per minute to 100 words per minute as measured by DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency. (2) By June 2013, the student will increase his score from .5 to 6 as measured by DIBELS DAZE. Goal 1 was especially troubling to her because she could not understand why it should take her son an entire school year to increase the speed of his reading by two words.

Although Malik had been assigned to his school's special education program, it is my assertion that he experienced academic success. His report card grades were consistently high, and his mother reported that he made high grades on teacher-made classroom tests. The educators with whom he worked at *Freedom Readers*, including the professor at the local university who reviewed Malik's IEP with his mother, reported that Malik was a fluent reader with above average comprehension skills. During the Freedom

Readers Summer 2012 session, I personally observed him engaged in a structured group discussion format called Grand Conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). The young scholars at Freedom Readers were taught the parameters of this discussion format by their Team Leader, an education professor who told me that she had been conducting professional development workshops on this topic with teachers for ten years. I witnessed Malik's active participation in this group, and noted that his contributions regarding the reading were both frequent and of a high quality. The Team Leader agreed, and expressed to me a high level of satisfaction in Malik's work. The current Team Leader is an African American professor who earned a Ph.D. in special education and teaches courses in special education at the university. Here is her evaluation of Malik's current performance:

> Malik is doing well. I have a little chat each week before the session begins to remind him of our expectations of him as a scholar. I give his tutor something to give him at the end of the session if he does really well. Something like a pack of crackers or an extra juice…It seems to be working well. As a special educator, I do not see the need for Malik to be placed in a self-contained class. He can function in the general education setting with a behavior management plan in place and frequent reinforcement from adults. (personal communication)

These observations and the assessments that Chaquita made about his progress appeared to be a stark contradiction to the observations reported by his teachers on his IEP. Chaquita's attention to her son's academic performance may have contributed to his ability to gain the reading and writing skills needed through the *Freedom Readers* program. She sought out a program that provided Malik with one-to-one instruction in literacy. By focusing her attention on understanding the school's placement of her son, Chaquita taught by example the importance of academic achievement.

Teaching by example: Staying in touch with school officials. Chaquita also remained a vigilant and vocal force in both her children's lives and the lives of school officials. As demonstrated in Scene 1, she established a homework routine for her children that at times seemed to resemble a cooperative where the older children taught the younger children. She appeared to orchestrate a network of tutors, teachers, and learners in order to minimize the negative effects of poverty and offset her lack of resources. She was both student and teacher in this case. In addition, she made sure that her children attended *Freedom Readers* each week. She attended a number of IEP meetings and meetings with school officials regarding Malik's behavior. Chaquita was able to accomplish all of this without access to her own car, walking the 45 minutes to and from school to meet with teachers and administrators, which shows that she may have been focused on and dedicated to the academic needs of her children. In this way, she has constructed an *environment of excellence* that supports student academic success, and taught her children the importance of academics by example.

Parents teach the importance of academic excellence implicitly and explicitly. Shameka and Chaquita's children were excelling in school based on the report cards Shameka shared with me as well as her comments about their grades. Shameka's attention to her children's academic performance and her constant contact with the school may have contributed to her daughters being included in honors classes at school. Chaquita also paid close attention to her children's academic performance and was in constant contact with the school as well, but her son had been placed into a self-contained special education classroom. His ability to read and comprehend well had been documented by the tutors at *Freedom Readers,* and Chaquita looked to Malik to help his

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younger siblings with their homework when they studied topics about which she had limited background knowledge. When Chaquita found herself at the end of her own resources, she reached out for help with academics. Both women had reached out to the *Freedom Readers* program for assistance in promoting the love of reading with their children. Beyond gaining a love of reading, Chaquita and Shameka both said that they expected their children to improve their reading skills while they participated in the program. Because the parents both focused on academic achievement and taught their children the importance of focusing on academics in explicit ways and by teaching by example, they appear to have incorporated the first tenet of Culturally Relevant Teaching, and in so doing, they have constructed *environments of excellence*.

Scene 2: Cultural Competence

This scene demonstrates the second tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy: cultural competence. First we see Chaquita demonstrating this tenet and then Shameka's facility in this area is shown.

Stage directions: The living room furniture included in Scene 1 fades to black and all characters except Chaquita exit stage right. Spotlight shines on Chaquita as she steps forward and begins her monologue. She removes her ear buds and the audience can hear the faint sounds of rap music pulsing through the tiny speakers. She is wearing blue jeans and a loose fitting sweater. There are five piercings in each ear and a ring in her nose. Her bare arms reveal a tattoo that reads "Little Miss Shawty." She uses her arms and hands to punctuate points she is trying to make, and her voice projects throughout the room. Her long hair, braided with bright red yarn, falls to her shoulders, calling

attention to the six gold and diamond necklaces she wears. Each necklace matches one of

her four rings and three gold bracelets.

Chiquita's Monologue

Chaquita: Cause he (Malik) love football, he love basketball. Me and his
                                   Daddy, we are not together. But if my income was like, where I
                                   could let my chillin' join stuff, you know like pay for them to join
                                   stuff**,** I would put him in football.

                                   Cause him and…Jawan and Malik…I let Tina play football, well
                                   sometime 'cause her nose bleed all the time. So I don't too much
                                   let her play football. But we gets out there in that yard and I tell
                                   him 'cause he think he in real football, he hit his brother with full
                                   force –BOOM-- run him over and keep on running. I be like,
                                   "Yayy Malik!" Course Jawan be out there like (*Makes a crying
                                   sound to imitate Jawan*)

                                   "Jawan you alright?"

                                   "Malik run straight over my face."

                                   Yeah. But Malik don't play no games. He play real football. He'll
                                   catch them and drag them by their waist and he still running. Malik
                                   will do some kinda flip over with his body and just turn around and
                                   make the person that holding him fall, and if they fall the wrong
                                   way, Malik is gonna step on they side, face, whatever and keep on
                                   running.

                                   "Boy, you fool? You can't do your brother like that. That's your
                                   brother."

                                   He like to rap. Malik like to rap. And he be like,

                                   "If you mess with me, I'm a put you in the ground just like my
                                   dead brother. My brother dead. If you mess with me I'll put you
                                   down just like my dead brother." (*Lyrics from a rap song Malik
                                   composed)*

                                   And I be like, "Malik, you got anger in you?"

                                   And I took him to Creative Approach (*a writing program for
                                   children offered through the local mental health clinic)*, because, I
                                   don't know, for some reason he thought-- I guess maybe because
                                   we were living in an apartment complex and there used to be a lot

of shooting out there-- he thought somebody shot his brother, and I keep telling him he died of natural causes (*Sudden Infant Death Syndrome)*. He don't understand what natural causes is. And I was just like,

"If you healthy, like, say for instance Mommy healthy, and Mommy just drop dead."

And he was like,

 "OK, you sick."

And I said,

"Just imagine somebody else drop dead and ain't nothing wrong with them. They are not sick. He said,

"Why they do that?"

 I said, "God do that. People don't do that. God do that."

He was like, "Why he ain't take me?"

I tell him say, "No."

He said, "He coulda take me, Ma, and leave my brother."

So I said, "Malik, don't say that."

He ask a lot of questions and I quit going to church because I don't know. My grandma used to keep me in church all the time. Every time the door open I be there. Then, I get to a point where I just say, "I ain't going to church no more." Then my baby died and I had to go to church for the funeral. Everybody say, "Keep going to church and God won't let bad things happen like this again." But then I go, and everybody, they just looks at me like I crazy, so I stop going. I didn't want to play with God. I just didn't feel right. I ain't been back there in a while, but all my chillin' love to go to church. I send them to the 10 am service at the center and then they go to the 11 am with my neighbor. A bus come through here on Wednesday nights and I send them to that church, too. It's a White church.

Stage directions: Chaquita walks off the stage and the lights come up on a new

scene. I have just left Shameka's house in my car and two of her daughters have chosen

to ride with me as I follow Grandma Rose to their church, Christian Baptist. Before we

left, I talked with Shameka and her daughters.

Tracy*:* So, do you guys like going to this church?

Jawana: Yes, we love our church. We really like the choir because the director is nice. We have fun there.

Tracy: What's so much fun about it?

Tramice: We like being able to see our friends and we like the songs we sing.

Tracy: Do you get to sing every Sunday?

Jawana: No, this is a special Sunday. It's youth day every fourth Sunday. You should come and hear us sing. Our choir is good!

Tracy: I just might do that. What about your mom? Does she come to hear

you?

Tramice: Not too often. She says we can go with Grandma if we want to, but we don't ever have to go. She doesn't make us go.

Shameka: I encourage them to do positive things, but I am not the kind of mom that forces things on my kids. If they choose to go to church with their Grandma, then I support that. But I will not act the way my mom did when I was growing up. I won't make them do things like that.

Tracy: Why don't you like to go?

Shameka: I'll go. I'll go sometimes. But I am not an every Sunday kinda church girl. That's more of my mom's thing.

We arrive at the church and Grandma Rose and I are sitting in one of the pews of

Christian Baptist Church. Shameka's daughters are on the choir stand. It is a Saturday

and the choir is rehearsing three new songs that they will be performing during the

Sunday morning service. We arrive at the church a few minutes before the rehearsal

begins, and I chat with Grandma Rose who is eager to fill me in on the long, rich history

of the church, which is celebrating its 115th anniversary. Jawana (8 years old), Tramice

(9 years old), and Diamond (12 years old) stand next to one another and are surrounded

by the ten other children who sing in the youth choir. The stained glass windows behind

them let in light that creates multicolored displays on the church's red carpet. Sandra,

the young, African American female director of the choir, gives Tramice the microphone

and tells her that she is going to be singing a solo. Grandma Rose, a lifelong member of

Christian Baptist, writes down the words to the song so that Tramice can practice them at

home. Sandra steps back and encourages the choir to sing loudly and with vitality.

Chorus: **This is a place that is familiar to us. We belong here. For so much of our history this place was all we had when it came to learning how to read and write. Black churches were one of the only public places in American society where we could be ourselves.**

Tracy: *Black churches are still an important part of the community. African American children are still gaining literacy skills in this setting. I know firsthand because as a child, I was one of them. I watch these girls and see myself. I remember what it was like to read the words of songs and sing them with the congregation. This is one of my first literacy practices: shared reading. Researchers* (Haight & Carter-Black, 2004; McMillion & Edwards, 2004) *have documented the significance of the African American church and the teaching that goes on in Sunday School and Bible Study. It certainly holds the legacy of our cultural tradition. Our church is our cultural memory bank.*

Sandra: Alright. That was good. Let me play this part one more time. You listen to the CD and see if you can sing it just like this. (*Turns on the CD player. The song is Oh, How I Love Jesus*). Now, you need to just listen to me. Let me read the words and then you repeat after me, Tramice.

Tramice: I am not sure I can do this. I think I will need to practice it at home.

Grandma Rose: Don't worry. I am writing the words down for you. You can practice it at home all night if you need to.

Sandra: Tramice, you have a great voice. You will be fine. Now come on everybody. Sing like you mean it. Show me some energy. Sing like this is your favorite rap song. (*She sways back and forth as the music begins to play again. She motions for the choir members to rock in time to the music. They follow her direction.*)

Unpacking Scene 2 and Culturally Response Pedagogy

CRT Tenet Number 2: Successful teaching focuses on students' cultural competence.

Culturally relevant teaching is not only about creating environments where children excel academically, but about environments that allow them to develop and maintain cultural competence. In the first half of the scene, we see that Chaquita and her family have adopted what has been termed by scholars as a hip-hop orientation (Hill, 2009; Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook, 2008; McLaren, 1997; Morrell, 2002; Stovall, 2006), which stands in opposition to the mainstream culture of schools and the educational status quo. As I have described her above, her physical appearance seems to speak resistance to the dominant culture and an alignment with hip-hop culture or youth culture (Mahiri, 1998). I interpret her fashion choices and linguistic leanings to be consistent with the hip-hop culture in that she used Black English Vernacular and chose to wear several pieces of "bling" or gold and diamond jewelry (Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook, 2008). She is also a devoted fan of hip-hop music, the lyrics of which she frequently interjects into conversation (Hill, 2009).

Teaching by example: Chaquita identifies with hip-hop culture: Hip-hop culture comes with certain ways of being that include language, dress, action, activities, music, and fashion. Due to widespread access to the internet, there now exists "a global community of young people who listen to the same music, wear the same clothes, play

the same video games, and emulate the same heroes" (Mahiri, 1998, p. 5). Although hip-hop culture is not the same as African American culture, the two share many common characteristics, such as the outsider nature of each culture in relation to dominant cultural views. When it comes to the issue of difference in America's schools, being African American and/or identifying with African American culture is significant because the dominant culture in schools is largely Eurocentric. Ironically, though, an increasing number of youth of all races, cultures, and ethnicities are finding themselves drawn to a kind of super-culture: the hip-hop orientation (Morrell, 2002). With strong ties to the African American community, especially low-income communities, the hip-hop culture has offered validation to the experiences of young people from various backgrounds who have felt alienated from the mainstream and marginalized because of their difference (McLaren, 1997). It is also important to note that in the school culture the vast majority of decision makers and authority figures are European American, while in the hip-hop culture, African American achievements and styles set the standard for excellence. These styles can include multiple piercings such as the ones Chaquita wore in her ears, nose, and tongue, and the diamond studs her sons wore in both ears, tattoos, and unique hairstyles (Stovall, 2006).

The vibrancy of hip-hop and African American culture. Another important component of African American culture is what Boykin (1982) refers to as its "vervistic" nature. This researcher and others (Ford, 2011; Nobles & Nobles 2011; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003) have emphasized the vibrancy, high level of stimulation and expressiveness that characterizes some African American homes, and have juxtaposed this verve against the more sedate approach to learning found in most classrooms. For

example, Chaquita personified verve as she played football with her children in their front yard. She was an active participant in the game and acted as both cheerleader and coach, displaying verve and expressiveness and a high-level of stimulation. In so doing, she taught her children by example the importance of cultural competence in the hip-hop cultural frame in which she lives.

I offer these descriptions of hip-hop or youth culture and African American culture not to generalize, but to provide a snapshot of what I observed while conducting this study. It is also important to keep in mind that no culture, especially not a culture developing as rapidly as the hip-hop culture, is static or fixed (Stovall, 2006). Each culture mentioned here is fluid, dynamic, and influenced by each other and a host of other cultures.

Chaquita and the hip-hop orientation. In the first part of the monologue, Chaquita seemed to take on the teacher's role and appeared to provide an *environment of excellence* where her children maintained a strong connection to their African American culture by allowing the children to be expressive and active. In addition, Chaquita's teaching approach seemed to suggest an allegiance to the ways of thinking, ways of behaving, and ways of being that characterize the hip-hop orientation. From my perspective, the oppositional nature and resistance of hip hop culture to the status quo give rise to heroes- most of them male- that carry themselves with a great deal of "swag" or self-confidence. It is this mindset that is sometimes perceived by outsiders as aggressive or threatening (Morrell, 2008). Chaquita was engaged with the children as they played football, an important factor on its own due to the energetic nature of the sport. But in this instance, it is not so much the game in which the family engages, but the

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way the game is played that seems to make this an example of Chaquita's teaching of cultural competence to her children. Malik played the game with an enthusiasm and intensity that positioned him as powerful and unstoppable, and was cheered on by his mother for doing so. This kind of masculine expressiveness is often not allowed in school settings where students are expected to sit still and listen to teachers talk for extended periods (Hale, 2001). In his home environment, under the watchful eye of a parent who identified with both African American and hip-hop culture, Malik and his siblings are expressive and vervistic. Chaquita focuses on cultural competence and teaches her children by example to be culturally competent.

In the second part of the monologue, Chaquita mentioned Malik's love for rap music, another hallmark of the hip-hop culture (Hill, 2009). He expressed his feelings regarding his brother's death by writing a rap that seemed to help him cope with this traumatic event. Chaquita attempted to teach Malik a life lesson about why bad things happen, but Malik's feelings may not have been revealed to her had he not expressed them in an artistic format with which they both felt comfortable.

Shameka focuses on cultural competence. The second part of the scene depicted Shameka's children participating in a choir rehearsal at Grandma Rose's church. The church itself stands as a beacon of culture for this family and for some African Americans. Studies (Brody & Flor, 1998; Lareau, 2011) have shown that religion is an important part of the philosophies of many African American mothers in the South, and this religiosity has been linked to homes characterized by a strict adherence to rules and a strong assertion of a moral code. Both Chaquita and Shameka spoke to me about having been raised in the church, but neither attended services regularly at the time the study was

conducted. Shameka does not regularly attend services either, but she told me that she wanted her children to become involved in positive activities that would keep them away from negative influences.

Cultural competence and African American churches. In the church setting, Tramice, Jawana, and Diamond appeared to learn to value their heritage as their grandmother proudly informed me of the long and rich history of the building. Historically, African American churches have been supported primarily by dollars donated by African Americans. Because of this fact, members of the church take a special pride in what the community has accomplished collectively. As a part of this church's choir, Shameka's daughters saw that the church and African American people have and continue to accomplish great things. The director of the choir took advantage of this legacy by sharing with the young choir members songs that had been meaningful in the African American tradition for years, but she also drew on what she knew of popular culture to motivate the singers. She encouraged the group to sing loudly and with great expression, the way they would sing along to their favorite videos. This bringing together of two worlds seemed to reinforce the cultural frames with which the girls most readily identified. In this case, Shameka's support of her daughters' participation in the church choir seems to exemplify teaching by example as demonstrated in Shameka's granting permission and explicit teaching as delivered by the choir director.

In the above scene, Diamond, Tramice, and Jawana enjoyed participating in the choir, and their mother did not force them to participate. Again, Shameka appeared to be sensitive to her children's emotional needs; however, she took advantage of opportunities to involve them in cultural events. Shameka seemed to understand that learners need the

opportunity to learn in an environment that is both familiar and friendly. This is a hallmark of culturally responsive pedagogy and sociocultural theory.

Scene 3: Critical Consciousness

This scene demonstrates the third tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy: Successful teaching promotes students' critical consciousness, the ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of society. First we see Chaquita demonstrating this tenet, and then the discussion turns to Shameka's ability to promote critical consciousness.

Chaquita's Monologue

Chaquita: With Malik, I got to keep him...I have to really be on Malik because with the mentality that Malik have at this early, only three things basically you can see a Black man doing: surviving and taking care of home and making something out of himself, or going to jail or getting killed. With his mentality, I can already see him killing somebody, or I can already see him going to jail. (*Malik was suspended the day before the study began for getting into a fight with another student. The teacher tried to break up the fight, and her arm was scratched in the process.*) But me as a mama, I'm trying to avoid that by trying to keep his mind open, like

"Malik, what you wanna do today?"

That's why I keep him in that [video] game 'cause little boys come to my house. It was like seven little boys knock on the door and they were playing with Malik cause I was playing the (video) game. I was like,

"What you want, Malik?"

He said, "No, they got something to ask you."

Some of them was shorter than Malik. They was like,

"We come to ask you a question. We wanna know can Malik be in the crew?"

"A dance crew or something?"

They laughed.
Malik said: "They wanna know can 6 of them go ahead and beat me up?"

And then the boys said, "Everybody wanna get down with us cause we Crypts."

They all live out here. That's who he has trouble with. The same boys.

Malik said, "Ma they keep wanting to beat me up cause I won't get down with their crew."

"And you ain't!"

They had respect. They came and asked me! If I walk outside and I have to look for him, he be with them same guys.

I call him. "Come on, Malik. Come on!"

Malik told me: "Ma, they gone beat me up tomorrow."

"Well, if they go to beat you up tomorrow, you F them up."

So he be like, "I'll see y'all later. My mama want me to come home."
Then the boys said: "Aha, you Mama's boy!"

"Yep! Cause if he's a mama's boy, at least he know his mama love him. If y'all mama had love y'all, somebody be calling y'all a mama's boy, too. I love mine."

And I grab him by his hand. And he be looking back like he so embarrassed and looking at them like, "It ain't me, it's my mama."

I ain't care.

Chorus: **So many years. So many tears, so much blood shed so that our people can be free, but there is no freedom in sight. They are locked away in virtual shanty towns inhabited by the people middle-class America has tried to silence, discard and forget. Even the middle-class Negro has forgotten these people and their fight against domestic violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling mental illness, physical disabilities, gang warfare.**

Our people. People whose struggle is no less exhausting and unjust as was our own so many years ago. Prisoners of poverty, and racism, and violence. Those who have gained some level of respect in the mainstream world- those our brother W. E. B. Dubois calls the talented tenth-- are running away from them as fast as they can. Trying to drown out the sound of their own heartbeat. But even a fool knows that when the sound of the heartbeat dies, the whole body dies. Our sons and daughters, when will you ever learn?

Stage directions: The lights come up on Shameka's living room while The Chorus and Chaquita fade to black. They exit stage right as Shameka and I talk about one of Tramice's teachers.

Tracy: OK. So, do you think that race has anything to do with it, though?

Shameka: I like to not think that. But in reality I believe it does. I really believe it does. Um, like the one teacher Tramice has Diamond had last year. Diamond didn't like her and Tramice doesn't like her. Diamond called her racist. And Diamond is pretty observant. She's like me. She sits back and she watches stuff like well, "She doesn't talk to her the same way she talks to me." You know Diamond's not a bad child. When it comes to school work, she's gonna raise her hand and ask a question and you know... she's very into school. So for Diamond to come to me and say that, you know, it made me look at her. Tramice's got her again this year and you know Diamond's like, "Don't let her go there." And I'm like, "No. She's gonna have her as a teacher because she's gonna learn from this. You have to deal with certain people in your life. You have to deal with them. So you go ahead and you learn from this. You're still gonna get your school work.. But you're gonna learn from this." Diamond wanted me to change her school, her teacher and everything. And I know it's just because she just looks down at her like, "She's not gonna do anything with herself," you know. So that's how I felt.

Tracy: Have you talked to her?

Shameka: I haven't. Not about any of this.

Unpacking Scene 3 and CRT

CRT Tenet Number 3: Successful teaching focuses on students' critical consciousness.

In the first part of this scene, Chaquita stood between her young son and the young sons of other mothers in the community who have chosen to align themselves with a local gang. Chaquita seemed to be well aware of what was happening, and she did not sit idly by and observe. She pushed back against the tide of violence and crime around her in order to offer the opportunity for a different kind of reality for her children. Although she did appear to affiliate herself with a hip-hop culture that included music that contained violent imagery, she seemed to resist the forces that could potentially lead her son to a life of imprisonment or end her son's life altogether. In this way, she appears to be highly critical, questioning the status quo, and explicitly teaching her son to distance himself from influences she deemed negative.

Research has shown that people who live in poverty are forced to deal with the realities of crime and gangs much more frequently than do people who are affluent (Milner, 2013). Although many (Hernstein & Murray, 1994; Payne, 1998) have pointed to this fact as another reason to consider people living in low-income communities to be inferior to the rest of a normalized, European American, middle-class society, critical sociocultural theorists have persistently asked questions about the intersection of race and poverty. From a critical perspective, the crime that permeates low-income communities, which are predominantly African American, is but another manifestation of an inequitable American society stratified by race. The high crime rate is connected to the lack of good jobs and school systems that fail to adequately prepare marginalized children for the jobs that are available.

Shameka focuses on critical consciousness. In the second part of the scene, Shameka told the story of having to address the issue of race with her daughters. Unlike Chaquita, Shameka did not separate her children from a potentially harmful situation, but instead seemed to support her daughters in learning from what she perceived to be a possible obstacle to their success. Shameka is not the one who brings up the issue of race, and when I interviewed her, she was reluctant to identify race or racism as a factor in her daughter's schooling or the schooling of any other children. Yet, eventually she did. Supporting them in their challenge of racist views, Shameka explicitly contributed to helping her daughters to develop a critical consciousness and constructing an *environment of excellence*.

Chaquita focuses on critical consciousness. The two mothers negotiated the landscape of a world where violence and racism must be faced and addressed in ways that are consistent with their cultural orientation. Chaquita's resistance to the violence in her neighborhood was vocal and embodied as she literally walked out into the streets and grabbed her son's hand and led him home. The activist, vervistic nature of the hip-hop culture promotes this kind of involvement (Mahiri, 1998). Ironically, Chaquita was exhibiting attributes of the same hip-hop culture from which she was trying to save her son. Gangs and the illegal work in which they engage have routinely been mentioned in hip-hop music, but Chaquita clearly did not seem to want this lifestyle for her son.

Critical consciousness and cultural orientation. Shameka, on the other hand, appeared to align herself more closely with a mainstream orientation and did not speak directly to her daughters' teachers about her concerns. Her resistance to what she perceived to be racist treatment appeared to come in the form of her instructions to her

daughters. She seemed to know that they would encounter racism in various circumstances throughout their lives, so she used the situation involving her daughter's teacher to offer them coping mechanisms that she seemed to hope would allow them to transcend the negative impact of racism, both real and imagined. In contrast to Chaquita, whose cultural orientation appeared to be exclusively aligned with hip/hop culture, aspects of Shameka's cultural orientation seemed to align with both mainstream and aspects of African American culture such as her ability to cope with the racist behavior of her daughter' teachers. For instance, her reaction to the teacher was not confrontational, which might suggest to the teacher that she was in agreement with her behavior. However, Shameka quickly contributed to her daughters' learning how to cope with and resist racist behavior, which suggested that she was aligned with African American culture. Because of this two-ness of personality (Dubois, 1903/1994), I consider Shameka a "boundary-crosser," or one who can function comfortably in a variety of cultures and Discourses. Shameka seemed to teach her daughters by her example to be boundary-crossers as well.

Focusing on critical consciousness by addressing racism and power. In addition to addressing the individuals who presented a threat to their children, Shameka and Chaquita's pedagogical approach appeared to focus on critical consciousness by addressing institutional racism and systems of domination or power that work against people of Color. Chaquita seemed to be well aware of the fact that her son was a part of a community where forces of violence were claiming young boys. In the scene above, she is approached by young boys who ask her permission to initiate her son into a gang. These forces seem to be a symptom of a larger problem of racism and lack of educational

and economic opportunity, and the boys were enacting these forces. Shameka also appeared to have a clear understanding that her daughters were a part of a school system where African American children from her community have not generally been successful. Shameka told me that she understood that there were a number of negative influences in her community that could distract children from setting goals and achieving them. One such influence that Shameka mentioned specifically was the presence of gangs in Gardners Corners. From a critical sociocultural perspective, Chaquita's and Shameka's plight both have significant implications about the nature of racism in American society. As residents of a low-income community and African Americans, these families encountered the oppressive forces of subordination. By teaching their children to recognize and resist these forces, Shameka and Chaquita seemed to focus on their children's critical consciousness and created *environments of excellence.*

Act II: Traditional Teacher/Transformed Teacher

The scenes in Act II correspond to the second research question:

How do teachers who teach students who live in this low-income community identify children who benefit from an *environment of excellence* in their community?

The discussion turns to stories that give deeper insight into teachers' perceptions of families and students. I interviewed two groups of teachers for this study. The first consisted of four European American teachers and one African American teacher from the school that Shameka's and Chaquita's children attended. After transcribing the interview I conducted with the first group of teachers, I realized that I still had questions about the perspectives of teachers of Color since there was only one African American teacher in that first group. I then arranged a second focus group interview. The second group consisted of three African American teachers and one self-identified Hispanic teacher who worked with the children in the *Freedom Readers* program. A close examination of data collected from both groups led me to the following key finding: The race, experience, and habitus of teachers influence the ways in which they sort students into categories.

In addition, I discovered that just as two distinct cultural orientations, boundary crosser and hip-hop, seemed to characterize the parents' practices, two distinct perspectives appeared to characterize the teachers, Traditional and Transformed. Traditional teachers seemed to use deficit language as they described low-income communities and the families that lived there, while Transformed teachers seemed to be more intentional about contextualizing student behavior. Also, Traditional teachers reported either never having spent time in low-income communities, or suggested that

their time spent in those communities had little impact on their worldview. Traditional

teachers seemed to have adopted a colorblind perspective toward teaching Transformed

teachers, on the other hand, reported having spent time in low-income communities either

as residents or volunteers. It seems that these encounters and experiences either shaped

Transformed Teachers' view of the world or changed the way they perceived and

addressed students. In addition, the Transformed Teachers did not use deficit language to

describe students. In this study, seven of the teacher participants appeared to be

Traditional, while two of the teacher participants seemed to be Transformed. Of the two

teachers that seemed to fit the criteria for Transformed teachers, one, Annie, was African

American and one, Diane, was European American. Of the seven teachers that appeared

to fit the Traditional category, four were European American and three were African

American.

Scene 1: Jamie's monologue

Setting

Although I interviewed five teachers at Creekside Elementary, I focus exclusively

on one teacher, Jamie, who, according to the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2009;

Picower, 2009) represented the vast majority of teachers in this country in terms of

demographics. She was young, European American and middle class. She is also

representative in that her comments reflect a shared consciousness that reflects an

expressed desired to treat all students in the same manner. Jamie, a Traditional teacher in

the sense that her descriptions of children from low-income communities seemed to be

characterized by deficit language and she seldom contextualized student behavior, had

been chosen by the principal to be leader of the team, and she was the most vocal

respondent during the interview. The questions that I asked during the focus group interview referenced the children of Gardners Corners, all of whom are African American, but in describing the children, Jamie did not mention race, focusing instead on the socioeconomic class of the students. This is another attribute of the Traditional Teacher who has adopted a colorblind perspective that does not seem to take into account students' race and culture. Jamie's sentiments were echoed in the comments shared with me by seven of the nine teachers who participated in the study. As a child, Jamie grew up in a two parent household in Freetown. As an adult, she is married and is the mother of two boys.

Chorus:	**Our children have a right to a good education. Hear us when we tell you that this is our strongest desire. Hear the voice of our brother Carter G. Woodson: "The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples…No systematic effort toward change has been possible, for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor." We challenge you to think on these things.**
	Jamie When I visited Gardners Corners, I noticed that there was a lot of you know... several family members, extended family in the home. Periods where there was no employment. Periods where some of them were working for a short period of time. Not a lot of stability in that household. But I have had other children from that area...I've seen a great support system with those extended family members. An aunt or an uncle or a grandmother that really were the people at home when that child got home and made sure homework was done for the cousins, for themselves and everything too. So I've seen both kinda family situations. The positive and the negative. Having those mixed families. Or maybe even in the same area. If they didn't live in the same apartment, both families living at Gardners Corners.
	Yeah we have high achieving students out there, too.

I'll give you one. This happened the other day. I sent home spelling tests that needed to be signed. And I told the parent that if they're not signed your child will be on the wall. K? Outside, which is recess that's taken from them. Not the whole recess. I was lenient and gave him five minutes for the first time. Child brought it back and mama wrote, "You do not punish my child for something I did not do." And I...I mean it was ugly. The child comes up to me and says my mama wants me switched out of this classroom. I was like, "What?" I mean, it's a miscommunication here. I told you, you know whatever, but everything's fine now. I looked at her and said, "OK if you want to go to a different class, why don't you go visit Ms. T?" And she did. She don't want to go back.

 I meant she realized that she has the same rules that I have. And we had that conversation prior too. But, things like that...I've never seen the woman. Never. She has not bothered to come in here and meet me. But conversations like that. You know, I'm like, you just are going on what your child said and you don't even bother asking me, the adult here in the situation.

 I'm real to em. I just say, "Look this is what he did and this is what we're going to do. What do you want me to do? What would you do?"
 You know, that kind of thing. Um, when my children come in I individualize them like I told you earlier. I would...OK... I wanna know how you're doing. I don't treat every kid the same way. I don't mean that in a funny way. It's like I individualize and I try to say, OK, well maybe you need more love today or maybe you need more structure today. I'm not gonna ... i have a child that likes to stand up all day long he does not like to sit down. I don't doc him every time. I don't say, Oh you're standing up again. Go pull your name. Whereas somebody that sits down all the time and just gets up and walks across the class, yes. I will have them pull their name. I know that doesn't make sense to a lot of people but that's what I do because you have to know your children in order, because if you turn them off, they're gone.

Half of them don't want to go home.

That breaks your heart.

 I had one boy tell me he was scared to go home because there were police at his house. He says, "I don't like it when the police come to my house." And so obviously that's something that happens constantly.

What do I mean by street smart? They take care of themselves. They get brother or sister ready for school. Mom and dad aren't even awake yet. Some of the kids...they do not get breakfast. They wait to come here to get breakfast because they have not eaten... Their clothes are mismatched. The way they speak. The way they talk to one another. I had a little girl today say, "I'm gone jack you up."

"What do you mean you're gonna jack me up? Where'd you hear that from?"

"Oh, my daddy says it."

You know that kinda thing. Or mom and dad don't come home. They're latch key kids, you know, whatever. You hear them in conversation say--cause they are brutally honest--you know. And that's what I mean when I say "street smart" 'cause they know more. Some of them know more than I do about things. Not reallly.

Like me, with my son, my child weighed one pound when he was born. He was three months early. Tiny little thing. Now he's nine and a half. And he's going into fourth grade this year. I moved him back to third. He could not do it. He started showing signs of um, stress, you know, and just scared and I said, I moved him to a school in Read Town. Now I'm moving him back because that school, it was a charter school and it just did not provide the extra help that he needed, so I'm moving him back here with me. I love, I mean, we are the school that provides for any child whatever you need. Well-rounded, and that's why I'm bringing him back. Because we have the resources here at this school being a Title I school. We have the resources. And I can be with him in the afternoons, and he wasn't having that before. I just don't ...as a parent as a mother, i totally get both sides of the spectrum.

You know, if the parents hold them accountable...OH... but I have kids that fail a spelling test over and over and over and parents just sign it. They sign it and I haven't heard from them since.

I'm like, "How do you expect them to do better if they are not held accountable? You're not showing them accountability."

Unpacking Jamie's Perceptions

Jamie was an active and caring teacher who went above and beyond to meet the needs of her students. In her monologue, we heard her talking about going to children's homes and individualizing instruction. Professional literature (Moll, 2001; Long et al,

2008) has shown that many European American teachers have spent little time in low-income or African American communities, but Jamie does not fit that description. She has stepped outside her comfort zone. It is important to note here that Jamie, like all of the participants in this study, is complex and nuanced. Though she appeared to be a Traditional teacher, I am not suggesting that her behaviors can always be interpreted in the same way. In addition, teachers in this study were sorted into categories based on one hour long focus group interview and follow-up interviews. My assertions are therefore based on the preponderance of data collected during that time, and may have been influenced in different ways by data collection methods or a series of focus groups.

Her perception of the students living in Gardners Corners seemed to have been colored and shaped by her own personal experiences, and her comments seemed to reveal that her lived experiences had been shaped by her racial identity. When she talked about the children, she described them in particular ways, mentioning first the number of people that could be found in their homes -- some of whom were, according to Jaimie, undereducated or unemployed, had problems with transportation, and the received visits by the police. A few of these characteristics mirrored the activities and situations I also encountered when I spent time with Chaquita and Shameka in Gardners Corners, however, Jamie did not contextualize these situations or acknowledge the wide range of experiences and stories that came out of this community. For example, she did not mention the fact that there were single-mothers like Shameka who set up strict guidelines for homework completion each day. In her emphasis on individual families and students, she failed to mention that neighborhoods like Gardners Corners are a manifestation of a larger issue of racial and economic stratification in this country. She also did not appear

to understand the realities of conducting a family's business without access to reliable transportation.

In essence, many of Jamie's comments seemed to reflect a lack of understanding of what poverty is and why it exists. Poverty in African American communities can be traced back to hundreds of years of racial discrimination which began when European settlers created inferiority myths about enslaved Africans to justify their cruelty (Compton-Lilly, 2003). These myths have persisted and continue to impact the educational and employment opportunities of African Americans. Without an understanding of this reality, teachers like Jamie find it difficult to understand why families like those living in Gardners Corners would choose the life they lived. She appeared to distance herself from these individuals because she seemed to fail to grasp the concept that poverty is not a lifestyle choice, but a set of circumstances containing elements that are beyond a person's control. For instance, since they do not have access to high level of economic or cultural capital neither Shameka nor Chaquita can make decisions about which jobs are available and at which time of the year these jobs are available. Shameka and Chaquita do not have the cultural capital, privilege, or power to make such decisions. Without this understanding, it appeared virtually impossible for Jamie to connect with students and families on a level that communicated empathy and cultivated trust.

Jamie also told a story in this monologue about her own son who was born at a low birth weight. Because of her access to resources, she was able to place her son in a special school. Many of the parents living on low-income communities do not have this luxury. Although Shameka considered sending Diamond to a different school because

that school had a better rating, Shameka was restricted in her choices by which busses came to her community and which schools were chosen for her as alternatives by the school district. Jamie, on the other hand, as a teacher in the district, not only had the luxury of sending her child to a charter school, but she even enjoyed the freedom to move him to the school in which she taught when he was not comfortable at the charter school.

Critical scholars refer to this type of freedom to negotiate bureaucratic systems without hindrance as "privilege" or "White Privilege," and it is characterized as being so ingrained into American life that those who have privilege are not aware of its existence (McIntosh, 1991; Johnson, 2006). Due to this lack of awareness of her own privilege, Jamie was not positioned to see the differences in her parenting style and that of mothers like Chaquita and Shameka as mere differences. She appeared to have been socialized to see these differences as deficiencies and indicators of inferiority. For instance, Jamie spoke about a student in her class using the phrase, "I'll jack you up." Jamie seemed to believe that this use of language was negative, and that parents should not speak this way in front of children. She called students who use this kind of language "street smart," a term I interpreted as pejorative as used by Jamie in this context. However, the use of such an expression as "I'll jack you up" in Gardners Corners may have been acceptable. Where Jamie perceived such talk as threatening, Shameka and Chaquita might not notice it at all.

Scene 2: African American Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs

In my interviews with teachers of Color, I found that these women held some of the same biases and prejudices as their European American counterparts. In detailing the perceived identity of students living in low-income communities they used words and

phrases such as "repeat offenders", "unable to focus or complete a task", "angry" and "aggressive." Unlike the European American teachers, teachers of Color did talk about the expressiveness and high level of stimulation that characterized the African American church and could be seen in the behavior of some African American students. When I first asked them about race—something I was too afraid to do in my interview with the European American teachers—many of them said that it was not a factor in the education of any child. After the sharing of stories about negative experiences we have had with our own biological children and their European American teachers, the tide turned and all of the teachers admitted that race did play a role. Several times the teachers mentioned that European American teachers seemed to utilize conceptual boxes for sorting which student behaviors are right and which ones are wrong. Any students that behaved in ways that did not fit into the box marked "right" would be marginalized, and more African American students failed to fit into that box.

Chorus:	**We want the children to have a good education. This is our strongest desire. Hear again from our brother, Carter G. Woodson: "Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do. In other words, a Negro teacher instructing Negro children is in many respects, a white teacher thus engaged, for the program in each case is about the same."**
Tracy:	*We have come a long way and we are continuing to tear down the walls. We are creating spaces where successful African American teachers feel free to be themselves. We will call on their voices to lead us because they are making a difference. But each of us must first examine the poisoned air we have been breathing. We will take on new paradigms and throw off the manacles of slavery once and for all.*

Scene 3: Annie's Monologue

I chose Annie's monologue because she represents multiple perspectives since she is the only teacher in the study to have experienced life from multiple economic contexts and points of view. As a child, she lived in a low-income community not far from Gardners Corners, so she knows what it is like to be an African American student from a low-income community in the district's schools. As an adult, she has been both an involved single-parent and a classroom teacher. Annie's voice brings life to the lived experiences of Shameka and Chaquita; thus her monologue demonstrates the major tenet of sociocultural theory. In addition, her lived experiences have been shaped by her racial identity and her recent quest to bring together her newly acquired professional identity and her long held racial and cultural identity. Her monologue serves to add "necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of positivist perspectives" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 22). Annie also did not seem to have adopted a colorblind perspective. During the focus group interview, she raised the issue of the race of her students while answering the first question. Once the issue was introduced, I asked follow-up questions about race of the entire group. Annie's point of view emphasizes the reality that race does matter in today's classrooms and communities.

Chorus: **We celebrate the ones who give back to the community and remain connected to their roots. We call on our brother W.E.B. DuBois: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Dubois, 1903/1994, p. 2)**

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Annie: I have felt like an outsider in the school setting. I never felt it as much until I reached the professional status. I didn't see and feel and discover as much in that area until I became a professional. When you are not, you are not let in on a lot of things. "Oh, poor you" or "Here, let me help you." That's how it was before. They (European-American teachers) automatically assume that they are superior. But now you are open to other things. Once you become on certain people's level they are like, "Oh, who let her out?" They say to me, "We didn't know you felt this way." I tell them that they didn't ask. They don't consider me if I'm not professional. So you would never know my thoughts and opinion about the situation. I was in a meeting and the whole Black History Program came up and the whole moaning and groaning about it. The perspective that I come from...being in it, and they complain about the same old things you always hear,
"Well, it's their history. You gotta give 'em their history."
"Well, can you give them a different history? Can you let them know that there are wealthy African Americans?"
Then the lady said, "We gotta teach 'em about Ruby Payne."
And I said, "You don't have to teach them about her."
And she said, "No! No! You know that lady who sat on the bus?"
And I said, "You don't have to teach them about Rosa Parks."
I said, "The perspective that we are coming from ...."
"We're?"
"Yeah, I'm on the committee."

Not trying to be funny, but with my White husband I'm almost in the door but not far enough. It's just a lot. It's a lot. So I had to let them know how I felt. I said you know it's not just our African American history. I want y'all to know that we have American history. I have a problem with putting that I'm an African American. I understand my history. I understand my people came from Africa. I understand that. There is nothing shameful about that. But my thing is, I was born and raised here in America. Why can't I be an American? Why they have to be a Native American? African American? You are not a Caucasian American. You're pretty much Caucasian or White.

I have 19 students and I am positive that 17 of them come from a low-income community.

The students from these communities that succeed, you can tell their parents are pushing them.

I can tell by observing their behavior. I have one that really fits that description. She is pretty much always hungry. I believe she has

food, don't get me wrong. And she steals. I think she is stealing because she doesn't have. She's as smart as a whip. She lives with both parents. I think she gets the attention she needs, but I think that certain things other kids have her family can't afford. Her family moves a lot. To me, that's how I could tell that she comes from a low-income community.

Parents say,
"I send them out there to you. You deal with it."
Just from my experience coming up too I know that ...I have kids even from non-poverty backgrounds whose parents won't show up. I think it's another issue. I really think it has to do with me and my big Black self sitting there trying to be professional.
"You don't need to be telling me anything about my kid. I send him to school, you teach him, that's it."
Also, there are other reasons even with the poverty situation. I remember my mom couldn't go. It wasn't that she didn't care, she couldn't go because she worked two jobs. And in her mind it was like,
"I send you to school 7 1/2 hours, you better act right. You better do what you're supposed to do. Come home, I don't want anything said. It's your responsibility to get these papers out for me to sign."
I don't even remember a parent/teacher conference. And that could just be my memory, I don't know. But at the same time, my mom didn't drive. She was not about to pay for a cab to go to the school. You know. I see that part of it with a lot of the kids in my class. But I also see some of them that just won't come.
"Well, I see the spelling tests she brings home and she's making A's so I don't need to talk to you."
That kinda thing.

They put them all in one box. If you're not doing it our way, then you're this. You're not concerned. They put them all in one box. Because if you're not doing A, B, C, D, then a red flag goes up, you're not concerned. And that's not the case all the time.

Some of them (European-American Teachers) never even got started with the compassion.

I saw a parent in the grocery store and I was buying steaks. They were on sale for $1 and she was buying wine coolers. I felt like I had to apologize, and then she told me that she didn't know how to do her child's homework. I explained that because of her age she didn't have to do that kind of homework. I tried to make her feel comfortable by asking her what flavor. I felt ashamed that she saw those three steaks in my buggy. I wanted her to know, I'm just like

you. I'm really just like you. I needed her to know that. We have to remember that just because this kid can wear--whatever--I don't know nothing about designer clothes--my husband says,
"You are so racist against your own people."
But I'm not. I'm mixed up. Somehow I just want to be this heroic person to help MY people see the difference in what's really important. But then that's crazy because I'm leaving other people in my classroom out.

Most of the teachers of Color that I know have a stronger desire to help students of Color and I think that poses a problem when it comes to other people. Then you tell them that you don't know how to teach my African American child. It's true, though. They gotta realize that. Some people don't.

Some people care about whether they know how and some people don't. There is a way to teach my African American child, and you have to see color.

You have to see it respectfully. You can't see it in judging. You gotta know I'm different and you're different. Now let's get together and see what we're going to do about this.

Unpacking Annie's Perceptions

There were a number of striking aspects in the monologue Annie delivers. First, it is important to note that although she strongly identified with being African American, she said that she did not want to be known as such. In this instance, it is clear that Annie had a deep longing to be accepted into mainstream American society. Like me, she had struggled for a very long time to attain some measure of success in mainstream society, and she wanted to be recognized for all that she has accomplished. She extended this idea by mentioning the fact that her husband is European American and that his affiliation with her offered credibility to her claim to be a part of mainstream American society. It seemed that in her view, his endorsement along with her college degree and her entry into the professional level of education legitimized her status as an "American" not just an African American, a label she clearly deemed inferior.

However, after proclaiming that the African part of her "African Americaness" was an unwanted burden, she told a gripping story about being a part of her school's committee to produce a Black History Program. These instances demonstrate Annie's confusion and ambivalence regarding issues of race and identity, a feeling that is not uncommon and so clearly captured by Dubois' concept of "double-consciousness." To use his words, she is "looking at herself through the eyes of others" (Dubois, 1994, p. 2) those "others" in this case being the European American teachers with whom she worked. In her monologue it is clear to see the ideals that she held dear — her affiliation with her own culture and her striving toward mainstream success — waging war against one another.

In terms of the perceived identity that Annie has of African American children who benefit from *environments of excellence* in low-income communities, she was less conflicted. She described the transient lifestyles of families saying that they moved a lot, and pointed to her belief that the parents of high achieving students must be "pushing them." In stark contrast to all but one of the other teachers included in this study, Annie did not mention one attribute of the students in question without contextualizing her comments. For instance, when she talked about a girl in her class who was always hungry and had been known to steal, she followed-up by pointing out that the child came from a nurturing two-parent home, but her family simply could not afford to buy the things that some of the other students had. Instead of implying that there must be some deep moral defect in the child, she offered reasons that helped outsiders begin to understand the child's motivations and resulting behaviors.

Annie's race, experience, and habitus, or comfort zone, came into play in three important areas: empathy, equity and two-ness. Because Annie could claim a shared race, shared experiences, and shared habitus with African American children who benefit from *environments of excellence* in low-income communities, she was able to empathize with their plight and see the world from a perspective that was closely aligned with the children's and their parents' perspectives. Annie expressed a willingness to collaborate with parents in the struggle toward academic achievement, and went out of her way to let parents know that she was "just like them." However, this affiliation with the children and their parents also led to feelings of guilt and shame for Annie. She seemed to have bought-in to the idea that equality in education is more important than equity.

Sociocultural theorists (Vygotsky, 1978) take the lived experiences of all students into account, and by virtue of the nature of our human uniqueness, lived experiences will be different. But those who believe that all students must be treated in the very same manner and with the very same approach -- those who promote equality over equity -- do not believe that different treatment is fair or just. In reality, in order to give all students equal access to a high quality education, background, race, class, and interests must be considered (Nieto, 2010). Had Annie's recognized this, her feeling about assisting African American children may have been different.

From a critical sociocultural perspective, it is this effort to treat everyone the same that has kept schools from improving and educators owing an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) to students. A mindset rooted in equity would have allowed Annie to think about the impact that poverty and racism had on the learning processes of her students without guilt. Finally, Annie's perceptions about the students in question and

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about herself are wrapped up in the idea of "two-ness." I noticed that she apologized often, to African American parents, for wanting to help students of Color, even for being herself during the interview. She apologized to the African American parent in the grocery store because she was buying steaks, an act that in her mind, is reserved for the elite. She did not want the parent to believe that she was positioning herself as "better." She sent me a message a few hours after our initial talk to find out if I thought her behavior was truly professional. It appeared that Annie was being shaped and reshaped daily by societal forces that told her constantly to deny her culture, while she strived desperately to both resist these forces and embrace them all at once.

The scenes in Act III correspond to the third research question: What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participant families and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home and school practices in support of marginalized children?

At this point, I juxtaposed the voices of the teachers and parents to allow them to dialogue with one another in ways that lead to important insights. To this end, I utilized the ethnopoetics structure I described at the beginning of this chapter, and placed the words of the participants side by side. A close and careful examination of data collected from both parents and teachers led me to the following key finding: While there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibilities for critical conversations.

Scene 1: Points of Divergence and Convergence Between Parents' Practices and Teachers' Perceptions

Setting

All of the characters, Shameka and Chaquita and the seven teachers, are standing on stage. Each has a separate spotlight cast upon her when it is her turn to speak.

Parents' Ethnopoetics   Teachers' Ethnopoetics

Jamie
I have a child in here, she asked
me...I asked her where her
homework was. She said, "My mom
used it for her weed." I said,
"Excuse me?" She said, "Yeah, you
know how you roll it up?" and she
knew it all. I said, "Well what do
you do when your mom's doing
that?" She said, "She give me

Nyquil and I go to bed." So of course we have to go through the whole thing of the process of channels and where we have to go and call and all. I just feel so bad. I mean she was sleeping in here. There was a reason and I was wondering, you know. And I finally asked her and she blurted it out. And I just went. AH! Mom jerked her out of school, got upset. But now she's back.

Tracy/Chaquita

She explains that she has been smoking marijuana. She explains that this is the reason that they removed her daughter from the home a few years ago. "I thought I did the test the best way I could, but they told the DSS people that I was incapable of taking care of myself let alone my children. The report was, though, that I was smoking the other stuff. I was like, fine, I'll cooperate, but you won't find anything in my system but marijuana. That's all they found. But I failed the test and they took my daughter. I failed both tests but I didn't have in my system what they came there to find. (Crack Cocaine)" She also failed a psychological test. "I was like, Wow. They are taking kids just for smoking marijana? The house was clean. I had plenty food, light, water. I didn't understand that one."

Tracy

Christina is doing her homework. She is being helped by a family friend. Henry.

Jamie

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I have one parent that can't read. Or a grandparent and the child goes home with him until mom gets home and um, he (The grand parent) came in and see if he could set up a time where I could help him (The grandchild) during class or in the morning when he first gets here because his dad can't read it.

Tracy
Juwan tells me that he is finished with all of his homework. His mom calls him outside and gives him instructions about chores. He responds with "Yes, Ma'am." Juwan leaves and Christina goes to do her homework.

Carol
And their hygeine. Like they are literally dirty. They come to school with dirt on them.

Sarah
But you hug them and everything the same as everybody else, and it's all in how you treat them. And your approach to them. "You might be dirty, but I still love ya."

Chaquita
House rules: Respect yourself. Respect your environment. Respect your elders. Do not steal from me. Do not lie to me.

Chaquita
Let me tell you how I got my baby mind set up. He used to get in fights because people used to pick at him because he was in special ed class. Now he will tell children, like, "So I

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might be in that class. That don't mean I'm dumb. Matter of fact my mama tell me it's ok to be dumb as long as you ain't stupid."

And I be like, "Malik, you got anger in you?"

He leave the little boy leaking (bleeding) *and mess up the teacher arm cause her try to break up the fight. Ms. Taylor.*

Natasha
As far as what I do behavior-wise and they have to come and see me, um. I know right away which kids have parents that are involved and which don't. The ones who come in crying or they're really sorry or they'll talk to me about what happened, I know that they have that support at home. Whereas, I have kids that come in and they don't care. They don't see a problem with what they did and no amount of words that I tell them is gonna fix that and I've watched our assistant principal. We have a child that can't sit still and they are all just as filled with anger and energy.

Shameka
I punish them even more if they lie to me. I respect honesty. They'll go outside...Diamond had a little boyfriend running around. She said, "I just go out there so he can buy me candy." That's not how I taught you to be.

Shameka

In this community it's so easy to fall into bad. It's out here. All these different gangs. They have all these different gangs and I didn't even know they had them. I'm just now finding out. Like weekend before last I found out about these two different little gangs, and I'm like, are you serious? I didn't know that. And from what I understand, it's out here bad. And a lot of the kids are being drafted into this stuff or, you know, brought into this. With that type of negativity hanging around seeing stuff like that, it does make it easier for kids to fall into it. Especially if they're not getting the type of structure at home.

Diane
When the staff came back and you got your class roll, we got on the bus as a staff and we rode through Learning Town. Cause, I've been to Learning Town because I've done a lot of volunteer work down there. But a lot of the teachers didn't and I live in the South Learning Town Community. So I had been to Learning Town taking children home, but there were plenty of teachers who taught there for years and had never bothered to drive to Learning Town. And that's primarily where our children came from. And our parents. I always did, when we had like a parent/teacher conference or something, I did one at Learning Town library and one at South Learning Town so that I could try to reach more parents.

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And it was successful and stuff. But to drive through there, it's a lot easier to understand why a child doesn't have homework when they don't even have anything but a garbage bag covering their window and it's Christmas time and they're freezing.

Shameka
When the school came out here and had their little fun day at the Center, that was a really good idea. Because instantly the kids are into it which means the parents have to be over there because they put plain as day on their paper, "The only way that your child can get anything is if the parent comes." That's perfect. That was awesome. That was great. Cause now you get the parents involved. "Now I have to go out here." Cause the kids are nagging the parents like, "Mom, I really want to go. They got stuff. Can we go get the stuff," you know? I really thought that was really creative.

Annie
The students from these communities that succeed, you can tell their parents are pushing them.

Shameka
Pushing them. Showing them what will happen. If you keep up with your good grades this is what will happen. You can go to any college that you want to. You can become this, you can become that. Things like that. Giving them that motivation, that's all they need. That's all my kids need. I keep telling them about all the different colleges and all the different things

you can go to school for, all the different things you can become.

Shameka
I am an active mom, I really am. I just can't get there. I really don't think they understand that. I think they're looking at it like, throwing me in that category of, "She doesn't care." And I mean it's like things happen. And I'm in a situation at the moment where I can't come up there and have these conversations that I normally would have. Like I can't wait to show 'em. Cause I am there...like there, there. I want to call you and tell you we need to meet up because now I'm concerned about this right here. You know? They will know. It is frustrating. It really is. Cause for them to come home and ...Tramice came home with a bad grade. All of her grades weren't bad, but she had a few grades that I didn't like. Had I had a vehicle, the next day, "When is your teacher time because I'm gonna come up there. We need to discuss what we need to do to get

Rebecca
They talked about more African American kids getting in trouble on Monday morning. Well, what do most African American kids do on Sunday morning? They go to church. They are loud. But if you are not a person of Color you wouldn't know that. You don't know that child is coming to you, he's still happy and joyful. If we don't know the culture, then we put them in a box. If you don't take classes that teach you how different cultures behave, you won't understand the child. You might mistreat the child.

this together." I just want them to
know that things do happen.
Everybody is just not involved. But I
am a very involved
parent.

Chorus: **They ask us who is responsible. We are all responsible. The policies and practices that are structural barriers must be removed. School systems need to provide educational interventions. We are all responsible. Teachers who understand the plight of our children must act and speak on their behalf. We are all responsible. Parents must keep pushing the children and encouraging them to strive. We are all responsible. You must stand up, speak out, and assume responsibility. You must take your rightful place amongst the scholars who have paved the way. You must continue, even into the next generation, to speak our names. And you must not forget.**

Tracy: *I will re-member. And I will listen to the voices coming from the right and the left. I will find a way to build a bridge. I will emphasize the common ground. I will prepare a pathway wide enough to walk shoulder to shoulder, two by two, into new environments of excellence in schools. And together, parents and teachers, we will lift ev'ry voice.*

Unpacking Parent Practice and Teacher Perception

In Act III, points of convergence and points of divergence between parent practice and teacher perception seemed to be evident. Points of divergence appeared to include the frequency with which parents contextualized their children's behaviors, teachers' greater emphasis on rules than on academic progress, and parents' increased expectations due to lack of resources. In terms of convergence, both parents and teachers mention the difficulty some children may have in relating to others, the importance of rules, and the problems that arise from the lack of access to resources.

Points of divergence. Parent practice and teacher perceptions seemed to diverge in a number of important ways. These differences presented the greatest challenges to

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transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home and school practices in support of marginalized children.

Contextualizing behaviors. Parents appeared to understand the context of their children's behavior and sought to employ strategies for helping students cope, whereas, Traditional Teachers seemed to perceive the behavior as further justification for the individual failings of parents. In Act III, a teacher commented that the children were "repeat offenders" who can be identified by their uncaring attitudes and disconnected parents. What this teacher failed to articulate is the fact that not all behavior perceived as disruptive or negative can be accurately classified in the same way. Some, but not all, behavior perceived as aggressive or angry may be explained by the families' alignment with a hip-hop orientation that is simply resistant to the mainstream culture or by the vervistic nature of the family's culture (Boykin, 1982; Mahiri, 1998).

Rules over academics. Where parent practice and teacher perception appeared to diverge is in the teachers' focus on correct behavior as a more important task than promoting academic excellence. Teachers commented on the need to help students remember to get papers signed and be accountable for themselves and their work. As an example in Malik's case, he was referred to special education environments not because of his academics but on his behavior. In speaking about students who benefit from *environments of excellence,* the topic of academics was rarely discussed by teachers.

Parents have higher expectations for their children. While some teachers seemed to see a family's lack of resources as an obstacle to students' academic success, parents seemed to push their students to excel academically so they might have a better life. For instance, Shameka talked to her children about all of the careers they might have

if they made good grades. Chaquita often told Malik that he was smart despite being placed in a special education class. Shameka and Chaquita both seemed to see school as a passport out of poverty and pushed their children to take advantage of the opportunity to do well in school.

Points of convergence. Parent practice and teacher perception did not always appear to be at odds. In a number of cases, parent practice and teacher perception seemed to be aligned.

Difficulty relating to others. Although the only instance of her daughters' possible trouble dealing with others that Shameka reported involved a classroom teacher, Chaquita spoke about this topic at length. Shameka and her daughters dealt with the teacher trouble in a quiet and non-confrontational way. Shameka also told me about another time when her youngest daughter asked her teacher if she could call home to ask Shameka to bring her jacket. The teacher replied by asking. "Why? You know she's not gonna come." Shameka appeared to handle this situation in much the same way she did when Tramice and Diamond told her of a teacher's racist attitude: "You know, I was upset. I was so upset. So I calmed myself down and I just wrote a little note and let her know whenever she needs to call me for something important let her call me. I am available at all times. You know. When something happens and I can't come up there, then I will send somebody else to come up there. And there you go. I left it at that." Chaquita and her sons do not choose this approach. Her son, Malik, had been involved in a number of physical altercations with other students, and there had been instances when teachers had been involved as well. A teacher in Act III mentioned that students from

low-income communities were often angry and reactionary. Both parents and teachers seemed to realize that this issue should be addressed.

The importance of rules. Parents and teachers both spoke of the importance of establishing and enforcing rules. Chaquita mentioned that she had a list of house rules, and each one of her children could recite them. Chaquita enforced consequences if those rules were broken. Shameka also taught her children about being honest. For instance, Shameka admonished Diamond when she said she was going to spend time with a little boy in the neighborhood just so he could give her candy. Shameka emphasized to Diamond that she had not been raised that way. In addition Shameka also told me of a time that she punished Diamond because she was caught stealing from an area store. When Shameka realized what had happened, she had Diamond create a sign that she could hang around her neck that read, "Don't trust me. I like to steal." A teacher in Act III mentioned that students have trouble sitting still, a required behavior in most classrooms. In addition, an African American teacher commented that African American children who have attended church services in a lively and loud African American church on Sundays were more likely to be active in class on Monday mornings.

The power of relationships. Another area where teachers and parents' beliefs seemed to have converged is in the area of relationship building. Both groups appeared to agree that nurturing, positive relationships between the child and the adult are extremely important in a learning environment. As demonstrated in Act III, through their strong, supportive relationships with their children, Shameka and Chaquita pushed them to achieve academic success. For example, Shameka speaks about explaining to her children

that keeping their grades high can result in a number of desirable outcomes. She said that this kind of talk is all the motivation that her daughters need.

Problems related to lack of access to resources. Finally, parents and teachers spoke about the hardships that resulted from a lack of resources such as reliable transportation. One example of this is when Chaquita had to walk to school for an emergency meeting with her son's teacher and administrator. Parents seemed to speak about not having transportation as a temporary inconvenience that they would overcome. Teachers also spoke about the burdens and challenges of families that did not own a car, but they seemed to view this reality as another disadvantage with which the children had to struggle. Teachers also mentioned the physical condition of children who had dirt on them, or wore clothes that did not match.

Points of divergence and convergence and critical sociocultural theory. Scholars (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Noguera 2003), who point to the importance of experiences and socialization that take place outside the classroom emphasize two of the above areas of divergence and convergence between parent practice and teacher perception: difficulty relating to others and the power of relationships. In terms of relating to others, sociocultural theorists maintain that knowing a child's background is key in determining how to help the child gain social skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Not only are the immediate contexts of the learners' situation important, but the historical and global impact of the learners' story should also be considered. In the cases of Shameka's and Chaquita's families, race and class seemed to be important factors in why their children behaved the way that they did in school. For instance, Malik played football with great intensity at home. When that intensity was exhibited at school,

however, he was disciplined. Chaquita spoke to me of having to attend emergency meetings at school because teachers said that Malik's interaction with another student started as horseplay, but ended in a fight. Sociocultural theorists also pay particular attention to the relationships that are built in learning spaces because learning together is a significant aspect of intellectual growth. According to Vygotsky (1978) learners can go beyond what they already know when they have the support of a trusted peer or teacher who can help them move to the next level of cognitive development. When relationships are strained learners are less likely to take risks and accept the academic support that is being offered.

Critical scholars have pointed to the overemphasis of rules in America's classroom as a tool for maintaining the status quo (Kincheloe, 2008). As Milner (2013) asserts, some students in today's schools are being educated to govern and others are learning how to be governed. Professional literature has demonstrated a stronger emphasis on rules in urban schools and special education classrooms, both of which are overwhelmingly populated by students of Color (Nieto, 2010). This difference in teaching approaches leads to the reproduction of a stratified society where affluent European American children graduate prepared for college, while African American children from low-income communities graduate with only basic skills (Noguera, 2003). Knowing this reality, parents like Shameka and Chaquita emphasized to their children the importance of academic excellence. For example, both Chaquita and Shameka established and maintained a strict homework routine with their children, and both mothers followed up with the school to ensure that academic progress was taking place. They spoke to their children about setting goals and accomplishing them. Shameka

especially motivated her daughters in this way. From a critical perspective, this extra push is necessary for African American students living in low-income areas because racism is so ingrained into American society that extra effort is needed to escape its grip (Milner, 2013).

In terms of educational pursuits, Jay (2003) maintains that, "the teaching of transformative knowledge poses a serious threat to the dominant power structures operating in American society that privileges Whites over all other racial groups (p. 5)." Dominant power structures are not sitting by idly while families strive to obtain power. They are pushing back and reinforcing obstacles to advancement in the educational realm. Traditional Teachers who fail to recognize this reality often approach their work with less urgency and intensity than parents and families who are at the mercy of this reality.

Points of convergence and divergence and sites of possibility. In order to leverage the cultural crossovers mentioned above and foreground points of convergence, parents and teachers need to find *sites of possibility* (Jennings, Jewett, Souto-Manning, Tropp Laman & Wilson, 2010), or spaces in which dialogue can lead to transformative and productive work. These engagements allow groups of people with diverse interests and backgrounds to partake in what has been termed *critical dialogue,* a type of talk that offers each participant an opportunity to engage with multiple perspectives on the educational issues that impact children. In contrast to conversations, critical dialogues involve the kind of give and take that help everyone involved deepen understand and explore viewpoints not previously considered.

During the course of this study, I recognized the emergence of sites of possibility between the Transformed Teachers and parents. Ideological cultural crossovers took place between Annie's and perceptions, the two Transformed Teachers in the study, and Shameka's practice, the border-crossing parent. In Annie's monologue, she mentioned an incident that took place in a grocery store where she was buying steaks. As Annie pushed her cart through the store, she encountered a parent of a child in her class who had wine coolers in her shopping cart. At that moment, Annie felt the full weight of her "two-ness" and made a concerted effort to acknowledge cultural boundaries. She said that she needed that parent to understand that there was a connection between them. Annie described her feelings in terms that suggested a willingness to reach out to the parent and engage in critical dialogue: "I felt ashamed that she saw those three steaks in my buggy. I wanted her to know, I'm just like you. I'm really just like you. I needed her to know that." Annie's words spoke to her awareness of two cultures, and she wanted to blur boundaries between them while assuring parents that she was sensitive to their perspectives.

Shameka, a cultural boundary-crosser, described the Fun Day that Creekside Elementary held at Gardners Corners as a site of possibility. She participated in the event and praised the teachers and school officials who arranged it. In her opinion, the event represented the school's efforts to reach parents that had previously been uninvolved in their children's education. In describing the flyer distributed in advance to announce the event, Shameka said, "They put plain as day on their paper, 'The only way that your child can get anything is if the parent comes.' That's perfect. That was awesome. That was great. Cause now you get the parents involved*.*" In addition, in Act I, Scene 1, Shameka expressed appreciation for teachers who sent her text messsages about her daughters'

progress in school. Staying in touch with school officials was important to her, and she frequently expressed a willingness to work with teachers, whether the work took place at Gardners Corners or Creekside Elementary. For this reason, Shameka's participation in Creekside's Fun Day held at Gardners Corners showed her to be a person who could become a member of a site of possibility for critical conversations about her children's education.

As a parent, researcher and educator, I was also able to overcome my initial discomfort and create sites of possibility with Chaquita, Shameka, and teachers at Creekside. Although I felt like an outsider in Chaquita's home and Creekside especially, I moved in and out of different cultural territory, building relationships along the way. These interactions and exchanges represent the beginning of negotiations that could lead to sites of possibilities.

Because of our forays into different cultural territories, Transformed Teacher Annie, and border crossing parent Shameka, and I might be able to create a site of possibility together. After negotiating challenges and tensions, Chaquita and I were also able to engage in critical conversations about issues related to school. It may be possible to include her in critical dialogues once the site of possibility has been established. Based on this foundation, Annie, Shameka, Chaquita, and myself represent the kinds of teachers and parents who could traverse spaces to have critical dialogue about the divergences mentioned between parent practice and teacher perception. In this sense, the above mentioned participants were all boundary-crossers, some to a greater degree than others, who exhibited the qualities of openness, caring for the well-being of their children/students, and high expectations for their children/students. Sites of possibility

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can be successfully established and maintained, and the genesis of this work is an examination of the points of ideological intersection boundary-crossers share.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLESSED BE THE TIES THAT BIND: BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN HOME

AND SCHOOL IN SUPPORT OF MARGINALIZED CHILDREN

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. (King, 1963)

When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change. (Dyer, 2005)

This study focused on describing the *environments of excellence* that exist in low-income homes and brought together perspectives of teachers and parents. This chapter explores implications of *environments of excellence* in families and pedagogical suggestions for teachers, and bridge building methodologies. This chapter also offers suggestions for using the knowledge gained from this study to build bridges between home and school by illuminating the *environments of excellence* that exist in low-income homes and recognizing key aspects of these spaces in order to create *environments of excellence* in schools. The creation of *environments of excellence* in schools, though, needs to be constructed through bridge-building pedagogies that can create *sites of possibilities* (Jewett, Tropp Laman, Jennings, Souto-Manning, & Wilson, 2010).

Historically, there has been a great deal of knowledge-sharing between home and school, but the process has been one-directional. Schools expect families to adopt their standards and practices, but rarely do schools give any credence to the standards and practices of families. When schools begin to consider the beliefs and practices of families

to be important, we will see a significant change in classroom practice and the school's environment will promote success for all students. The constructors of the *environments of excellence* in communities should be given the support, space, and opportunity to tell their stories and present their pedagogical models to their educational partners: classroom teachers.

At the core of these implications is the conviction that African American parents living in low-income communities who create *environments of excellence* in their homes, and Transformed Teachers of all races and backgrounds who are critical, social justice allies, are expert resources in the quest to pay the education debt. Their voices should be at the forefront of teacher education programs and school district reforms if we sincerely want to provide equal access to a good education for all students (Edwards & Turner, 2010; Nieto, 2010;). In failing to do so, we make it virtually impossible for any lasting change to take place by perpetuating the practice of blaming students and families for children's academic shortcomings. This crucial implication is drawn from the finding that while there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers' perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibilities for critical conversations.

Creating Sites of Possibilities

I believe that a foundation of critical dialogue will be required in order to create the kind of space necessary to build bridges between parents and teachers about their beliefs and practices related to the education of children. These spaces will need to be intentionally constructed. We need to find opportunities for stories to be told in safe and supportive spaces. When we do so, we will be creating sites of possibility, places where

educational stakeholders can negotiate meaning and question educational systems in what

has traditionally been contested territory. To support the sites of possibility, parents and

teachers need to find time to discuss ideas and build trust, establish cultural expectations

and draw on their own lived experiences. As I found in the data, people who can support

sites of possibilities seem to be those who are open to crossing cultural, racial, and class

boundaries. For example, possible participants in a site of possibility may be

Transformed Teachers such as Annie who understand the culture of African American

students and students who live in low-income areas, a parent such as Shameka who is

open to crossing cultural and racial boundaries to benefit the educational opportunities of

her daughters, and a hip-hop oriented parent like Chaquita who will argue for an

equitable education for her children.

Learning from *Environments of Excellence*

Educators have much to learn from *environments of excellence* in homes such as

Shameka's and Chaquita's, and the valuable insights gained from this study can lead to

the establishment of *environments of excellence* in schools as well. Just as the

environments of excellence in Shameka's and Chaquita's homes were built upon the

foundations of mutual respect, cultural sensitivity and academic achievement, so should

environments of excellence in schools. In such spaces, children would be both seen and

heard, and classroom teachers would abandon the banking approach to education (Friere,

1970), where teachers endeavor to fill students' heads with knowledge to be retrieved

later on tests. That is, the seemingly inexhaustible use of worksheets would be replaced

by in-depth explorations of topics that are meaningful to students and raises their

awareness of their socio-political situations. *Environments of excellence* in schools would

go further than simply honoring the lived experiences of marginalized families; they would incorporate aspects of that experience into the very fabric of school life.

Toward *Environments of Excellence* in Schools

Instead of students being situated into the life of the school as is currently the case, *environments of excellence* in schools and the cognitive development that takes place within them need to be situated in the lives of the learners. Ladson-Billings (2009) shares a number of cases where this goal is already being achieved in schools. The eight teachers she profiled in her work had been identified by administrators, parents and family members and other key community members as successful in their teaching of African American students who lived in low-income communities. These teachers viewed race and culture as important, and they intentionally drew on the outside school, cultural experiences of students when designing lessons. For instance, one of the teachers included in Ladson-Billings' study, Pauline Dupree, described the importance of knowing about students' interests, strengths, and culture:

> What I try to do is find those things the children really are good at and acknowledge them in the classroom. That means knowing about their sports and church activities. If someone is on a championship team, we try to get the coach in and talk about the person's contribution. I have had coaches, ministers, Scout leaders, family members – you name it – in here to tell the class about the excellence of the class member. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.107)

This type of acknowledgement of out-of-school excellence and interests can strengthen the connection between home and school and motivate students to strive for excellence inside the classroom as well. Classroom teachers should follow Dupree's example and the example of parents in this study who build on students' strengths.

With these thoughts in mind, the implications described in this chapter address:

(a) lessons I have learned as an educator about *environments of excellence* in African American low-income communities and how they are constructed by parents and interpreted by teachers,

(b) pedagogical suggestions for teachers and teacher educators as they design and teach curricula that support marginalized children.

Implication 1: Lessons Learned About *Environments of Excellence* in Low-Income Communities

The lessons shared in the following section were learned as I investigated this study's first research question:

In a low-income community, how do parents of two families establish and maintain *environments of excellence,* or environments where the characteristics, conditions, dispositions and practices in home and community settings support student academic success?

In the following paragraphs, I share lessons I learned from parents and my own research experiences. These lessons have led to the following key recommendations for educators who desire to establish and maintain *environments of excellence* in schools.

Educators should recognize parents as culturally relevant teachers. Given the foundational implication that the voices of parents and Transformed Teachers of students living in low-income communities need to be amplified as integral to school reform and teacher education, I provide thoughts about lessons I have learned as an educator about *environments of excellence* and some of the assumptions I held before beginning this study.

After careful consideration of the stories I collected, I found that parents incorporated the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy, which include a focus on academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Although parents were not trained in this philosophical approach toward culturally relevant teaching, they seemed to instinctively adopt these practices because they aligned with their own ideology. As I observed parents maintaining *environments of excellence* through the incorporation of culturally relevant teaching, I gained new insights about the ways that *environments of excellence* are established and maintained in homes, classrooms, offices, churches, and virtually any setting where teachers and learners come together to achieve goals. In these environments, the importance of attentive listening and the significance of acknowledging that privilege and oppression exist are emphasized.

Educators should listen and gives credence to what people have to say about their own experience. Professional literature tells us that Traditional Teachers often have a difficult time engaging in attentive listening with students and parents of Color, especially if the teachers are members of dominant groups (Johnson, 2006). Because the views of dominant groups have been accepted as common sense for such a long time, these views are very seldom challenged in public spaces. Teachers are also seen as authority figures in many situations and consistently position themselves as experts on content and the experiences of others (Delpit, 1995). In order for a meaningful *bridge building methodology* to take hold, however, teachers should deliberately and consistently examine their own power and privilege and be willing to abdicate this positioning in order to share power with groups of parents and their children who have historically been silenced and ignored. I will address the components of *bridge building*

methodology in greater detail in the section of this chapter entitled *Pedagogical*

Strategies for Teachers.

Educators should acknowledge that privilege and oppression exist. Parents in

this study incorporated the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy, which require a

focus on critical consciousness. Classroom teachers and teacher educators should also

adopt this focus if they are to make meaningful educational reforms that reflect an

alignment of home and school. According to researchers such as Compton-Lilly (2003)

and Nieto (2010), teachers at every level need to gain an understanding of the concepts of

privilege and oppression and explain these concepts to students in ways that will help

them create a more democratic society.

Understanding oppression starts with identifying a succinct definition that is both

clear and precise. Weinberg (1994) offers such a definition in the title of a journal article:

"Diversity without equality = oppression" (p. 13). Gregory, Volk, and Long (2004)

emphasize the significance of educators taking a stance that includes acknowledging

privilege and oppression by encouraging teachers and teachers-in-training to "consider

the desired ends of [their] change efforts" (p. 223). It is a given that educators want

students to excel academically, but in terms of the big picture, educational institutions are

charged with the important task of helping to shape young lives and protect American

democracy. By confronting privilege and oppression, teachers equip students to question

and dismantle injustice.

Educators should be willing to do whatever it takes to assist students of Color

in their pursuit of academic success. Although I had a strong belief that families would

embrace the *Freedom Readers* program, a small part of my brain also assumed that there

would be a weak response to my invitation to families to participate in *Freedom Readers*.

Despite being an African American woman and educator who has been an advocate for

children of Color for decades, and despite my extensive experience working with

students of Color and spending time in urban schools in several large cities, I now

recognize that had fallen victim to the type of socialization that Compton-Lilly (2004)

addresses in her comment about stereotypical visions of people of Color:

> The media have contributed to associating a particular set of beliefs with poor
> African American and Hispanic people. Television images of people of color are
> often mug shots. Newspapers report on African American and Hispanic men and
> women who are allegedly associated with various crimes. Our weekday talk
> shows feature people of color, often from low-income communities, who are
> manipulated and cajoled by some talk show hosts to reveal the most sordid details
> of their lives. (Compton-Lilly, 2004, p.7)

All of us carry the scars of racism, which sometimes manifests themselves as

stereotypes and mythologies about groups of people. My assumption, though not

constantly present in my mind, was that some parents living in low-income communities

were content to live on welfare, cared little about their own learning, and did not value

education. These assumptions were echoed by potential tutors, Housing Authority

officials, and grant makers that I approached before beginning the program.

What I learned is that most parents did not have to be sold on the program. Their

desire to get their children involved proved to me that they valued education. Not every

parent took advantage of the opportunity, but a large number did. When I asked Shameka

and Chaquita about their willingness to participate in this study, both commented that

they wanted to help the *Freedom Readers* program because they could see that the

program helped their children. I learned that some parents may see education as a way

out of poverty.

This lesson is significant in that it suggests that classroom teachers who seek to create *environments of excellence* should not only realize that there are parents living in low-income communities that want their children to succeed; they should be willing to do whatever it takes to assist parents in making success happen. For instance, Chaquita and Shameka both found ways to deal with their lack of resources in their pursuit of academic success for their children. Too many educators, though, are not willing to persevere when confronted with challenging behaviors and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Delpit (2012) writes about the number of teachers she has observed in recent years who spend a large amount of class time sitting at their desks, assigning paperwork to students, and seemingly completing paperwork themselves. In contrast, she has also observed teachers in every school who created *environments of excellence.* Those teachers are moving around the classroom, asking students to analyze, and addressing student behaviors that hinder academic success. As was the case with Malik, school officials assigned him to a self-contained special education class instead of finding ways to meet his educational needs in the regular classroom. Given Malik's race, class, and gender, critical sociocultural theorists would maintain that the school's actions in this case constitute a perpetuation of what Woodson (1903/2012) would call the miseducation of African American children. As in *environments of excellence* in homes, teachers who create *environments of excellence* in schools, should go stay engaged with students and make active instruction a part of routine classroom life .

Educators should take an intentional and determined approach to transformation. Before beginning this study, I did not realize that I would have to confront so many power structures. It did not take long for me to learn that there is a

particular way that things have been done in the education system for many years, and the school culture is resistant to change (Jay, 2003). On the one hand, schools and school districts publish mission statements and strategic plans that espouse a desire to pay the education debt and see students of all backgrounds achieve. For example, in the school district that Shameka's and Chaquita's children attend, the 2012-2013 Strategic Plan states: "We will ensure that persistent gaps between student achievement in subgroups are consistently and continually diminished" and "We will develop parent and community partnerships to work collaboratively to close gaps." I assumed that these statements reflected a true commitment to marginalized children and their families.

However, during my conversations with school administrators and other officials, I learned that these statements were but empty promises. Officials seemed more interested in projecting a caring and supportive image than actually enacting policies and programs that would challenge the status quo. As Ladson-Billing (2009) maintains, schools have to be concerned with academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, not just feel-good activities. For example, the school that Shameka's and Chaquita's children attend invited some faculty and staff members to make a one-time trip into Gardners Corners to distribute free books and meet parents. Teachers who participated in this study said that part of the reason this event took place was to show families that school officials care. This event represented a good start, but because there has been no follow-up or opportunity for dialogue between parents and school officials, this event amounted to nothing more than an opportunity for positive publicity for the school.

Educators should embrace discomfort. In order to transform classroom

practices that align home and school practices in support of marginalized children,

educators should acknowledge one of the key findings of this study:

> Teachers' race, experiences, and habitus, or comfort zone, influence the ways
> they sort students into categories.

To interrupt business as usual, educators and parents should be willing to ask hard

questions of school officials, even though these questions may be uncomfortable. I found

that by asking questions such as, "Why are our gifted and talented classes filled with

affluent European American children while our special education classes are filled with

children of Color?" I positioned myself as an outsider, a circumstance that led to

discomfort for me in many situations. I also experienced a similar feeling of discomfort

as an outsider in Chaquita's home where the family members were aligned with hip-hop

culture. Looking back on the experience, I am certain that I learned the most about

myself and about the participants in the study during times of disequilibrium, which led

to deeper reflection and insight on my part. This implication is echoed in the work of

researchers (Nieto, 2010; Zeichner and Hoeft,1996) who assert that the majority of

practicing teachers have limited experiences with people of Color, and they "frequently

perceive diversity in a negative way" (Nieto, 2010, p. 157). These researchers urge

teachers and teacher educators to create environments where they and their students can

examine their own identities and draw on personal experiences of marginalization to help

them gain an understanding of the pressures faced by student of Color. Nieto had her

graduate students keep detailed journals in which they wrote about feelings of

disequilibrium and the fear of owning their privilege or experiences of oppression. This

exercise proved to be as transformative for many of the students in Nieto's class as it was for me as I conducted this research.

Educators should realize that their assumptions can be overcome. I had assumed that when I entered Garners Corners I would find that everyone was alike. I thought that everyone would fit the stereotype of the unemployed and uneducated person I had seen in films. Then I met Shameka and found that she had traveled around the world and had a strong interest in reading. I met other parents who were taking college courses and helping their children with their reading at home. I learned that the community in which the study took place was not very different from my own. Quiet reflection on those moments when my assumptions were proven wrong forced me to face my own stereotyped responses and overcome the assumptions I carried with me.

Educators should be willing to form partnerships with family members. Researchers have written about the strong desire some European American educators have to offer their expertise in African American communities in order to save the less fortunate. This motivation is sometimes associated with the guilt European Americans feel when conversations turn to race. Although I am African American, I too carried with me some of this savior complex. On some level, I assumed that I had all the answers where literacy was concerned, and that my way of reading, writing, speaking, and being was the most acceptable way. Now I understand that there are many ways of being, and from a political standpoint, some ways of being are privileged (Kinloch, 2010; Taylor, 1997). What I have learned is that I should value and respect families and their desire to see their children succeed. I have to come into these new situations willing to appreciate what they are doing in the home and community in terms of literacy, and then inquire

about whatever skills and cultural capital that the families want to be added to help the child succeed in school. Partnerships should be based on the following principles:

Trust building is key. When I entered the community, I knew I would be an outsider and that it would be an uphill battle to build trust with family members. They were polite and cordial but, as a principal of one of the schools the community's children attended said to me, "They have seen so many different people come and go." I made a commitment to be consistent and patient and in time parents began to trust me more. The lack of trust could also be attributed to the negative views that authorities have often expressed in regard to these parents. When I learned to listen and work with families, for the most part, they responded in kind.

Working with others is necessary. During the course of this study, I came in contact with a number of different people who have a number of different ideas about education. When the people I encountered held views close to my own, I felt successful. For example, when Shameka affirmed the work of *Freedom Readers* by attending weekly meetings and encouraging her daughters to put forth their best effort during the meeting, I celebrated. When they did not, I felt challenged. For example, when school officials told me that the work of *Freedom Readers* had nothing to do with schools, I bristled. What I learned is that no matter what the perception or world view, it takes a community of learners and teachers to transform schools. Some teachers have been working diligently to make schools a welcoming place where students of Color can find success, but they cannot do it on their own. Traditional Teachers such as Jamie go into communities and offer their assistance, and Transformed Teachers such as Annie draw on their own

backgrounds in an effort to assist students in achieving academic success. Still, schools in general fail to provide *environments of excellence* for all students.

Parents such as Chaquita and Shameka are culturally responsive teachers, yet their children face obstacles, including teachers' negative perceptions of them, which may hinder their progress toward academic success. Parents, teachers, policy makers, teacher educators, and researchers have to find a way to work together or the children end up suffering. At times, I have engaged strategies employed by attentive listeners such as refusing to counter others' stories with my own in order to make room for the concerns and ideas of others. At other times, I have had to challenge deficit perspectives in respectful ways that will not shut down the conversation completely.

Educators should work hard to establish *environments of excellence* in schools. While conducting this study, I made a concerted effort to listen carefully as I spent time in Shameka's and Chaquita's homes. There were many times I wanted to give my opinion on a topic or directives of some kind. In many cases, I kept my opinions to myself and focused on the voices of the participants. In other cases, I shared my own stories in an effort to connect with Shameka and Chaquita on a personal level. When I entered the community, I assumed that I should approach the research situation as a teacher would, but by the time the study ended, I learned that I needed to be more of a learner than a teacher.

Though the notion of *environments of excellence* in low-income communities was not completely foreign to me when I began this study, the concept crystallized during the process of spending time with families and writing this dissertation. I can now say with certainty that environments where the characteristics, dispositions, and practices in home

settings support student academic success are being established and maintained by parents in low-income communities. However, I have learned during the course of this study that not every home in a low-income community establishes *environments of excellence,* but neither does every home in affluent communities. There are a wide range of experiences and stories that make up the tapestry of any community, and this study offers but a snapshot of two distinct cases. Also, it is important to note that *environments of excellence* may also be constructed in homes by family members other than parents, and the work of other family members and community leaders is a rich topic for future exploration. This study focused on two parents in order to give voice to the adults in children's lives with whom classroom teachers expect to work.

Implication 2: Pedagogical Strategies for Teachers

The next section offers implications related to this study's second and third research question:

What is the perceived identity that teachers have of students who live in this low-income community who benefit from *environments of excellence in their homes?* and

What can be learned from the beliefs and practices of the two participant families, and the teachers about transforming classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home and school practices in support of marginalized children?

The key finding resulting from these question are: (1) teachers' race, experience, and habitus influence the ways in which they sort children into categories and (2) While there were both divergences and convergences between parents' practices and teachers'

perceptions, within the convergences there were sites of possibilities for critical conversations.

During my time as an educational consultant with a nonprofit organization whose goal it was to address the achievement gap, I had the opportunity to study many successful teachers who created *environments of excellence.*

However, for the purposes of this description, I will focus on one such successful teacher of students of Color, Augusta Mann, whose work is being used by literacy teachers around the country to engage and excite students of Color. Borrowing from Mann's groundbreaking work developing strategies that utilize African American cultural themes (Boykin, 1982; Nobles & Nobles, 2011) and my own work with *Freedom Readers,* which extends Mann's teaching philosophy, I offer the following suggestions for what teachers should do to create *environments of excellence* in schools. The following section details what Mann terms the Five R's, ritual, recitation, rhythm, repletion, and relationships, all of which were derived from a study of African and African American culture, and have been found to characterize the work of a number of successful teachers of students of Color (Mann, 2005).

Ritual. Historically, segregated schools began the day with the singing of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" also known as the Negro National Anthem, a ritual that set the tone for the day's work and remind students of their legacy of excellence. In *environments of excellence* in schools, teachers should establish rituals or activities in which students participate every day. These rituals can take place at the beginning of a school day or class period and can be something as simple as reciting poetry with positive themes. Engaging in these rituals can help students to feel a sense of connectedness and

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family in the learning environment (Delpit, 2012). Shameka's and Chaquita's families had a number of rituals such as the time the family spent completing homework immediately after school each day. In *Freedom Readers* some of our rituals have been dancing the electric slide, a popular line dance amongst African American groups, at the beginning of each meeting. Classroom teachers can have students read an inspiring poem in unison or play a song that promotes students' academic success.

    Recitation. Recitation has historical roots in African American churches where children routinely perform Easter speeches each year. This practice engages students and helps them to stay focused on the teacher and the material being taught. Reciting poetry, definitions of words, or summaries of reading passages can be a powerful way to create *environments of excellence* in schools. Mann (2013) advocates having students memorize and recite definitions so that they internalize the language patterns of formal English. In addition, she asserts that having students memorize and recite summaries of passages from textbooks before they are asked to read the actual texts helps build student confidence and comprehension. Shameka often engaged in recitation with her children as they played video games where words of songs were read from the screen. In *Freedom Readers*, young scholars are commonly invited to memorize and recite inspiring poetry and poems and quotations written by African American authors. Because difference in background knowledge is an important issue that leads to the education debt, classroom teachers can address this by making lists of essential vocabulary words at the beginning of each grading period and having students memorize and recite those definitions at the end of the grading period.

Rhythm. The rhythms of music are a strong influence on learning, and have been known to have a profound impact on African American learners (Hill, 2009). The power of rhythm lies in the fact that the brain is a pattern seeker and has been shown to translate information into long term memory more often when patterns exist (Jensen, 2005). Mann suggests that teachers use rhythm as a core teaching tool to help student memorize definitions and essential summaries. Parents in this study routinely sang songs with their children or used phrases in their conversations that referenced their favorite music. The *Freedom Readers* curriculum takes advantage of young scholars' comfort with rhythm and contains a number of invitations for children to write and perform songs. Team Leaders are also trained in the art of using call and response (Peery, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003), an African American rhetorical device, during whole group instruction. Classroom teachers can also incorporate the use of call and response into their teaching and can also write songs to help students remember key concepts.

Repetition. Another important African American rhetorical device is repetition, which has historically been used by African American preachers to emphasize important elements of sermons. Parents in this study played the same songs over and over again and students quickly internalized the words of those songs. During *Freedom Readers* sessions, Team Leaders revisit vocabulary words, favorite songs and favorite dances each week. Classroom teachers should remember that key concepts should be revisited for several times during a lesson and over the course of many days.

Relationships. Perhaps the most important component of *environments of excellence* in schools is the relationships established between the teacher and the students and amongst the students themselves. Teachers shouldadopt a stance that aligns with

what Delpit (2013) calls the "warm demander." Teachers should believe that their students of capable of academic success and should not be afraid to demand that students reach their academic and intellectual potential. In her discussion of relationship building in classrooms, Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts that successful teachers of African American students find out what is relevant to students and connect with them on a personal level, thereby being able to connect what is to be learned with what is already known. Since *Freedom Readers* offers young scholars the opportunity to work with one adult on a weekly basis, supportive relationships are established quickly. Classroom teachers who work with a large number of students each day should engage in activities such as journal writing and class meetings, which invite children to share their lived experiences out of school.

Sociocultural scholars (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Hill,2009; Kinloch, 2010) maintain that because teachers have been socialized in particular ways, as has every human being, they unconsciously reward and privilege students and families whose ways of being mirror their own (Mahiri, 1998). Because we live in a racialized society, we are most comfortable communicating with and sharing spaces with people who validate and affirm our culture (Lopez-Robertson, Long, Turner-Nash, 2010). Most teachers are European American and middle class, and most of the valuing that goes on in schools supports their cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Therefore, parents face challenges in their efforts to prepare their children for academic success due to cultural differences that often exist between teachers and parents.

Yet, points of convergence between parent practice and teacher's perception can provide common ground from which the two groups can begin to transform classroom

practice. I hope that teachers can learn from the experiences described in the vignette below. It details how I first tried to make in-roads into a community that did not reflect my own community or lived experiences and how I overcame my discomfort to find that I, instead, was invited and welcomed.

Tracy's Vignette:

"I'm telling you, this will never work. Do not get your hopes up."

The first few times that I drove to Gardners Corners to invite parents to participate in Freedom Readers, I was almost too afraid to get out of the car. I had heard that the area could be dangerous, but that was not the primary reason I was afraid. I was in a strange area, approaching strange people, and that is normally a stressful situation for me. That is just my personality. I always took someone with me, either my husband or a friend who is a teacher that had lived in another low-income community. Sometimes I allowed her to knock on the door and introduce us both while I stood in the background and watched. If the person answering the door seemed friendly, I would take a few steps forward and chime into the conversation. If not, I would take off walking in the other direction as if I had no idea why my friend rang the doorbell.

Being in a strange place was not the only factor in my extreme anxiety. I also had a lot on the line. I had spent hours meeting with public housing authority officials and church members sharing with them this dream that I had for assisting children and their families in their efforts to excel academically. This was something I believed in strongly, but I could tell that many of them did not share my faith. They had seen the same movies I had seen, read the same

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newspapers, breathed the same air. One African American gentleman, the resident services coordinator, actually spelled it out in no uncertain terms: "You will never get them to come. They won't even show up. And if you do get them to show up, when they realize that your program is structured and that they won't be allowed to run around, they won't come back. I'm telling you, this will never work. Do not get your hopes up."

His words echoed in my ears as I walked through the streets of Gardners Corners, sometimes keeping me paralyzed in my car for several minutes taking deep, calming breaths while gripping the steering wheel. I even had flashes of people cursing me out and sending me away. I had seen too many movies of aggressive mothers regarding outsiders with hostility. I was afraid.

But I learned during the course of this study that this myth is not at all grounded in fact. In the three years that I have been periodically canvassing the neighborhood, and during the entire time that I conducted this study, I can only count one or two occasions when people have not been friendly. Generally, every single resident has gone out of his or her way to be kind, and if not accommodating, then at least respectful. Older women who remind me of my own mother have invited me to sit on the front porch with them and tell them about the program. Grandmothers have taken registration forms for their daughters and son's children. I have been invited in for dinner, invited to church, and treated with a level of decency that amazes me. I am ashamed to say that I am amazed. People are people. What on earth did I expect?

This story emphasizes how difficult it can be to cross ethnic, racial, class, and linguistic borders. There can be a great deal of discomfort and hesitation involved in the beginning, but the effort is extremely worthwhile. In order to truly transform school and classroom practices to reflect an alignment of home and school, stakeholders should adopt a *bridge building methodology,* one in which people of diverse backgrounds come together as equals.

At the core of the *bridge building methodology* I am proposing is a mandate for educators to engage in attentive listening. Also significant to this approach is the past unwillingness if educators to listen to marginalized parents. In the tradition of critical researchers, *bridge building methodology* foregrounds questions such as,

> "Why have school districts and colleges of education spent millions of dollars on contracts with outside consultants and education professors who have little personal knowledge or intimate understandings of poverty, while overlooking the real experts on African American students and students living in low-income areas: the students themselves and their families?

To answer such questions, critical scholars (e.g. hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1999; McLaren, 1997; Milner, 2013) point to the stubborn presence of racism in American society and the continual reproduction of social inequities. Therefore the type of listening that I am proposing should be different from the listening we have done in the past. This new listening should reflect the principals of "resisting the impulse to defend or deny" and "accepting what is being said as true" (p. 141) as put forth by Johnson (2006) in his discussion of how educators should position themselves when marginalized individuals share their stories.

I had to learn to avoid certain unproductive behaviors as I engaged in collecting stories. When Shameka or Chaquita said things that made me uncomfortable, I made a

conscious effort not to defend or deny, rather to listen. For example, Chaquita said she

viewed me in the same way she viewed any European American authority figure that

visited her home. She let her friends and associates know that they should do the same.

Her experiences with such authority figures told her that they were not to be fully

accepted because they could pass judgment on her and her family, for example when

school officials placed her son in a special education class. I wanted to deny that I would

do something like that. I wanted to defend my identity as an African American woman,

but I know that my explanation would have made little difference. I chose to keep quiet.

My impulse to defend myself is a common response that represents the path of

least resistance. Johnson cautions teachers to be aware of thought processes and impulses

that may arise as they listen. He tells teachers to take notes but avoid giving voice to any

thoughts until the speaker finishes. Reading those notes after the conversation or

presentation has ended, and critiquing them in ways that call attention to privileged

perspectives may be a good way to assess personal growth. For example, Johnson (2006)

began taking note of the ways his own male privilege "encouraged [him] to control

conversations" and "how easily men dominate group meetings by controlling the agenda

and interrupting, without women's objecting to it" (p. 142). After reflecting in writing on

his own impulses and the behavior of his colleagues across a variety of meetings,

Johnson realized that he was contributing to the oppression of women and decided to

make a serious effort to listen more and talk less. He noted that "with time and practice,

new paths have become easier to follow…but awareness is never automatic or

permanent" (p. 143). Although educators may eventually spend less time monitoring their

thinking and behavior, vigilance will always be necessary as long as privilege and oppression exist.

Johnson goes on to offer suggestions about what can be done by listeners who hope to build bridges between home and school. He suggests that people in power "listen and take what is being said seriously and assume for the time being that what is being said is true" (p. 141). This was an extremely hard piece of advice to follow, but after Chaquita spoke about me as "being just like the White lady," I could not shake her words. I thought about them on the ride home and wrote about them in my journal. Although it was extremely difficult for me to assume what she was saying had some truth to it, I eventually came to terms with aspects of my own privilege. She forced me to look at myself in a way that made me uncomfortable. I had to admit that although I am proud of my accomplishments, being the founder of a non-profit and a doctoral candidate positions me as an authority figure with a relatively significant amount of power. Chaquita challenged me to consider the ways that I had abused that power or could potentially misuse it. I would never have come to that realization, though, had I not taken the time to listen and assume what Chaquita was telling me was the truth.

Once I had fully considered Chaquita's assessment and seen the situation from her perspective, I was ready to take the next step in *bridge building methodology.* I decided to "take responsibility to do something about it" (Johnson, 2006, p. 141). If I indeed possessed the power and privilege that Chaquita claimed, I had the responsibility to tell Chaquita's story to the world to the best of my ability. This dissertation and *bridge building methodology* presented in this chapter is a manifestation of my commitment to interrupting my own understandings in view of another's perspective in order to

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recognize and then disrupt the oppression that separated me from Chaquita. The goal of this approach is to eventually make school reform a two-way street where all parties involved work together as equals. This can only be achieved if educators and school officials keep in mind the importance of consistency, commitment, and valuing the characteristics, practices and dispositions inherent in *environments of excellence* in low-income homes.

Consistency. Although it seems like common sense to me now, it took a while for me to learn that people had to get used to seeing my face in the community. I made a special point of keeping a consistent routine of visiting the community at a certain time on a certain day of the week each week for several years before I actually entered Shameka's and Chaquita's home to conduct this study. Once they realized that I was serious about helping their children and that I was not going to be scared off by the first challenge, they began to relax and move beyond the polite respect they offered me in the beginning. As a result of conducting this study, I learned the power of consistency, and educators can learn from this, too. For example, the single visit of the teachers to the Gardners Corners community was a good first step but did not meet the consistency requirement. It was only one visit.

Commitment. Classroom teachers and teacher educators should make a commitment to step outside of their comfort zones and enter into the communities marginalized students call home. We should attend church services and other settings where our students are serving as experts and where they feel as if they can be themselves. Learning from and with African American families living in low-income areas is a key component to *bridge building methodology* because teachers cannot

promote cultural competence if they do not know anything about or have only a surface knowledge of students' cultures. The following paragraphs outline practical steps teachers can take in order to become better acquainted with parents, African American culture, and the *environments of excellence* that are established in low-income communities.

Value students' home language patterns. Researchers (Boutte, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Smitherman, 1977) have long asserted that by creating a space where students feel at ease, educators increase the likelihood that students will succeed (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2010; Valdes, 1996). Black English Vernacular, or BEV, has long been looked upon by educators as unwelcome and incorrect. In some cases, educators have considered the use of BEV to be a sign that the speaker lacks morals (Hilliard, 2002) In these cases, Traditional Teachers seek to rid African American students of their home language patterns with little regard for what this does to the students' cultural competence, self-esteem, and socio-emotional well-being. Ladson-Billings and Gay, in their explanations of culturally responsive pedagogy, point to the importance of classroom teachers showing respect for the language patterns that are used at home, while researchers such as Boutte (2007) and Valdes (1996) demonstrate that students do their best thinking and problem solving in their first language.

These researchers and others offer a number of suggestions for classroom teachers who want to create *environments of excellence* in schools. I echo these recommendations, as I struggled with how to deal with the language used by participants in this study. Shameka's language use aligned with the formal language many educators expect to be used in schools at all times. I felt comfortable with her language because it reflected my

language use to some extent in its cadence, rhythm, and use of idiomatic expression. However, in contrast, Chaquita's did not. I struggled with the decision about how to represent her speech in this dissertation. I wondered if representing her word-for-word language patterns might offend her. In the end, however, after reading Smitherman's (1977) treatment of language as a political tool and reflecting on what I learned, I decided to include all of the speech as I heard it, or at least as close an approximation as I could manage. I believe that this approach honored Chaquita, her way of being, and her way of communicating. To attempt to standardize her words would amount to appropriating them into my culture and in so doing, devaluing Chaquita's voice.

Share stories about African American families living in low income communities who are succeeding. All too often our conversations about African American families and children and families living in low-income communities deal exclusively with the shortcomings and underperformance of the group. In order to emphasize the fact that being African American does not fit one stereotypical model, classroom teachers should share stories of successful African Americans. Critical race theorists (e.g. McGee & Martin, 2011; Milner, 2013) refer to these success stories as counter-narratives and promote their telling because they provide a more complete and accurate portrait of the African American community than do traditional narratives of academic failure. For example, in the literature I studied (Banks, 2007; Compton Lilly, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Taylor, 1983), I found teachers who brought in not only books and articles about successful African Americans, but invited children to write family stories that honored the accomplishments of their family members. Although researchers and educators will never be able to tell the story of the African American

experience in a way that is considered to be comprehensive, each counter-narrative propels the conversation challenges preconceived stereotypical images and stories of African American families .

Invite parents to make presentations to students. Moll (2001) suggests that classroom teachers make an effort to identify the *funds of knowledge* that exist in every community. During the course of establishing relationships with parents, teachers will find, as I did, that some are expert cooks and others may be expert hair braiders. For example, I found that Shameka has expertise in styling hair and Chaquita in cooking and organizing people, and that Grandmother Rose had expertise in the history of their community. Strong positive relationships with communities can be built when teachers call upon that expertise and invite parents to share their knowledge within the walls of the school.

A Mandate for Future Research

This dissertation is part of an iterative process. It has contributed to the field of education by giving voice to rural African American parents who create *environments of excellence* that support academic success. Knowing the characteristics of these environments can assist classroom teachers and other educators in transforming classroom practice by allowing parents to lead. This dissertation is also about the perspectives of the teachers of the children who live within environments of excellence in their homes. Understanding these perceptions and locating openings within them for critical conversations, can also lead to transformative teaching collaborations. However, this study is but a starting point, not an end. A number of important questions have been raised here as well. For instance, what are the implications of including African

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American and youth/culture into classrooms where students are aligned with a mainstream culture? How do teachers avoid alienating one group in an effort to include and engage another?

Because so many important questions have been raised, I would like to explore various avenues and extend the research. I would like to have an opportunity to actually bring together parents involved in this study and Transformed Teachers who are ready to work on aligning classroom practices with home practices. My goal would be to facilitate discussions that would lead to the development of a culturally-sensitive curriculum that also honors the standards for which teachers are responsible, and lead to the creation of *environments of excellence* schools.

Conclusion

I opened this dissertation with a narrative involving a high ranking school official who asked me what *Freedom Readers* has to do with school. This narrative illustrates the great divide that exists between schools which seek to educate all students but fail many of the students from low income communities of Color. I shared this story to assert that this dissertation is about social justice. Although the conversation I described involves literacy, the act of reading and writing are but small components of a dialogue about issues of equality, fairness, and access to opportunity. Until the educational community acknowledges that every family counts and every voice matters, the divide that leads to academic failure will never be bridged. However, as we allow families to speak out and speak up for their children, our understanding of their needs and concerns are broadened, equipping us with the tools to show once and for all what communities have to do with schools.

The education of all of students is an important task, arguably one of the most important charges we have as a society. It undergirds the stability of our democracy and reflects on our willingness to fulfill our promises as a nation. As the demographics of our country change and the complexion of the gatekeepers in society and the schools themselves change, we enjoy unprecedented opportunities to pay back the education debt to children who have been traditionally marginalized and under-served by America's education system. Though many obstacles remain, this is an exciting time in education, a time filled with promise and possibility. Now is the time for widening our definitions of education to include various perspectives, cultural orientations and pedagogical approaches. Today is the day for inviting all of our citizens to take their rightful seat at the table. This study and its findings have the potential to contribute to promise and possibility for students too long marginalized in our education system. The consideration of these recommendations and resulting alignment can lead to innovative and creative educational approaches that will strengthen homes and communities and allow America to take bold steps toward fulfilling its promises to all of its citizens

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APPENDIX A----FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself. Your name, age, years of experience, what you teach.

2. The families with whom I am working live in the Gardners Corners community. Have you worked with families from this community? Tell me about them.

3. Have you ever spent time in the Gardners Corners community? If so, what was the experience like for you?

4. Give me an example of a family you know that lives in a low income community and provides excellent educational environments for their children.

5. Tell me about a person you think is a really good teacher. What is he/she like?

6. Tell me about the expectations you have for the parents of the students you teach.

7. Tell me about the relationships you've had with families from low income settings over the years? How would you characterize these relationships? Friendly? Strained?

8. What can be done to strengthen relationships between the school and parents in low income communities?

9. What advice do you have for parents in low income communities who want to create excellent educational environments for their children?

10. More of our students in advanced classes come from affluent backgrounds. More of our students in special education classes come from low income communities. Why do you think that is?

APPENDIX B---- FREEDOM READERS LESSON PLAN
Freedom Readers Summer 2012: The Summer Olympics

Monday June 18, 2012

2:00   Team Leaders Arrive

2:50   Doors open for young scholars….tutors can enter at any time

3:00   Play "Olympics Opening Ceremony Music" and Take the March

w/Torch

3:05   Show "We're All Champions" 4:28 **Which Olympic sport is the**

toughest?

3:10   Introduce Vocabulary….Have tutors ask scholars to tell them

definitions

3:20   Give out snack bags

- Kids should put trash back inside the bag

- Anything not eaten by 3:30 will be put aside until 4:30.

3:30   Snack ends ……tutors and young scholars read together.

                                WEEK ONE: Introduce yourself and have a warm up chat.

Help young scholar write down one thing they want to achieve in terms of reading this

summer.

1. Team Leader reads aloud one selection from *Great*

   Moments in the Summer Olympics. This is a whole group

2. activity. Everyone listens. Tutors help scholars write one paragraph in response to reading. This is NOT a summary, but prep for #4.

3. Young scholar reads to tutor from teaching book already chosen for you the first week. Teaching books stay here until week 6.

4. Young scholar retells and creates a flow map of events.

5. Prepare for Grand Conversation…events in the story, favorite quotes, author's word choice, or illustrations

4:15   Grand Conversation on *Great Moments in the Summer Olympics*…..Starter questions: What did you think? Who would like to share? **Build on others' comments, ask questions, make sure everyone participates, refer back to the book to make a point.**

4:30   Dismissal and Clean up

Vocabulary Words and Definitions

Week One

1. An **arena** is an area used for sports surrounded by seats.

2. An **amateur** is an athlete who competes for free.

3. A **champion** is a person who in comes in first place.

4. A **gymnasium** is a building for indoor sports.

5. A **league** is an organized group of athletic teams.

Week Two

6. **Leisure** is free time when we can enjoy sports.

7. An **opponent** is a person on the other side.

8. A **penalty** is given for breaking the rules.

9. **Performance** is competing in a sports event.

10. A **physique** is a bodily structure.

Week Three

11. **Practice** is repeating a skill in order to get better.

12. A **professional** competes to make money.

13. A **referee** checks the rules of the game.

14. A **spectator** is a member of an audience.

15. **Sportsmanship** is being fair and not a sore loser.

Week Four

16. A **stadium** is an area with tiers of seats.

17. A **strategy** is a plan for obtaining a goal.

18. A **tactic** is a way to gain success.

19. **Teamwork** is moving toward a common goal.

20. A **tournament** is a series of games.

Week Five

21. To **train** is to get fit by practicing.

22. A **trophy** is evidence of victory.

23. An **umpire** is a kind of referee.

Victory is triumph over an enemy.

APPENDIX C----INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Study Title: Environments of Excellence

Dear _____,

My name is Tracy Swinton Bailey. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education

Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part

of the requirements of my degree in Language and Literacy, and I would like to invite

you to participate. I am studying the ways that environments of excellence are created in

homes and schools. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to allow me to

interview you and record our conversation. The meeting should last about 60 minutes.

The session will be audiotaped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The

tapes will only be reviewed by me and I will transcribe and analyze them. You may feel

uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any

questions that you do not wish to. Although you probably won't benefit directly from

participating in this study, we hope that others in the community will benefit by gaining

an understanding of how children learn and grow. Participation is confidential. Study

information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The

results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your

identity will not be revealed.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 843-251-1804 or founder@freedomreaders.org or my faculty advisor, (Pam Jewett, 803-240-2927) if you have study related questions or problems. Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please sign the attached form and return it to me.

With kind regards,

Tracy S. Bailey

PO Box 30548 MB, SC 29588

843-251-1804

founder@freedomreaders.org

I agree to participate in the study.

Name_____