AWAKENED TO INEQUALITY: THE FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF WHITE, FEMALE TEACHERS THAT FOSTERED STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY STUDENTS

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Bob and Marcia McKinney

Thank you for raising me in a home rooted in faith and social justice.

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Thank you for supporting me as a wife, mom and principal.

The many teachers and students who helped me become a better teacher, leader and person

Thank you for sharing your school days with me.
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AWAKENED TO INEQUALITY: THE FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF WHITE, FEMALE TEACHERS THAT FOSTERED STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY STUDENTS

MARGARET M. SCHAUER

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focused on exploring the stories of White, female teachers to understand ways that critical moments of consciousness around race and class in early childhood, pre-service and current teaching assignments may have influenced their abilities to form strong relationships with minority students and their incorporation of pedagogies and practices that would be considered culturally responsive.

The central research question examined: What are the childhood and pre-service experiences of White, female teachers that cultivated critical consciousness of race and class and how have these formative experiences been further developed in the profession, leading to an ability to form strong relationships with poor and minority children and implement practices and pedagogies of empowerment in urban classrooms? In relation to methodology, qualitative methods were employed to collect and analyze the stories of five White, female teachers in an urban school district. Open coding was employed to explore emerging themes of the study around opportunities to explore race and class during early childhood and moments of critical consciousness in university teacher preparation programs and current teaching assignments that influenced the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogies and practices.

The study provides current and future colleges of education and schools with recommendations that might help awaken the critical consciousness of teachers by creating spaces for critical reflection and collective action in curriculums and professional development.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................. vi

**CHAPTER**

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 1
    Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................ 2
    Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................. 4
    Significance of the Problem ....................................................................................... 7
    Limitations .................................................................................................................. 8

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................. 10
    The Context of Urban Schools: Demographics ......................................................... 12
    The Challenge: Urban Academic Achievement and the Achievement Gap ............. 14
    Proposed “Solutions”: Teacher Quality Improvement and Legislative Practices ...... 15
    Another Proposed “Solution”: School Climate ........................................................ 18
    Fostering a “Solution” One Teacher at a Time: Teacher Identity Development .... 20
    Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory ....................................................... 21
    White Identity Development and Urban Teachers .................................................. 24
    Teacher Identity Development ................................................................................ 27
    The Development of Critical Consciousness in Teachers ....................................... 30
    Culturally Responsive Teaching: Critical Consciousness in Action .................... 34
    Critical Care and Concern for Students .................................................................. 38
    Strong Student-Teacher Relationships .................................................................. 39
    Summary of Chapter II ......................................................................................... 42

III. METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................................... 43
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction and Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersection of Race and Class Among White Teachers</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for Qualitative Study</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive Paradigm</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Approach</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Selection</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants as Unique to the Profession</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Selection</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods and Rationale for Sequence of Method</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of Questions for the First Interview Session</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of Observation Protocol</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of Questions for Second Interview Session</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Methods</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Perspective and Subjectivity</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Participants</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi – “Teaching to Empower Students to Own their Learning”</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teaching</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current teaching</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the classroom</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and supporting relationships</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and supporting relationships with parents</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff and volunteers that support relationships</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda – “It’s All About Fresh Starts”</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teaching</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current teaching and “fresh starts”</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the classroom</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing testing, group work and field trips</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building a sense of community</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and a change in culture</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon – “Rooting for the Underdog”</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teaching</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current teaching</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the classroom</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-wide supports</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla - “The Arts as Empowerment”</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teaching</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current teaching</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the classroom</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-wide supports</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vickie – “Teaching as One of Her Students”</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teaching</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current teaching</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the classroom</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Exposures to Race</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Race was not a big deal”</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moments of critical consciousness of race and class</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Opened my eyes to differences”</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Look to the inside of people”</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You can’t understand because you’re not Black”</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nothing in life will ever be handed to you”</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pre-Service Teaching

“Nope. It was all the same”

“It’s just a conversation until you are actually in school”

“More than graphing M&M’s”

“Theorists for the Hood”

“More than just teaching”

Current Teaching

“I didn’t apply anywhere else”

“You bloom where you are planted”

Learning to “Look beyond the label”

“Because I knew you cared”

“Knowing the whole story”

“Getting their baggage out”

Creating a “comfort zone for students”

“It’s your class not mine”

“The power within”

“Let the children drive the curriculum”

“A commitment to each other”

“Getting them out of their bubble”

“Sometimes you have to do the dance”

“A champion for kids”

“Open door policy for parents”
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION
In my career as a teacher and principal, I have had the privilege to work with many White, middle class teachers who have been able to form incredible bonds with low-income, minority students from urban neighborhoods. These teachers’ abilities to negotiate barriers of race and class to teach and learn with their students inspire hope for a future of education where the lines of the learner and teacher are blurred and where students feel empowered through a curriculum that is real and relevant to their lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Unfortunately, I have also seen more than my fair share of teachers who share this same demographic as White and middle-class, but are completely unable or unwilling to relate to the students they teach. In these classrooms, the teachers see their role as the primary source of knowledge in the room. They assume low-income and minority students lack prerequisite knowledge and will always struggle to succeed. This deficit-based approach often speaks to the teachers’ feelings of racial and class superiority and students are quick to view their roles as subordinate to the teacher (Delpit, 1998; Willis, 1977). For this study, I wanted to collect the stories of White, female teachers who have been successful in forming strong relationships with poor and minority students to explore potential common themes and moments of critical consciousness as they interrogated and negotiated issues of race and class and implemented pedagogies and practices of empowerment in their classrooms.
**Statement of the Problem**

The majority of urban teachers are White, middle-class females who do not share the same race or class as the low-income and minority students they teach (Nieto, 2003). This dichotomy of race and class can create barriers to understanding and relating to the experiences and worldviews children from urban neighborhoods bring to the classroom (Delpit, 1998).

The ability to form strong relationships with urban students is a strong precursor to student achievement; however, this ability to form strong relationships requires teachers to interrogate and negotiate issues of race and class at both personal and pedagogical levels (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Urban teachers, who are predominately White females, need to possess deep understandings of their own identities as persons of power and privilege and use their status not to impose White, middle class culture as “the right way”, but to seek opportunities to use their status as agents of change and empowerment (Delpit, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In the classroom, teachers who are able to form strong relationships with urban students often incorporate culturally relevant pedagogies and spend a great deal of time trying to see the world through the eyes of the students they serve (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

A review of literature points to the demographics of urban schools as spaces where teachers are predominately White and middle class and students are primarily low-income and minority (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013; Nieto, 2003). This dichotomy can create unique challenges where teachers have difficulty relating to their students (Nieto, 2003). Additionally, legislative policies that focus on standardization seek to provide a universal curriculum for students. However, these standardized curriculums are often presented from White, middle class perspectives and assume low-income, minority students bring little
knowledge to the classroom (Delpit, 1998). These deficit-based approaches create school cultures where teachers, students and administrators are defined by poor student achievement as measured by standardized test scores (Haberman, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2012).

To move beyond standardization and celebrate diversity, teachers and students require spaces where they can explore and understand their identities as they are situated within the context of their schools and socio-political environments. As such, critical race theory guides the interpretive paradigm of this study. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1998) explores the ways identities can intersect with each other in complex and dynamic ways. Her work draws attention to ways a person can feel their identity can contribute to empowerment or marginalization depending on the context of social interactions and their identification as a member of an in or out group (Collins, 1998). Additionally, the research of Janet Helms (1993) explores White identity and presents findings as phases of development. These phases begin with the “contact stage” where Whites have limited exposure to minorities and may take for granted the power and privilege afforded to them by the nature of their race (Helms, 1993). The phases conclude with “autonomy” where Whites accept racial differences and seek opportunities to learn from and with minority groups to eliminate racism (Helms, 1993).

The work of Paulo Freire (1998) describes “moments of critical consciousness” as important to White identity development as interactions with minorities “open their eyes” to inequalities and inspire a desire to join in collective action to eliminate oppressive structures and systems designed to keep minorities poor. These moments of critical consciousness can lead teachers to the adoption of pedagogies and practices that could be considered culturally responsive (Freire, 1998; Romano, 2008). The research of Rosalie Romano (2008), highlights the role pre-service teaching and service learning experiences can “awaken” students to their own
identities as ones situated in power and privilege and ways they can help students in their classrooms celebrate their identities through culturally responsive pedagogies (Romano, 2008). Finally, Stanton-Salazar (2011) discusses ways teachers can act as agents of empowerment to not only provide students access to culturally responsive pedagogies, but to work with students and colleagues to engage in collective actions that would serve to eliminate oppressive systems in schools, such as tracking and standardized curriculums.

The design of this study fits under the theoretical frameworks of social identity theory and critical race theory. Through these frameworks, the study specifically examined the roles and intersections of White identity, teacher identity and the development of critical consciousness on understanding and relating to urban education settings from the perspective of White, female teachers from middle class backgrounds.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the stories of White, female teachers to understand ways that critical moments of consciousness around race and class in early childhood, pre-service and current teaching assignments may have influenced their abilities to form strong relationships with minority students. The study also sought to understand ways these moments of critical consciousness may have shaped the participants’ understanding of their identities around race and class in relationship to their students and ways these understandings may have influenced the participants’ incorporation of pedagogies and practices that would be considered culturally responsive.

To this end, the following research questions guided my research:
What are the childhood and pre-service experiences of White, female teachers that cultivated critical consciousness of race and class and how have these formative experiences been further developed in the profession, leading to an ability to form strong relationships with poor and minority children and implement practices and pedagogies of empowerment in urban classrooms?

a) What childhood and adolescent experiences with family or friends allowed participants to establish a positive view of their own identity and the identities of people from diverse contexts?

b) What experiences as a pre-service teacher allowed participants to examine their identity and its potential relationship to power structures and pedagogies encountered in urban schools?

c) What experiences as a teacher allowed participants to explore White identity and negotiate power structures of race and class in their classrooms?

d) What other experiences prepared the teacher participants to work in urban environments, form strong relationships with their students and explore practices and pedagogies of empowerment?

Data was analyzed through the interpretive framework of critical race theory and critical pedagogies. As a construct, critical theories seek to “understand the origins and operation of repressive social structures” (Gordon, 1995, p. 572). Similar to the legal definitions, critical race theory in education is understood as a construct that permeates the entire fabric of education. Critical theorists, therefore, are interested in discovering and understanding why oppressive structures exist and exploring ways in which society can be transformed.
The methodology of this study sought to understand the lived experiences of White, female teachers as they related to their abilities to form strong relationships with minority students. A qualitative methodology with a narrative approach was best suited for understanding these experiences and situating them within a context of critical consciousness and reflection. Purposive sampling was used to select a large urban school district with White, female teachers as participants. The participants were identified by their principals as teachers who have been successful in forming strong relationships with minority students and employing pedagogies and practices of empowerment. The use of interview and observation allowed the participants to tell their stories and for the researcher to gain understanding and co-construct meaning with the participants. Data analysis measures that employed open coding strategies allowed for data to be categorized and contextualized within and around the research questions of the study.

An analysis of the findings began with descriptions of each participant and explored their experiences in early childhood, pre-service teaching, and teaching careers as they negotiated issues of race and class and formed strong relationships with minority students. From these experiences, emerging themes are presented and analyzed. Major themes that developed from this study include:

1. Color-blind views toward race despite early childhood exposures to diversity
2. Meritocratic views of class that link effort with class advancement
3. Mismatches between experiences with university teaching curriculums and practical applications in school settings that serve minority students
4. Moments of critical consciousness of race and class in early teaching experiences that helped form strong relationships with minority students
5. Commitment to urban education and care for students
6. Implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices that support minority students
7. The role of school principals as mentors and their efforts to establish school cultures that supported culturally responsive practices of the participants
8. Positive views of parental involvement and support in schools

A discussion around the findings of this study seeks to explore implications for practice and recommendations that could foster spaces for critical reflections in early childhood, university teacher programs and school settings. These recommendations include increased opportunities and responsibilities for schools and community spaces such as faith-based institutions to serve as places where critical conversations around race and class can occur. Recommendations also include shifts in university teacher preparation programs to restructure curriculum to allow pre-service teachers earlier and more frequent opportunities to observe and teach in schools. These opportunities would include service learning opportunities where students could understand the broader implications of power and privilege in our society by serving in other structures and systems such as governmental agencies and health care institutions. Finally, a proposal for the adoption of university lab schools as a model that could allow pre-service teachers, mentor teachers and university professors opportunities to engage in shared teaching experiences is discussed. This model would help connect theory and practice as pre-service teachers, mentors and university professors reflect upon moments of critical consciousness and explore ways they can best serve as agents of empowerment for their students.

Significance of the Problem

This study contributes to the body of literature on the role teacher identity development and critical consciousness plays as colleges of education and schools seek to prepare and develop
teachers for service in urban environments. Pre-service curriculums that help future teachers unpack their prior experiences with race and class and then build on those understandings might better prepare teachers to relate to children from different backgrounds. Attending to teacher development has the potential to impact the education of students in urban schools by ensuring access to teachers who can relate to their students and create classroom cultures where student achievement is most likely to occur.

Additionally, this study is significant because similar studies have explored pre-service experiences as the beginning point of reference in identity development. This leaves a gap in the literature that would explore identity development as shaped by the childhood experiences of urban teachers. For my study, I believed it was important to consider both the childhood and pre-service experiences that may have helped White, female teachers negotiate their identities, form strong relationships with their students and implement pedagogies of empowerment in their classrooms.

**Limitations**

This study was limited to the stories of the five, White female teachers who agreed to participate. Their stories and common themes found within them cannot be generalized for larger populations of teachers.

Additionally, the stories the participants were asked to tell centered on difficult subjects of race and class. Despite sharing the same demographic as the participants, it could be possible that they chose to tell stories that were most comfortable for them to share and left other stories unspoken because they did not want to be perceived as racist.
Also, as a member of the demographic of this study, it was important that my own biases were noted throughout the study. This was achieved through frequent conversations with my chair and methodologist so biases could be checked and bracketed.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Alexis” is a White, female teacher who grew up in a wealthy suburb. She is now teaching in an inner city school where most of her students are poor and minorities. In her classroom, discussions of race and class are not ignored or discounted, but confronted in a spirit of empowerment. Alexis believes the students in her classroom bring their own unique cultural knowledge to the room and she builds upon it through curriculum and practices that encourage students to celebrate their identities and realize high expectations for themselves. The strong relationships between teacher and student are clearly evident and serve to demonstrate mutual respect as well as a desire to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to break cycles and structures of poverty and racism. Sadly, Alexis is the “outlier” in today’s educational landscape; but it is her story and journey through childhood and pre-service teaching that might help us better understand ways colleges of education and society in general could nurture more teachers like “Alexis” in our schools.

Today, 80% of all poor and minority students in the United States spent their day in school learning from a White, middle class teacher (Uzzell, 2010). This teacher most likely grew up in a neighborhood very different from the children she (and very rarely he) teaches. She probably had little contact with minorities growing up and might be struggling to situate her own identity within the structural and cultural context of her urban school. With limited previous opportunities and supports to fully examine and critically explore their own identities, it becomes
difficult for teachers to understand the structural and cultural differences of urban schools and respond in such a way that values the experiences and identities of the students they teach. However, throughout the day, some of these White, middle class teachers are able to move between cultures, form new understandings of self and others, and produce remarkable results with the same students that others from similar backgrounds are unable to reach (Delpit, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2008). These successful teachers seem to possess a unique sense of self and a genuine desire to form meaningful relationship with their students. These relationships often lead to higher levels of academic success and can become empowering for both the student and teacher (Delpit, 1998). Children are no longer just names in a grade book and teachers are no longer just teachers in the eyes of their students. Similarly, the strong relationships that can develop between teacher and student often have reciprocal benefits where the students help the teacher develop a stronger sense of identity and the teacher helps the student celebrate and embrace their own identity. Assuming that White, middle class teachers will continue to enter and dominate the urban education workforce, it is therefore essential to explore the role of identity development and cultivation of critical consciousness as it pertains to the beliefs and attitudes that allow teachers to form strong relationships with students and implement pedagogies and practices of empowerment.

This review of literature seeks to identify and evaluate research that explores the identity development of White, female teachers who have been effective in forming strong relationships with poor and minority students in urban environments and who employ culturally responsive practices and pedagogies as a means for student empowerment. The review also includes discussions of demographic and achievement trends of urban schools, legislation and policies implemented to address these trends and the effect those mandates have on the climate of urban
schools. It looks at student achievement through the lens of strong relationships between teachers and students and the ways identity development allows successful teachers to form strong bonds and adopt culturally responsive practices and pedagogies. Additionally, it seeks to explore the critical moments of consciousness that occur in the identity development of these teachers and ways these moments can lead to the adoption of pedagogical practices that serve to celebrate and empower poor and minority students.

The Context of Urban Schools: Demographics

Today’s urban schools are vastly comprised of a homogeneous population of students, taught by a different homogenous population of teachers, where both groups don’t have much in common. Over 63% of students in urban schools are minorities from poor and working class backgrounds while 80% of their teachers are White (and mostly women) from middle and upper class backgrounds (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013; Nieto, 2003). The stark contrast between teacher and student demographics create unique challenges and barriers to overcome in urban schools as teachers and students seek to learn with and from each other. And with 50% of urban teachers leaving the profession within the first five years of teaching citing lack of support, behavior problems and inadequate teacher preparation, urban schools have become a revolving door of teachers and closing doors of opportunity for students (Nieto, 2003).

There is a wealth of research that supports the fact that after controlling for outside factors such as poverty, the classroom teacher is the best predictor of student achievement in the classroom (Entwisle, 1988; Gay, 2002; Haycock, 1998; Nieto, 2003; Stronge, 2007). However, in urban environments, students are often not taught by the best teachers for them. Urban schools - where the need for excellent teachers is greatest - are often staffed by “inexperienced teachers
who know little about their students and who struggle to teach them” (Nieto, 2003, p.7).

Research completed by Stronge (2008) demonstrated the effects of having a “highly effective teacher” for three consecutive years. In that study, students with highly effective teachers yielded achievement scores fifty-two percent higher than students having an ineffective teacher three years in a row as measured by the Tennessee State Mathematics Test (Stronge 2008, p.170). Similarly, knowing little about students can ultimately lead to poor student performance and increased drop-out rates. A study by Hargreaves (1996) of high school drop outs told researchers that the one factor that might have prevented them from dropping out was “an adult in the school who knew them well and cared for them” (Hargreaves, 1996, p.82).

Another problem in urban schools is the fact that teachers do not look like the students they teach and the number of minority teachers is declining. Currently, minority students are taught in schools where 90% of their teachers are White (Nieto, 2003, p. 36). These teachers face challenges to understand a culture and students for which they are not familiar (Leake, 1995, p.92). With little supports for bridging this cultural divide, over 50% of all urban teachers quit within five years (Haberman, 1995, p.780).

Urban teachers also struggle to maintain consistently high academic expectations for minority students as compared to their White peers. Entwisle & Alexander’s (1988) research demonstrates that teacher expectations for Black students are often lower than their expectations for similarly achieving White students. The study found that teachers of middle class backgrounds did not perceive minority students as favorably as teachers from more modest socio-economic backgrounds (Entwisle, 1988, p.452). These same middle class teachers also rewarded higher performing minority students for passive classroom behavior even though that
quality resulted in lower achievement scores when compared to similarly high performing White students who were not rewarded for passive behaviors (Entwisle, 1988, p.455).

The Challenge: Urban Academic Achievement and the Achievement Gap

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results, students in urban schools lag far behind their suburban peers in terms of academic achievement. The 2013 NAEP results find a twenty-six point gap in reading scores between Black and White students at age nine that rises to twenty-nine points by age seventeen. Similarly, math achievement finds an eighteen point gap at age nine that escalates to twenty-four points by age seventeen. These gaps, however, have narrowed since data collected in 1971 reported a forty-four point discrepancy in reading achievement of nine year olds (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013).

Strategies to address these gaps in achievement have mixed results, but are moving toward the need to understand the unique learning needs of poor and minority students. Urban teaching requires a different skill set and instructional approaches from suburban teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Research shows that contextual factors such as school location also carry influence over the students and teachers in the school (Waxman, 1997, p.10). Students in urban schools are at the highest risk for failure and face the worst social and economic factors (Waxman, 1997, p.10). Urban schools are also represented by high percentages of minority students (Waxman, 1997, p.38). Therefore, it is important to understand the specific learning needs of African-American students and the instructional strategies that work best for them. Waxman (1997) found that a significant difference between effective and ineffective schools that served predominantly African-American students was that students were found interacting with
their teachers “nearly twice as much in effective schools” (Waxman, 1997, p.38). Further research is important to explore the exact nature of these interactions.

**Proposed “Solutions”: Teacher Quality Improvement and Legislative Policies**

With an acknowledgement of disparities in educational equity, the government has taken steps to improve teacher preparation in colleges of education and in our schools. To address issues of student achievement, teacher effectiveness and inequitable funding models, the government has stepped in to create legislation and policies that hope to improve teaching and learning in our schools. However, these policies are often created without input from teachers and have become punitive and reactionary rather than progressive and visionary. These policies also tend to view teaching as a profession where effectiveness is completely quantifiable through student assessment. These policies do not balance the quantitative aspects with the qualitative measures that recognize the artistic and personal aspects of teaching.

An example of this problem is current educational policies at the Federal and State levels which focus solely on credentialing and content knowledge as indicators of teacher quality and effectiveness. Since 1965, the definition and evaluation of “teacher quality” has changed and evolved. This transformation has been driven primarily by policies created and enacted at the Federal level of government and implemented at the State and local levels. Few of these policies have been proposed or even endorsed by major teacher organizations or colleges of education signaling a trend of external control. Federal policy makers justify their involvement because education is viewed for its “positive externality”, which purports that a well-educated society benefits all of society in both market gains and the advancement of democracy. “Because education is associated with positive externalities, policy makers want to encourage individuals
to attend college and to help defray the cost of doing so; in the end, the better educated population stimulates economic growth” (Kraft, 2010, p. 305).

In 1965, lawmakers passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in the “interest of advancing equity for low-income, non-White children, primarily through supplementing local and state school spending with federal dollars” (Shober, 2012, p. 4). This legislation assumed that disparities in education were caused by inequalities in funding. One year later, however, James Coleman’s *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (EEO) report foreshadowed forty years of subsequent research that would show that teacher quality demonstrates stronger links to pupil improvement than improving facilities and supplies (Shober, 2012, p.3). This research, however, was largely ignored as policy makers assumed that teacher quality was properly controlled and effective through credentialing. These policies assume that content knowledge alone is sufficient to closing achievement gaps. The research focuses on what is more easily quantitatively measured than the more qualitative data that seeks to explore the role of relationships, cultural sensitivity and individual teacher identity to student success.

Equating teacher quality with qualifications was standard policy throughout the 1990’s and teachers were largely trusted with an ideology that said “what teachers want is what students need” (Shober, 2012, p. 3). This theory was supported by the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1998 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 which defined teacher quality as the “combination of training and experience” (Shuber, 2012, p. 3). Subsequent student testing and greater access to individual student data, however, quickly made it apparent that training and experience were not sufficient indicators to define teacher quality.
With little information on “how” teachers were effective, policy makers stuck to what was most measurable - credentials and student outcomes as the focus of teacher quality and effectiveness (Shuber, 2010, p. 5). In 1998, Congress created a new Title II that focused “exclusively on teacher quality” (Shuber, 2010, p.6). This legislation required colleges that received federal dollars to publicly report how teachers were assessed and how many of their teacher candidates passed the state licensing exams. Title 1 monies tied to NCLB then required teachers meet “highly qualified” criteria by 2006 which specified “a bachelor’s degree, full state certification, and demonstrated knowledge of his or her subject matter” (Shuber, 2010, p. 6).

Changes in Title legislations and NCLB raised standards for teacher quality at the same time that research from student data found few correlations between credentials and student achievement. This led to a new shift in “value added” measures where student growth is linked to individual teacher effectiveness. Now, new policy proposals are being implemented where up to half of a teacher’s effectiveness is measured by student growth in their classroom. This policy change recognizes the unique talents that individual teachers bring to the classroom. This is a shift toward a better assessment of teacher quality, but it still does not address or specify the exact qualities, skills or characteristics that effective teachers possess. A need to identify, recruit and retain teachers who possess specific characteristics and beliefs that lead to effectiveness in their work with students continues to be overlooked; yet it is an essential component for improving policy and outcomes for student achievement. To date, research that has influenced legislation has been largely quantitative. However, exploring the stories of teachers and teaching beyond the numbers might yield new information that could help close achievement gaps in our schools.
Another Proposed “Solution”: School Climate

It is also important to explore the impact that these legislative policies and mandates have on the everyday functioning of teaching and learning and the ways in which relationships within a school are supported or weakened by these policies. According to Keiser and Shulte (2009), school climate is defined as “created through the combined culture of the adults and students within a school – both the culture they share as an organization and the diverse cultures they bring from home” (Keiser & Shulte, 2009, p.45). Additionally, Hoy refers to school cultures as “open” or “closed” where open, humanistic environments are characterized by authentic, open and transparent interactions between adults and students and closed, custodial schools are characterized by mistrust and low morale (Hoy, 2008).

In urban environments, the extreme diversity between the cultural background of teachers and students can create barriers to forming a positive and unified school climate. Additionally, the current climate of urban schools is often characterized by a lack of resources, collegiality, professional development and distrust of administration (Haberman, 1995). Coupled with the issues faced by the students of poverty, crime, discouragement and family instability, this creates an environment where teaching and learning is an extreme challenge (Olson & Jerald, 1998). For beginning teachers an urban school environment can become a “volatile, highly charged, emotionally draining, physically exhausting experience” (Haberman, 1995, p.777). The consequence of this challenging school climate is a high attrition rates for both students and teachers. After five years, the attrition rate is “between 40-50%” for all new teachers (Ingersoll, 2007, p.166).
A qualitative study by Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2012) highlights the challenges teachers face in urban contexts and ways they attempt to negotiate these barriers. The study was a comparison of two teachers using a narrative approach. Both teachers possessed all the qualities that policy makers claim are critical to teacher quality and success: Each had a strong academic background, solid subject knowledge, strong teacher preparation, commitment to education and a placement that corresponded with their teaching certification and expertise (Cochran-Smith, 2012). However, their ability to navigate the school climate was a contributing factor that made a difference between a teacher who left the profession and the other who remained. A significant barrier was the isolation of the teachers from other colleagues. The teachers went from a relatively supportive pre-service experience to one of limited support. Both teachers were assigned mentors that were rarely engaged with their mentees. However, the successful teacher sought out support networks while the teacher who left retreated to her classroom. Her refusal to sign off on the mentor’s request for payment demonstrates the frustration and disappointment with the lack of support from colleagues. Another barrier to overcome was the mismatch between the curriculum and approach taught in the university teacher program and the scripted curriculum of the public school. The university advocated an inquiry-based approach where the teacher was able to lead students into higher-level thinking. These exchanges also allowed the teacher to get to know her students on a deeper level which then led to personal reflection on her teaching and the lived experiences of her students. This approach, however, conflicted with the school’s scripted curriculum, pacing charts and frequent assessments. The successful teacher was able to work inquiry into the curriculum and sometimes overtly ignored the pacing charts. Her relationship with the principal was one of frequent negotiation and advocacy for an inquiry approach. Her confidence in her approach and abilities allowed her to demonstrate high levels of
success. And though she was ostracized by her colleagues, she made it a point to find outside sources of support that encouraged the methods and philosophies originally learned in the university program. The teacher who left the profession was quick to conform to the prescribed curriculum and felt threatened by other teachers who questioned her desire to use other teaching methods. Her feelings of isolation and pressures to conform resulted in her lowering of expectations for herself and her students. Her ensuing frustration and depression is all too symptomatic of the climate of urban schools (Cochran-Smith, 2012).

**Fostering a “Solution” One Teacher at a Time: Teacher Identity Development**

Educational policy mandates have altered the climates of schools and changed the purpose of teaching to one where effective teaching is defined as “being able to raise students’ test scores and clear notions that there are ‘best’ ways to teach, regardless of who the students are and what experiential and cultural resources they bring” (Cochran-Smith, 2012, p.122). When academic achievement is viewed as a purpose and not a result of developing an individual, the relationship between student and teacher can suffer. The former view dehumanizes students to names on a spreadsheet who are interchangeable and able to learn in similar manners. Teachers are now challenged to make decisions that might go against their core beliefs and philosophies of education. An exploration of the identities of teachers who are able to view and teach students as individuals and foster strong relationships that can often lead to pedagogies of empowerment is an important issue that has not been thoroughly addressed in the literature. Just as educational practice is moving toward a more individual and differentiated view of students, perhaps a similar view of teachers would also lead to improvements for teacher quality and practice. Perhaps it is important to understand not just “what” Alexis does in the classroom or “what” she knows about content, but “how” she was able to arrive at her beliefs and practices. It is a hope of
this study that the stories of teachers who have been successful in urban classrooms can fill the critical gap between “what” and “how”.

**Theoretical Framework – Social Identity Theory**

This research fits under the umbrella of social identity theory and will specifically examine the roles and intersections of race, class, beliefs and professional identity on understanding and relating to urban education from the perspective of White, female teachers from middle class backgrounds. This population is important to understand as over 90% of all urban teachers represent this demographic (Nieto, 2003).

Social identity theory was first introduced by Henri Tajfel in the 1970’s and expanded upon by J.C. Turner in the 1980’s (Korte, 2007). It seeks to answer fundamental questions of why people behave in certain manners and how much of that behavior is linked to who they perceive themselves to be, or their identity (Korte, 2007). Furthermore, this theory explains that individuals are comprised of multiple selves and these perceptions of self are heavily influenced by group or social memberships (Collins, 1999; Korte, 2007). The interactions between the individual and in-groups, where they easily identify, and out-groups that they may reject, create complex and dynamic social interactions (Jenkins, 2004). For these reasons, identities are continually evolving and subject to the evolving natures of social groups.

Group identity is an important aspect of social identity. Group membership can viewed by physical characteristics such as race or gender and can also be a function of society as observed in class hierarchies, beliefs and power. Memberships by race or gender can often influence societal categorization and even self-categorization as to groups that are potentially
open for inclusion. Therefore, one’s “history, personality, status and opportunity constrain the choice of groups available” (Korte, 2007, p. 169).

Group membership and identity often becomes stronger than individual identity as individuals adopt a collective identity (Turner & Onorato, 1999). This shift is important to understand as individuals will often behave differently as members of a group than they would as individuals (Turner & Onorato, 1999). The desire to experience positive self-esteem as a member of a particular group is a concept of social identity theory that helps to explain bias for membership in one’s own group and possible denigration of competing groups. Power struggles between groups can cause dominate groups to exaggerate differences between groups in efforts to maintain power and positive self-esteem (Tajfel, 1982).

The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1998) explores ways that identity and group membership can intersect with each other in complex and dynamic ways. In Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice, Collins discusses ways that individual and group identity as a Black woman can take on multiple meanings depending on the perspectives of individual and in-group/out-group perceptions of memberships of race and gender. Collins critiques the concept of standpoint theory which states that “group location in hierarchical power relations produces shared challenges for individuals in those groups (Collins, 1998, p. 201). A greater understanding of these challenges and the formation of a collective identity can be understood when the study of socially marginalized groups includes an analysis of standpoints situated by intersecting points of marginalized identities, analyzes how exclusion may operate differently for members of that group might be situated differently, where Black women might experience patriarchy within their membership in the black community and racism within their identification as women. Collins also discusses intersectionality which states that “systems of
race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of a social organization” (Collins, 1998, p. 279). The use of intersectionality to study social identity as connected to systems of privilege and oppression offers a finer lens of analysis and can be used to invoke political action for change.

This work is important to this study as it seeks to explore the understandings and meanings teachers in urban settings bring to the field as representing a predominately, White, female, middle-class demographic. The ways these identities intersect with beliefs and work together to form a professional identity as an urban educator, are important to understanding the relationship between social identity and their ability to form strong teacher-student relationships with members of out-groups - primarily the students they teach. The students in urban schools predominantly comprise minorities of poor or working-class homes. Students’ individual and collective experiences as members of out-groups in relation to White teachers, often resulting in discrimination by these teachers’ in-groups affiliations, has contributed to the existence of significant barriers to collective understandings. The ability for a teacher to explore and negotiate their group memberships in contrast to the memberships of the students they teach is important as teachers seek to form positive relationships in their classrooms (Delpit, 1998). The ability to maintain a positive individual and collective identity as a member of dominant groups, while at the same time recognizing the inherent struggles of membership in out-groups, is important for teachers who cross barriers of race and class on a daily basis. The extent to which a teacher seeks to relate to and understand members of minority groups is critical to their ability to form strong relationships with their students (Delpit, 1998). It was an aim of this study to explore the ways teachers understand the dynamics of in and out groups and ways these memberships can function in schools to create socially stratified systems that negatively impact minority students.
White Identity Development and Urban Teachers

The importance of racial identity has been explored extensively for minority groups and ways they are able to develop positive identities despite discrimination and persecution from dominant race groups (Howard, 2006). However, the subject of racial identity formation for dominant groups, especially Whites in the United States has been less explored. The work of Janet Helms (1993) has primarily informed this area of research and is used as a basis for emerging work in the field. The ways in which White teachers make meaning of their racial identities and place them within their context of work with minorities is important to understanding ways teachers are able to negotiate issues of race within their classrooms.

Similarly, it is important to explore this construct as it relates to White teachers working in urban schools. According to Sharon Chubbuck (2004), the possibility that White teachers’ dispositions toward race may create “internal obstacles to the implementation of both effective pedagogy and curriculum and a transformative response to inequitable policies” is important to consider (Chubbuck, 2004, p. 302). A teacher who has not progressed sufficiently through the stages of White identity development may have misconceptions toward minorities and lack of understanding or disbelief that power and privilege are dominant forces in racism and classism. They may purport the concept of the “American Dream” as realistically attainable for all members of her classroom (Chubbuck, 2004). Other examples of “Whiteness in practice” include school tracking systems where biased testing practices perpetuate low expectations and feelings of racial inferiority toward minority students (Chubbuck, 2004). Another practice is that of “colorblindness” where Whites reject the salience of race and deny its effect on issues of equity. This again can manifest in schools through tracking policies, low expectations and feelings that effort is all that is needed to do well in school (Chubbuck, 2004). These ideas,
rooted in meritocracy, can create environments where even the best intentioned teachers can fall prey to subtle practices of racism. Therefore, a complete and complex understanding of race and one’s Whiteness is important for teachers to explore in efforts to best meet the educational needs of their students and to work as an agent of change in the educational community.

One way teacher racial identity can be explored is through Janet Helm’s theory of White identity. This construct is a stage theory that “assumes that in the United States, racial identity development is a normal developmental process” where the goals for Whites is “racial transcendence, where attitudes and behaviors are no longer governed by racial consciousness” (Block, 1995, p. 72). The first stage is called the “contact stage” where Whites express curiosity and nervousness about members of other races as well as a lack of awareness of being White. This lack of awareness is a function of being a member of the dominant race in the U.S. where power and privilege allow Whites to take their race for granted. In this stage, Whites will often assert that “they don’t see what race a person is” (Helms, 1993, p. 57). Teachers in this stage will say that they don’t see their children as Black or White, but merely as children (Howard, 2006).

The next stage is called “disintegration.” It is characterized by feelings of “guilt and anxiety as the person becomes aware of the social implications of race on a personal level” (Block, 1995, 72). In this stage the person comes to understand that Blacks and Whites are not treated equally and they begin to explore reasons for these inequalities. In this stage the White person will make one of three choices: (a) Avoid the problem by reducing contact with Blacks (b) Try to convince other Whites that racial inequalities exist or (c) Develop new belief systems that say racism is not real or that Whites are not responsible (Helms, 1993). Whites that choose this last option then move into a stage call “reintegration” where Whites come to believe that they are the superior race (Helms, 1993). Individuals in this stage replace their feelings of guilt
or anxiety with “fear or anger toward Black people” (Block, 1995, p. 73). These feelings can be expressed either passively or aggressively. Passive behaviors include avoidance of contact with Blacks and aggressive behaviors can include acts of violence or exclusion. Many Whites remain in this stage unless a personally jarring event occurs to lift them to the next stage (Helms, 1993).

When Whites begin to abandon racism and develop a positive White identity they have moved to the “pseudo-independent” stage. This stage has a renewed curiosity for Blacks but still views Black culture as dysfunctional and therefore responsible for institutional and cultural racism. Whites in this stage may want to help Blacks “change themselves so they function more like Whites on White criteria for success and acceptability rather than recognizing that this criteria might be inappropriate or too narrowly defined” (Helms, 1993, p. 61). Additionally, persons in this stage tend to experience distrust by members of both races and find themselves in uncomfortable positions of dissonance and marginalization (Helms, 1993).

During the “immersion/emersion” stage Whites redefine what it means to be White and redevelop a positive identity toward Whiteness. This stage is characterized by an interest in exploring the racial identity development of other Whites and trying to understand what it really means to be White in America (Helms, 1993).

The final stage of White identity development is called “autonomy.” In this stage individuals “accept racial differences and value cultural diversity.” In this stage, the individual “no longer feels a need to oppress, idealize, or denigrate people on the basis of group membership characteristics such as race because race no longer symbolizes threat to him or her” (Helms, 1993, p. 66). These individuals actively seek opportunities to learn from other groups and seek opportunities to eliminate racism.
While Helms is the dominant researcher in the field of White identity, several criticisms of her model, in addition to her own revisions, have emerged in the literature. One criticism is that model places a greater emphasis on how Whites feel about Blacks than how they feel about themselves (Leach, Behrens & LaFleur, 2002). Additionally, these stages, or later called “statuses” by Helms, can move in non-linear fashions and it is possible for multiple statuses to exist simultaneously (Leach, Behrens & LaFleur, 2002). Research in White racial consciousness has sought to learn ways White view themselves as the emphasis of the work and has been led by Rowe, Bennett and Atkinson (1994). However, this work is similarly criticized for being too narrow and not considering the viewpoints of Blacks.

Finally, measures of White racial identity and consciousness have been developed to quantitatively measure this construct. The White Racial Identity Attitude Scale of Helms and Carter (1990) and the Oklahoma Racial Attitudes Scale of Choney and Behrens (1996) are frequently utilized. However, limited qualitative research that explores the lived experiences that allow individuals to move from one stage to the next exists in the literature. It is important to explore this gap in the literature to arrive at a better understanding of White identity development.

**Teacher Identity Development**

According to Palmer (2007) “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). Identity, according to Palmer is “an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic make-up, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me
harm” (Palmer, 2007, p. 13). From his research, Palmer has found that “good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity” (Palmer, 2007, p.11). This identity is characterized by a connectedness between teacher and student where teacher, student and subject are joined into “the fabric of life” (Palmer, 2007, p.11). In this sense, connections are not made with instructional methods, but in the heart of the teacher. For Palmer, a teacher’s heart is the place where “intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (Palmer, 2007, p.11). Additionally, a teacher’s identity is both public and private; and to Palmer, a strong teaching identity allows a blurring of the lines where teachers share their thoughts and feeling with students in real and vulnerable ways (Palmer, 2007).

Beliefs, support structures and race all work together in the formation of a professional identity as a teacher. According to Merseth and Dickstein (2008), teachers bring attitudes and beliefs to the classroom that then influence instructional practices. In a large part, these beliefs and practices define a teacher’s professional identity. Similar to the stage approach to racial identity, teacher identity can also be viewed as an evolving process and places such as teacher preparatory programs have unique opportunities to help shape the identities in positive ways (Merseth and Dickstein, 2008). According to Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992) “Teacher identity is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning and decision making…teacher education must begin, then, by exploring the teaching self” (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1992, p.21).

According to Cochran-Smith (2012) early teacher preparation programs of the 1970’s held a belief that teacher identity was primarily formed within the context of the four year university teacher preparation program. Becoming a teacher was an evolving process, but only over a four year span of time. By the 1980’s the view had shifted to see teachers as “reflective
practitioners” who thought deeply about their work in the field and engaged with colleagues to continue to improve their practices. This shift from “I am a teacher” to “I am becoming a teacher” allows teachers to think of themselves and their professional identities as a continually evolving process. Learning to teach becomes “a process and not an event” (Cochran-Smith, 2012, p. 109). This shift in perspectives is important, particularly in urban environments, where teachers need time and support to engage in reflective practices and make meaning of urban contexts.

According to Cochran-Smith, teacher identity is formed through the intersection of beliefs, prior life experiences, opportunities for on-going professional support and the context of the school environment (Cochran-Smith, 2012). In a qualitative study conducted by Amy Brown (2013) these factors intersected to form or not form an urban teacher identity of a “neoliberal savior” for their students. This study is compared and contrasted with the identity of urban teachers as presented in the media and film. The teacher identity of media and film is presented as a White, middle-class female who enters an urban school to “save” the students through inspired teaching and student adoption of the values held by the teacher. These values include concepts of meritocracy and social justice defined through a lens of individual effort that should be rewarded (Brown, 2013). These values are then reinforced in teacher training programs that speak to a “culture of poverty” that discuss ways to lift those who would be lifted out of poverty through adoption of middle-class values and agendas (Brown, 2013).

The savior mentality is created though a lens of deficit thinking where teachers perceive themselves as superior and charged with imparting their cultural values on populations in perceived need. Teachers are often unaware of their deficit thinking, have good intentions, and often think of themselves as “good teachers of Black students” (Brown, 2013, p. 129). In the
Brown study, the teachers who most embodied a “savior” identity felt they needed to maintain a professional distance from the students, have high levels of classroom control and provide students with a curriculum that, if taken advantage of, would serve to give their students similar opportunities for advancement as they had experienced in their educational experiences. Furthermore, attempts to relate to students often served to unintentionally demean students’ home discourses through “hidden curriculums” that placed a value on the use of standard English as “proper” and “correct” (Brown, 2013). By contrast, teachers who did not embody a “savior” identity, tended to talk about “code switching”, which involves teaching students that language use is situational and requires the mastery of multiple forms. This technique, in combination with open discussions of race and class, embodied a teacher identity that sought to learn with and through her students rather than change or rescue them (Brown, 2013; Delpit, 2006).

Often, a teacher’s identity or “teaching self” is intertwined with other facets of identity and are informed by prior life experiences. In the research of Merseth and Dickstein (2008), the authors conclude, “In each of these instances, the pre-service teachers brought their personal identities to the process of learning to teach. Prior life experiences, family members, community and socio-economic contexts all played an important role in who they were and how their professional identities would develop” (Merseth & Dickstein, 2008, p. 96). In other words, who a teacher is as a person is not far removed from, nor is it easily separated from, who they are as a teacher. And who they are as a teacher has direct influence on the curricular choices they make, their level of concern for their students, and their abilities to form strong relationships.

The Development of Critical Consciousness in Teachers

The concept of “critical consciousness” was developed by Paulo Freire and was primarily focused on the conscious minds of the oppressed, rather than those who sought to aid liberation,
such as teachers. However, the construct is important to understand as White teachers move through Helm’s White identity model and reach a point of awareness similar to Freire’s “critical consciousness”. An acute level of awareness of inequalities, coupled with a desire to take action through pedagogical and political practices, is important to understanding the belief formation of teachers (Shim, 2008).

Critical consciousness “describes how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them” (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011, p. 44). It is a process of “continuous self-reflection coupled with action to discover and uncover how we, our approaches to social work practice, and our environments have been and continue to be shaped by societal assumptions and power dynamics” (Reed, Newman, Suarez & Lewis, 1997, p.46). Additionally, critical consciousness is comprised of three components: critical reflection, political efficacy and critical action or to use Freire’s terms “see, judge, act” (Gibson, 1999; Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011).

Critical reflection refers to the “social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequalities, such as social, economic, racial/ethnic and gender inequalities that constrain well-being and human agency” (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011, p. 46). In the Willis (1977) study, Learning to Labour, this stage is similar to the lads understanding or “penetrating” the ideals of capitalism and the ways it can serve to oppress (Willis, 1977). For teachers, it is necessary for them to also penetrate the realities of capitalism to “be aware of her differences with her students as well as her connections with them” (Romano, 2008, p. 89).

Intentional and supported reflection can become powerful way for teachers to penetrate cultural differences and seek action. A study by Rosalie Romano (2008) sought to learn ways university teaching programs could “awaken” critical reflection in pre-service teachers. In the
study, pre-service teachers had an option to enroll in the Consortium for Overseas Student Teaching (COST) as fulfillment of student teaching requirements. This qualitative study found that teachers’ personal experience of being the minority in a foreign culture allowed them to engage in “a more critical way of looking at schools, at students, and what it means to teach” (Romano, 2008, p. 93). Additionally, the program allowed them to explore their “cultural identity” and see ways that shifts in power (moving from a majority status in the States to minority in the foreign country) opened their eyes to power dynamics created and perpetuated by dominant groups. As an exercise rooted in practice rather than theory, students became emotionally connected with their own thoughts and feelings and also demonstrated stronger feelings of empathy and connectedness with the students in their classrooms (Romano, 2008). Upon completion of the program, students were able to point to the experience as one of “wide awakeness” that altered their views of self and others. It inspired them to help their students also become “wide awake to social consciousness, especially around issues of race and class” (Romano, 2008, p. 94). This statement is aligned with Freirean views that a teacher cannot help others overcome their ignorance unless they are “engaged permanently in trying to overcome [their] own” (Freire, 1998, p. 89).

Political efficacy is the “perceived capacity to effect social and political change by individual and/or collective activism” (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011, p. 46). The Willis study used the term “limitations” to describe the lad’s feelings that they were powerless to change the system that served to oppress” (Willis, 1977). In teaching, teachers have greater power to affect change but seldom choose to exercise this ability due to fear of retaliation from administration (Romano, 2008). For Freire, this was the “judge” stage where teachers would challenge political structures within schools. Freire felt it was important for teachers to view themselves in political
contexts to “Fight against social injustice, which oppresses schools and students as well as the teachers themselves (Shim, 2008, p. 529). Therefore, it is important for teachers, especially those who have been “awakened” to inequalities, to have systems of support to help them navigate oppressive structures.

Often, a mentor teacher is important to the development of political efficacy. These teachers can guide new teachers through political systems comprised of administrators, district-mandated curriculums and legislations to advocate for student equality (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011). These mentors help new teachers “go against the grain” to protest unjust policies and encourage oppressed members, such as students and parents, to also join against these policies (Shim, 2008). However, these relationships are rare; and most mentoring situations are highly scripted by districts where new and mentor teachers are assigned to each other and then follow a curriculum of mentoring that serves to encourage teaching and learning supportive of social reproduction (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011). Craft and Kaiser (2011) note, “As sociocultural and social justice theories play a larger role in school reform and teacher professional development, an understanding of the nature of the discourse that supports this transformation will become the lifeblood of change” (p. 107). To date, however, more research is needed that demonstrates ways mentor teachers could help new teachers feel empowered to challenge political structures that serve to oppress.

Finally, critical action refers to “individual or collective action taken to change aspects of society, such as institutional policies and practices, which are perceived to be unjust” (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011, p. 46-47). Examples of activism could include voting, protesting or community organization. It can also include using curriculums that serve to empower low-status youth. Once teachers are aware of inequalities and have the courage to confront political
structures, they need a curriculum and plan for change. Mentors and school climates that work collectively toward empowerment can further inspire teachers to have the courage to confront oppressive practices.

Freire believed that teachers who taught for societal change utilized a pedagogy of problem posing and solving opposed to the traditional narrative or “banking methods” where teachers provide information for students to memorize and reiterate. The former approach treats students as fully human and capable of being active participants in their learning. In the latter approach, knowledge is transferred with no desire to encourage autonomous or critical reflection (Shim, 2008). A problems-posing and solving curriculum also values students as fully human and is often characterized by strong relationships between students and teachers. Freire referred to the relationships as “armed love” where teachers not only care for their students but also protect their rights through a curriculum of empowerment (Shim, 2008). This view extends problem solving curriculum to become a truly transformative process for both student and teacher.

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Critical Consciousness in Action

Once teachers are awakened to structural inequalities and have a desire to challenge these structures, they often adopt pedagogical strategies that serve to empower and transform. The concern that urban students need different instructional strategies and teachers who support these strategies is addressed through culturally relevant/responsive and multi-cultural educational approaches. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p.108). Culturally responsive teaching is rooted in the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky who defined sociocultural as “higher level psychological functioning such
as ideas, beliefs, thoughts and ways of problem solving as rooted in social interactions” (Yamauchi, 2005, 105). It is based on the “assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2002, p.110). Culturally responsive teaching includes five essential components: developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction (Gay, 2002, p.111).

Culturally responsive education is also offered as a solution to the effects of social reproduction. Social reproduction is a theory where Bowles & Gintis assert that “schools train the wealthy to take up places at the top of the economy while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status in the class structure” (MacLeod, 1995, p.87). Bourdieu’s definition takes a more subtle approach to the role of economy and emphasizes the importance of “cultural capitol”, or the knowledge, cultural background, skills and dispositions unique to classes (MacLeod, 1995, p. 88). Cultural capitol can be acquired through culturally relevant teaching where dominant class realities are discussed alongside the celebration of other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.14).

Social reproduction is manifested in educational practices that assimilate, rather than accommodate cultural diversity (Enomoto & Blair, 1995, p.223). In practice, these students have been expected to “divorce themselves from their cultures and learn according to European American cultural norms. This places them in double jeopardy—having to master the academic tasks while functioning under cultural conditions unnatural (and often unfamiliar) to them” (Gay,
Teacher efforts to understand and include culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms can therefore greatly improve academic achievement and allow for greater opportunities for students to advance socioeconomically.

Culturally responsive teaching also requires teachers to demonstrate a “pedagogy of caring more than a pedagogy of method” (Noddings, 1984, p.24). These teachers are able to step out of their cultural framework of reference and relate to another point of view (Gay, 1995, p.104). Gay’s research (1995) outlines qualities of effective urban teachers that include: cultural consciousness and positive self-identity, personal responsibility and integrity, facility to take considered action, ability to manage others’ racial and ethnic perceptions, pioneers and trailblazers, self-reliance and acceptance, reaching and giving back, and spirituality (Gay, 1995, p.104).

Cultural consciousness and positive self-identity refers to a teacher’s genuine appreciation for diversity and a strong sense of self in relation to one’s own racial identity. This allows the teacher to form close relationships with their students regardless of differences in race. Personal responsibility and integrity means that teachers hold high expectations for their students regardless of poverty or other barriers. They assume a personal responsibility for each child’s success and view student deficiencies as temporary and improvable through their efforts. Facility to take considered action refers to a teacher’s sense of efficacy and empowerment. These teachers believe they can make a positive impact on student performance, that their students can learn and that demonstrating high levels of care for each child makes a significant difference in their lives.

The ability to manage others’ racial and ethnic perceptions translates to a teacher’s capability to understand racism and other perceptions of minority student achievement but not
use it as an excuse for poor student performance. Pioneers and trailblazers are teachers who “do whatever it takes” for students to be successful (Gay, 1995, p.104). They are risk takers who find intrinsic motivation to improve their skills as a teacher. Self-reliance and self-acceptance are qualities of teachers who operate independently and are not concerned with public opinion. They embrace their own identity and this is often expressed with the art, music and books they read. They are at once “playful and profound, certain and skeptical, serious and humorous, humble and confident” (Gay, 1995, p.105).

Reaching and giving back refers to teachers’ sense that their success was not earned on their own and they feel a deep need to help others achieve success. They reject common notions of individualism and understand that developing a sense of “affiliation, kindredness, and community between themselves and their students” is important (Gay, 1995, p.105). Finally, spirituality is a teacher’s “resounding faith in the possibility of all things” and a “belief in the inherent goodness, worth, dignity, and redeeming potentiality of humans” (Gay, 1995, p.106). These teachers do not give up easily and maintain a positive attitude in their work and life.

The attributes described in Gay’s research are similar to Ladson-Billings and Nieto. Ladson-Billings (1994), in *The Dreamkeepers*, echoes Gay’s research that explores the concepts of culturally relevant teaching and the qualities of culturally relevant teachers. She defines cultural relevance by: teacher conceptions of themselves and others, the manner in which social interactions are organized in the classroom and the teacher’s conception of knowledge and how it is co-constructed with her students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Additionally, Nieto (2003) is aligned with Gay and Ladson-Billings in her characteristics of culturally relevant teachers: high value on student identity, high expectations for success, perseverance, challenging the status quo, risk taking, care for their students, and a personal commitment to improving their practice. Of
these qualities, Nieto believes “respecting and affirming students’ identities and demonstrating care and respect for students” are the most important (Nieto, 2003, p.24). It is important for further research to explore the stories of how these identities were cultivated and the prior life experiences that allowed these qualities to emerge.

**Critical Care and Concern for Students**

The work of Noddings (2006) also refers to caring as an essential characteristic of successful urban teachers. Caring, Nodding states, is more about motivations for students’ success than giving hugs and pats on the back (Noddings, 2006, p. 342). Accordingly, caring teachers are intrinsically motivated to help their students succeed. Caring teachers listen to their students and are responsive to their needs. They motivate their students to succeed and that success is in turn their motivation to continue to do more (Noddings, 2006, p.343). Similarly, Teel (1998) discusses the importance of student motivation and a teacher’s understandings and use of culturally responsive teaching as evidenced by multiple opportunities to demonstrate learnings, increased responsibility and non-competitive grading systems (Teel, 1998, p.480).

The characteristics discussed are qualities that can be refined, but are difficult to learn or acquire if they are antithetical to a teacher’s persona (Philpot, 2012, p.87). Two of these characteristics are a social justice imperative to help students succeed and spiritual “calling” to serve. They are often the responses of teachers who intuitively understand social reproduction and seek to use their craft as teachers to counter the effects of social reproduction.

Teaching for social justice has many definitions, but many include a “distributive notion of justice” (Enterline, 2012, p.270). Enterline further defines social justice as “enhancing students’ learning and their life chances by challenging the inequities of school and society”
Teachers that ascribe to teaching for social justice recognize that disparities in society exist and see their teaching as an activity that “identifies and challenges inequalities” (Enterline, 2012, p.271). Enterline’s 2012 study at Boston College quantitatively researched changes in pre-service teacher’s attitudes toward social justice themes as they progressed through the program and entered their first year of teaching. Results showed that a social justice curriculum in their teacher preparation program significantly changed attitudes toward accepting more themes of social justice over time (Enterline, 2012, p.280). This finding is important because while some individuals may have predispositions toward a social justice agenda in their teaching, attitudes can change and even more teachers could be successful in urban environments with the completion of coursework that includes social justice themes.

Additionally, a teacher’s spirituality can influence their practice as a teacher in the classroom. Palmer (1998) defines spirituality as “the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life – a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching (Palmer, 1998, p.14). Serow (1994) further defines a teacher’s spiritual characteristics as a “calling” in life (Serow, 1994, p.67). Spirituality and sense of calling also align to Nodding’s work that emphasize the inner life of teachers and the care and ethic of teaching as important factors toward understanding teacher effectiveness (Noddings, 2006, p.342). Finally, teachers who think spiritually about their teaching are able to call upon notions of “courage, hope and faith, which rooted in spiritual vernacular allow teachers to imagine schools in a totally different fashion” (Dantley, 2005, p.675).

**Strong Student-Teacher Relationships**

A large body of quantitative research supports a correlation between strong teacher-student relationships and a myriad of outcomes including academic achievement, engagement,
attachment, attendance, and persistence to graduate from high school (Delpit, 1998; Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2003; Palmer, 1998). However, few of these studies address the process of relationship formation or the prior life experiences that allow these relationships to exist and flourish. Fewer still examine these relationships in diverse educational contexts. This gap in the literature speaks to the purpose of this study.

The research of Moje & Martinez (2007) addresses the mismatch of identity, formed by culture, and dominant social structures such as schools. Moje & Martinez place the source of responsibility on schools for failing to create “spaces of comfort” where students could feel belonging and support (Moje & Martinez, 2007, p. 4). They cite the duty of the school to “invite” students to spaces that help them “engage and persist” in their academic studies (Moje & Martinez, 2007, p. 4). Rather than requiring students to sacrifice their identities, schools should create structures that acknowledge cultural differences and provide supports as needed. Administrators and teachers who understand these concepts are more likely to work toward the creation of “spaces of comfort” such as sponsoring ROTC programs, Latino Clubs, or allowing their rooms to be used as a “safe space” for mentoring and cultural bonding with peers.

Additionally, habitus is formed in the “home fronts” described by Moje & Martinez and are often at odds with “contact zones” such as schools. Home fronts are “the spaces in which social identities were shaped and promoted; contact zones were those spaces in which youth confronted racist and discriminatory practices” (Moje & Martinez, 2007, p. 9). Moje & Martinez advocate for schools changing their practices to become “generative spaces, in which new understandings of self and other are forged” (Moje & Martinez, 2007, p. 10). The Bridge programs and ROTC in the Moje & Martinez study were examples of structures that valued the habitus or “home front” of the youth and sought to widen, not restrict their worldview.
Contact zones and home fronts also serve to regulate the aspirations of youth. Moje & Martinez’s research demonstrates the importance of positive role models in both areas and particularly in the home fronts. The authors discuss the role of “pipeline navigators” or members of the community who were able to support the youth as they navigated the educational pipeline. The students in the Moje & Martinez study discuss mentors and members of their community who were attending college. They also discuss opportunities the school provided to connect students with college visitation experiences. Interacting with mentors who were already in a college environment and actually visiting colleges allowed students to expand their identities to see “possible selves situated in contact zones represented by universities” (Moje & Martinez, 2007, p. 17).

Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (2011) also describes the development of low-status youth through mentors that are able to assist them in the navigation of dominant structures such as schools (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). According to Stanton-Salazar, structures are stratified and mentors can serve as gatekeepers that help low-status youth move between structures of power (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1077). Mentors can help students navigate school policies such as curriculum tracking which often serve to limit the educational opportunities of low-status youth (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1086). Finally, Stanton-Salazar discusses ways gatekeepers such as mentors are more inclined to assist youth whose cultural norms are more closely aligned with their own. The extent to which a mentor is able to relate to the culture of the youth they serve can widen or limit access to educational opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1077).
Summary of Chapter II

In conclusion, this review of literature demonstrates efforts to quantify and qualify the nature of effective student-teacher relationships in teaching. In general, it has moved from a quantitative to a qualitative field as the criteria are more subjective and often specific to the individual teacher. In short, effective teacher-student relationships are not learned through credentialing or changed through behavior modifications, but are rather cultivated and expanded as teachers move through stages of identity development and critical consciousness.

Similarly, the theoretical framework in which the practice of teaching is understood has also evolved from an empirical lens to a socio-cultural and critical theory perspective. This shift allows researchers to place the teacher within a larger context of culture and lived experiences, thereby highlighting the shared characteristics and beliefs of teachers as created by similar prior life experiences. This literature is significant to educational practice because if it becomes apparent that successful urban educators share similar beliefs and narratives, then analyzing their stories for themes becomes an important method to improve the quality of teachers our urban students encounter. Similarly, if these themes are areas that can be improved upon through teacher preparation programs, then colleges and universities could benefit by considering these narratives and themes as they write teacher education curriculums. Ultimately, students need and deserve to learn from a teacher who knows them well and wants to awaken their critical consciousness through pedagogies of inquiry and empowerment. Research that seeks to identify and recruit these teachers, particularly for urban youth, remains essential to realizing meaningful and improved results in student achievement.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

I have been a teacher and administrator in both public and private urban school settings for eighteen years. Over the course of my career, I have witnessed the enormous challenges that students, parents, teachers, administrators and the community at large face in our efforts to provide an education that is not only sufficient for children from urban neighborhoods, but capable of breaking cycles of poverty, racism and oppression. Too many of our urban children are learning in schools that are structured in ways that will ensure that they stay poor. Too many of our children are sitting in classrooms with teachers, who often have noble intentions, but are not able to connect and relate to urban children. The majority of urban teachers are White, middle-class females who do not share the same race or class as the low-income and minority students they teach. This dichotomy of race and class creates barriers to understanding and relating to the experiences and worldviews urban children bring to the classroom. Urban teachers, who are predominately White females, need to possess deep understandings of their own identities as persons of power and privilege and use their status not to impose White, middle class culture as “the right way”, but to seek opportunities to use their status as agents of change and empowerment. In the classroom, teachers who are able to form strong relationships with urban students often incorporate culturally relevant pedagogies and spend a great deal of time trying to see the world through the eyes of the students they serve (Ladson-Billings, 1994).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to study the experiences of teachers who have been successful in forming strong relationships with urban students to explore potential common themes and moments of critical consciousness as they negotiated issues of race and class. Identity development in this study encompasses moments of critical consciousness as they pertain to the racial and professional identities of White, female teachers that foster strong relationships and encourage pedagogies and practices of empowerment with their minority students. Similar studies have explored pre-service experiences as the beginning point of reference in identity development (Brown, 2013; Cochran-Smith, 2012; Gay, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1994). This leaves a gap in the literature that would explore narratives of identity development as shaped by the childhood and pre-service experiences of urban teachers. For this study, I believe it was important to consider both the childhood and pre-service experiences that may have helped White, middle class teachers explore and reconcile their identities and which may have resulted in their ability to form strong relationships with their students.

Research Questions

To this end, the following research questions guided this study:

What are the childhood and pre-service experiences of White, female teachers that cultivated critical consciousness of race and class and how have these formative experiences been further developed in the profession, leading to an ability to form strong relationships with poor and minority children and implement practices and pedagogies of empowerment in urban classrooms?
a) What childhood and adolescent experiences with family or friends allowed participants to establish a positive view of their own identity and the identities of people from diverse contexts?

b) What experiences as a pre-service teacher allowed participants to examine their identity and its potential relationship to power structures and pedagogies encountered in urban schools?

c) What experiences as a teacher allowed participants to explore White identity and negotiate power structures of race and class in their classrooms?

d) What other experiences prepared the teacher participants to work in urban environments, form strong relationships with their students and explore practices and pedagogies of empowerment?

**Intersection of Race and Class Identities among White Teachers**

This research fit under the umbrella of social identity theory and specifically examined the roles and intersections of race, class, professional identity and critical consciousness on understanding and relating to urban education from the perspective of White, female teachers from middle class backgrounds. These frameworks helped shape my analysis of the data collected.

From the stories told, the participants viewed themselves and their relationships to others in complex ways. The participants saw themselves as teachers, mothers and co-workers. They also reflected upon their growing up experiences and ways they understood themselves at earlier points in their lives. The ways these identities intersected to compliment and challenge their
personal and group identities was important to consider as the data was analyzed (Collins, 1998). The stories the participants shared often encompassed multiple views of themselves and the ways they situated these identities with the identities of the students they taught was important to consider in the analysis. In particular, the participants’ connections to their low-income students in terms of class identity was an unexpected finding of the study. The work of Collins helped understand ways participants were able to view themselves simultaneously as members of in and out groups with their students. The ability for a teacher to explore and negotiate their group memberships in contrast to the memberships of the students they teach is important as teachers seek to form positive relationships in their classrooms (Delpit, 1998).

The ways in which the participants made meaning of their racial identities and placed them within their context of work with minorities was also important to understandings ways they were able to negotiate issues of race within their classrooms. In the analysis of the participants’ stories pertaining to their understandings of their racial identity, the work of Helms (1993) was important to the analysis. Stories were analyzed to determine where they might resonate within the stages of identity development described by Helms (1993). According to Sharon Chubbuck (2004), the possibility that White teachers’ dispositions toward race may create “internal obstacles to the implementation of both effective pedagogy and curriculum and a transformative response to inequitable policies” was important to consider in the analysis (p. 302).

The identities of the participants as teachers was another framework to consider in the analysis. Their identities as teachers informed their relationships with their students, their colleagues and pedagogies implemented that could be considered culturally responsive. According to Palmer (2007), “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching
comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). This identity is characterized by a connectedness between teacher and student where teacher, student and subject are joined into “the fabric of life” (Palmer, 2007, p. 11). Stories were analyzed from this framework to look for connections between teacher, student and subject.

The concept of “critical consciousness” was developed by Paulo Freire (1998) and was primarily focused on the conscious minds of the oppressed, rather than those who sought to aid liberation, such as teachers. This construct was important to understand as the participants moved through Helm’s White identity model and experienced “moments of critical consciousness” where they were awakened to race, class and systems of oppression (Freire, 1998). An acute level of awareness of inequalities, coupled with a desire to take action through pedagogical and political practices, is important to understanding the belief formation of teachers (Shim, 2008). An analysis of the participants’ stories regarding these moments of critical consciousness informed the answers to the main questions of this study around spaces and contexts where these awakenings occurred.

For the analysis of data in this study, it was important to understand the extent to which teachers were aware of social reproduction, cultural reproduction and theories of resistance. It was not important that they identified with these theories by name (although one did), but that they could articulate moments of critical consciousness that may have awakened them to the inequalities of schools and sparked a desire to act as an agent of empowerment by employing critical pedagogies and practices of resistance. Each teacher’s level of awakening appeared to correspond to their own racial identity development as discussed by the research of Helms or to their socio-economic identity as discussed by the work of Freire. The ways in which they responded to these awakenings and chose to engage in resistance and empowerment strategies
was analyzed through culturally responsive pedagogies as described by Ladson-Billings (2009) and Delpit (1995) and resistance strategies previously outlined by Freire (1977).

**Rationale for Qualitative Study**

The research questions of this study were best answered by understanding the “lived experiences” of the subjects. Analysis of responses for commonalities and themes yielded answers to the research questions. Interviews resulted in a narrative of the experiences of urban teachers who have been able to form strong relationships with poor and minority students. These stories are important to future research and understanding the identities and narratives of these teachers.

**Interpretive Paradigm**

The data for this study was analyzed through the lenses of critical race theory and critical pedagogy. As a construct, critical theories seek to “understand the origins and operation of repressive social structures” (Gordon, 1995, p. 572). Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed in the legal system in the 1980’s as a means to critique racist legal laws and practices that permeate the judicial system in America (Leonardo, 2012). In the 1990’s, Gloria Ladson-Billings built on the framework to define it from an educational perspective. Similar to the legal definitions, CRT in education is understood as a construct that permeates the entire fabric of education. Leonardo (2011) notes, “Critical race theorists in education argue that race and racism permeate the entire educational enterprise, from aspirations, to spatial configurations and teacher education itself (p. 428). Critical theorists, therefore, are interested in discovering and understanding why oppressive structures exist and exploring ways in which society can be transformed.
Critical theory can trace its origins to the research of Antonio Gramsci, Jurgen Habermas and Michel Foucault (Jennings, 2005). Gramsci was important for developing the term “hegemony” to describe the process that allows “dominant groups to establish and maintain control of subordinates by using specific ideologies and particular forms of authority that are reproduced via social and institutional practices” (Jennings, 2005, p. 16). Habermas and Foucault defined critical theory through lenses of knowledge and power and that the two constructs were closely linked.

One of the first theorists to specifically link critical theory to educational environments was Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire discusses the power of education to be both oppressive and liberating. Education is oppressive when its structures lead to social reproduction, which is the replication of class orders through institutional structures such as schools. Education can also become a means for liberation if the curriculum seeks to awaken “critical consciousness” in the oppressed where they can analyze, discuss and take action against oppressive structures. Freire also felt that critical consciousness was important for the teacher as well so she or he could better encourage students to be reflective and open to understanding their role in dominant structures (Freire, 2000; Jennings, 2005).

The latter and most salient component of critical consciousness is “action.” From this need to act upon understandings of oppressive structures, Henry Giroux developed the term “critical pedagogy” to fuse “critical theory with the practice of teaching and learning” (Jennings, 2005, p. 17). Critical pedagogy unites theories of social reproduction, cultural reproduction theory and theories of resistance as a way to talk about and analyze inequalities in schools.
Social reproduction, according to Bowles and Gintis (1976), has five major components that can manifest in the analysis of educational systems. The first is the nature of capitalism as a construct that creates and maintains vast disparity in wealth in industrial nations that leads to poverty and disenfranchisement for peoples who lack power and property. The second principle speaks to the ways schools serve to maintain these class disparities through practices and pedagogies that prepare and predetermine lower class students for lower paying and unskilled jobs. The third component of social reproduction theory states that teachers in urban settings, who tend to come from a higher socio-economic status than their students, are often unaware of practices that reproduce class inequalities and engage in them with “no malice of intent” (Jennings, 2005, p. 17). However, schools can become places of social awareness and teachers can become agents of change. Finally, an understanding of historical contexts and power structures specific to each nation is important to the analysis of ways schools serve to reproduce class inequalities.

The term cultural reproduction is best associated with the work of Bourdieu (1977). This theory builds on social reproduction by highlighting ways schools reproduce social inequalities through the promotion of class-specific cultural knowledge (Bourdieu, 1977). The concept of cultural capital refers to the knowledge and skills a student may possess that allows them to navigate dominant class culture. According to the theory, schools are built on middle class norms and cultures, which make it harder for students who lack the middle class cultural capital and norms often necessary to be successful in school. Additionally, the value placed on middle class cultural capital by teachers and school systems can lead to deficit thinking of lower status children where the cultural capital they bring is viewed as incorrect or non-existent (Delpit, 1995).
Theories of resistance are a result of exploring social and cultural reproduction and devising responses to the inequalities that are perpetuated. These responses can serve to either liberate the oppressed or actually further limit their potential to move between classes as seen in the studies of Willis (1977) and McLeod (2009) where students’ forms of resistance actually were counterproductive. In education, resistance theories clearly acknowledge the cultural capital of the oppressed and seek to empower both individuals and schools to act as sites of liberation (Jennings, 2005). According to the theory, one way to accomplish liberation is through critical pedagogies.

Critical race theory was selected as an interpretive paradigm because culturally responsive pedagogies and collective action represent responses to an awareness of power and its influences on structural forces such as schools. The design of this study selected participants whose racial identity as White represented the dominant race in our country. Interview questions probed the participants’ understandings of their White identity as one situated in power and privilege and ways they viewed and interacted with minority groups. The methodology also included classroom observations to view ways the participants recognized and celebrated the identities of their students through culturally responsive practices designed to empower. The extent to which the participants were silent around an awareness of structural forces that served to oppress and their relative lack of involvement in collective action was also analyzed through critical race theory.

Qualitative Approach

For this study, a narrative approach was used to collect and analyze data. Narrative inquiry can be traced to Aristotle’s Poetzcs and Augustine’s Confessions (Connelly, 1990).
Czarniawska (2004) defines narrative as “spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). Features of narrative writing include lived stories from individuals that tell experiences and shed light on identities, collaboration between researchers and subjects, include various forms of data and are organized and analyzed through a chronological structure. Additionally, narratives often include the analysis of themes, turning points and contexts (Creswell, 2013).

I selected this approach because I was trying to understand the past experiences of teachers that helped shape their beliefs and attitudes toward teaching poor and minority students. More specifically, I was looking for themes that might emerge that were consistent with identity development, critical consciousness and culturally relevant pedagogies to explain ways teachers were able to traverse boundaries of race and class to form strong relationships with urban students. Narratives have been used in school environments and help to understand the “context for making meaning of school situations” (Connelly, 1990, p. 2).

**Participant Selection**

The participants for this study included five White, middle-class women who were currently successful in their abilities to form strong relationships with poor and minority students in urban school environments. This selection of participants was aligned with purposive sampling techniques of “unique sampling” where subjects are chosen for possessing rare or atypical qualities or attributes (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). The success of White, female teachers in their abilities to form strong relationships with poor and minority students has been considered atypical in the research (Delpit, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2003) so selection of this population can be considered unique.
Teachers who have been able to form strong relationships with their students were identified by using “snowball sampling” techniques. Snowball sampling involves locating a few key participants and then asking them to refer other participants based on their understanding of the selection criteria. With this method, the sample size grows or “snowballs” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). For this study, I began by asking the superintendent of a large urban school district to recommend school principals who they believed had an understanding of the importance of strong teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive pedagogies and practices, and who they believed were advocates for their students and influential in their students’ lives. The principals nominated then served as the nominators for the White, female teachers in their building who were also able to form strong relationships with minority students and who have demonstrated culturally responsive pedagogies and practices. This layered nomination approach provided better reliability than randomly selecting principals who may not themselves have understood the importance of strong relationships, culturally responsive pedagogies and practices, or lacked in their own ability to form strong teacher-student relationships.

The researcher asked the principals to nominate teachers for participation in the study with the objective of eventually securing permission from one of the nominated teachers. In the course of speaking to the principals, they immediately identified a teacher and then were able to name one other teacher for possible inclusion. One principal was able to name a third potential participant, but the others could not offer another teacher who fit the criteria beyond the first two. The first choice teachers were contacted by the researcher and all agreed to participate. (One principal’s first choice had transferred to another school and that participant as well as her first choice in her building both agreed to participate.) All participants were provided with IRB documents for review and consent. Principals were not officially informed as to which teachers
were selected for the study nor did any follow up conversations with the principals occur to help ensure confidentiality for the participants. A total of five teachers were selected from a large urban school district for participation in the study.

**Participants as Unique to the Profession**

When this study began, I knew the participants for this study would comprise White, female teachers. The research has shown that this population is significant as 80-90% of the teachers in urban environments are White and female (Nieto, 2003). Therefore, to understand this population is significant to the success of our students. However, the literature does not specify the individual demographics and life experiences of these White, female teachers and ways they may differ. My prevailing assumption of these teachers, and perhaps those of current research, is that they grew up in middle class to wealthy environments, lived in the suburbs, attended high performing schools and had little to no contact with minorities, poverty or city life. This may in fact be the prevailing demographic; and so, with this broad understanding of the research, these were the teachers I was expecting to interview for this study. However, these were not the teachers nominated.

Further research will be needed to more precisely identify the demographics within the population of White, female teachers of minority students; but I was surprised to learn ways their growing up experiences situated them closer to their students’ environments and experiences than I had anticipated. Two teachers grew up in the same city as the students they taught, two more had early exposures to the city and were able to critically consider issues of race and class, and one grew up on a military base with its own unique culture and views on diversity.
The methodology for the selection of participants may have influenced this atypical sample of teachers. Previous studies have defined teacher success through academic achievement as measured by test scores (Shober, 2012, Haycock, 1998, Hargreaves, 1996). The methodology for this study held the ability to form strong relationships with students as the primary nominating factor. The superintendent was first asked to nominate principals who he felt had strong relationships with students and who understood and employed culturally relevant teaching strategies. From this conversation, of a little over one hundred principals in the district, only ten were recommended and four agreed to meet with me. That the superintendent could only recommend less than 10% of his principals (as he moved down a list with all principal names listed) as being able to form strong relationships with the students in their buildings speaks to research on the challenges of school culture and relationship formation in urban schools. However, it is important to consider that other factors may have influenced the superintendent’s inability to recommend a larger sample size of principals such as the time constraints of our one meeting, stress from other duties and not having an intimate knowledge of newer principals to the district.

It was also interesting to note the teacher nomination process with the principals who agreed to participate in the study. When asked to recommend teachers in their building who were able to form relationships with minority students and who use culturally relevant pedagogies, each of the principals were immediately able to identify one teacher. Additionally, after a minute or two of thought, they were able to identify a second teacher. Sharon’s principal also recommended Vickie as she had taught under her prior to Vickie’s appointment at the all-girls school. Only one of the principals was able to identify a confident third choice and the others offered a third name with hesitation, “If the other two say “no”, this one could work”. The
participants selected and who agreed to participate were all the first choice nominees, with Sharon and Vickie nominated by the same principal. The school building sizes for the study averaged around thirty to forty teachers per building. If current research is employed and 80-90% of the teaching staff is White and female, then the sample size for the principals’ selection included between twenty-four to thirty-six White, female teachers in their buildings. That they could confidently identify less than 10% of their White female staff as having formed strong relationships with their minority students could also be an area for further research. This small nomination pool might also help inform many of the shared experiences of the participants, their opportunities for critical reflection and themes of this study which could be considered atypical within the demographic of White, female teachers

**Site Selection**

The study was conducted in urban school district of approximately 45,000 students. Written permission for the research was sought and secured through the superintendent through the IRB process and prior to the superintendent’s participation in the nomination methodology. The selection of a public school is in keeping with the conceptualization of school settings in this study as institutions serving the most inclusive of student bodies as these schools are open to all teachers and students whereas charter and private schools often have admissions and hiring criteria that are selective. The lack of selectivity in public schools allows an opportunity for the broadest sampling of teachers to occur since issues of beliefs and religion cannot be used in hiring or admission decisions. To this point, themes of faith and specific beliefs that emerge in these public settings, they might have greater potential significance to the study than if the study was limited to or included private and charter schools where these attributes are often contingent for employment. Including samples from various types of schools, such as elementary, middle
and high schools, allowed the research to be generalized to a variety of settings. The overall academic success of the school was not a factor in selection, only the demonstrated ability of the principal to form strong relationships with students as identified by the superintendent. A later review of data, however, found that the principals selected by the superintendent for nomination of teachers had some of the highest scores on standardized achievement tests in the district.

**Methods and Rationale for Sequence of Method**

The study consisted of a sequence of interviews and classroom observations with White, female teachers who have been able to form strong relationships with their students. The study began with interview sessions of approximately sixty minutes at public locations mutually agreed upon by the participants and researcher. The purpose of these interviews was to gain basic demographic data and to understand the prior life experiences of the participants that may have led to their abilities to form strong relationships with minority students. The next sessions were thirty minute observations of the teachers interacting with minority students in the classroom and/or school building to look for specific manifestations of strong relationships outlined in the literature review and pedagogies and practices of culturally responsive teaching. The teachers were asked to suggest a time in the day where these practices might best be observed so the researcher had a clearer understanding of her experiences. The final semi-structured interviews included follow-up questions from the observations to gain a better understanding of prior life experiences that may have influenced these practices. These interview sessions also lasted approximately sixty minutes and took place at locations mutually agreed upon by the participants and researcher.
Interviews followed both structured and semi-structured formats. Structured interview questions included basic demographic data as self-reported from the participant such as age, race, and number of years teaching. Semi-structured interview questions allowed for open responses and deep exploration of topics. According to Merriam, semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). The constructivist format of the interview allowed for the narrative of the teacher to be told and for meaning to be co-constructed by the participant and researcher. (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Development of Questions for the First Interview Session

Interview questions were written, tested and revised through a pilot study conducted prior to the present study. In the pilot study, interview questions were written that sought to answer the same research questions of this study. I wrote questions that encouraged participants to talk about stories or specific examples from their lived experiences. Theoretical and education jargon was removed as much as possible from the questions to help the participants feel comfortable and not intimidated by the questions. Additionally, I hand wrote the questions on index cards so the participants could see them during the interview. I also felt this method would bring a level of informality that allowed the participants to relax and focus on thinking of stories that answered the questions. The questions were as follows:

1. You have been identified by myself and colleagues at our school as a teacher who has been able to form strong relationships with the students they teach. How do you feel you are able to form strong relationships with your students?
2. What kinds of childhood experiences led to important understandings of your identity as it relates to:

a. Race

b. Socio-economic status

3. How were these understandings of race and class significant to your current ability to form strong relationships with students who do not share your same race or socio-economic status?

4. What kinds of beliefs or support structures from your childhood helped you form strong relationships with the students you teach?

5. What kinds of experiences in your pre-service teaching allowed you to explore your identity and issues of race and class?

6. What kinds of experiences in your pre-service training allowed you to explore pedagogies/practices that would serve the needs of low-income and minority students?

7. How did your pre-service experiences contribute to your ability to form strong relationships with the students you currently teach?

8. Is there anything else that you can tell me about your work with your students that enhances a strong teaching/learning relationship?

In the pilot study, these questions resulted in responses that were more “report-like” than narrative. According to Susan Chase (1990), narrative work should allow the participants to tell their stories rather than accounts of an experience. The interviewer’s ability to focus the participant on story telling also allows for greater rapport between participant and researcher.
Additionally, the removal of educational jargon from the questions allows participants to focus on story telling without having to decode the researcher’s intent. This clarity allows for a better flow for the stories and greater richness. With this research in mind, revised questions were required that focused attention on a specific moment or story from the participant’s childhood or pre-service experiences. The interview questions for the first interview session were subsequently modified for this present study to read:

1. Could you talk to me about your growing up experiences and your decision to become a teacher?

2. How have your original ways of thinking about education and yourself as a teacher changed now that you are in the classroom?

3. Tell me about a minority student with whom you were able to form a strong relationship. How did the relationship start and what does it look like today? In what ways was/is the relationship mutually beneficial?

4. Tell me about a time in your early childhood or adolescence where your family or friends helped you understand your racial identity in relationship to others.

5. Can you talk about a time in your early childhood or adolescence where your family or friends helped you understand your socio-economic status in relationship to others?

6. Tell me about a time where you struggled with your race and class in relationship to the students you teach.
7. Tell me about a turning point moment that you feel made you a better teacher for minority students.

8. Can you speak to a time where you realized that the pedagogies or practices of a school were working against minority students?

9. Could you talk about a time during pre-service teaching that made you think about your identity and how it relates to working with poor and minority students?

10. Tell me about a teacher in the field or professor who influenced your thinking around practices and pedagogies that best serve low-income and minority students.

11. Tell me about a person or experience during pre-service teaching that helped you form strong relationships with the students you currently teach.

12. Are there any other stories that you want to tell that illustrate your growth in understanding your identity or ways you have been able to form strong relationships with your students?

These revisions reflect attempts to break up the questions into smaller parts, particularly around issues of race and class to allow for greater opportunities for focused responses and hearing the actual stories of the participants.

Development of Observation Protocol

After the initial pilot study interview sessions, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes. The emerging themes of the pilot study and themes related to the review of literature became the basis for the observation protocol used in this study. Based on the pilot study and theoretical framework of this study, an observation protocol included the physical setting of the room, the instructional and relational interactions between teacher and students, the
focus of teaching and ways it might support student agency and empowerment, and the broader context of the school environment and ways it might support or constrain practices in the classroom. Upon completion of all observations, the data was analyzed using open-coding techniques to find emerging themes within the larger framework used in the observation protocol. From these observations, follow up questions such as those noted below were formulated.

**Development of Questions for Second Interview Session**

After the observations, a second interview took place that sought to qualify data collected in the classroom observation. The questions for the second interview sought clarification of observed practices as well as narratives of prior life experiences, including growing up, pre-service and professional experiences that may have influenced these practices. Based on specific observations in each room, some questions were unique to a participant and some became universal for all participants based on emerging themes. Specific questions for the second interview for each participant are included in the appendix.

Each sequence of questions sought to understand the rationale behind an observed practice and what or who might have influenced each practice. Additionally, concluding questions that asked for final thoughts allowed participants to reflect on the interview session and observation to include additional narratives they felt were important to best understanding their prior life experiences.

**Data Collection Methods**

Prior to data collection, an application to the IRB was submitted and revisions were made according to their conditions for approval. Upon approval, the research began. The IRB process
was important to make sure the participants were protected in the areas of confidentiality and that the questions would not cause any risks “beyond those of daily living”. A semi-structured interview format using open-ended questions allowed participants to provide varied responses. The interviews were recorded, with permission secured from the participants in the Informed Consent letter approved by the IRB, and then transcribed by the researcher. Before the interviews began, I showed participants index cards with the interview question so they would have an idea of the flow of the interview. I hope this strategy helped alleviate any nervousness or apprehension that could be associated with not knowing the content of the questions. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

Open coding techniques were used to code data and classify data by emerging themes. The software program NVivo was utilized where interview transcripts and observation data were uploaded and allowed the researcher to code and analyze data for similarities and differences as they related to emerging themes. Transcripts were read and re-read multiple times as new themes were identified and coded. Listening to the audio of the interviews as well as personally transcribing the data also allowed for themes to begin to develop during the transcription process. Once the data was coded, I was able to produce several reports by using the NVivo program. From the pilot study, the most helpful report was the Coding Summary by Node report which lifted coded text by theme and listed the responses of each participant under each theme. In this report, it was easy to visually see which themes had the most codes and ways in which each participant spoke to those themes. This same data analysis strategy also proved helpful in this present study. This practice allowed for an inventory of codes that included the following: name of code, its meaning, examples of its presence in the data and relationship to other codes.
The trustworthiness of the interpretation of the data was increased by maintaining this inventory of codes as well as through period audits with my methodologist and chair.

**Researcher’s Perspective and Subjectivity**

As member of the demographic I am researching and as a fellow educator of poor and minority students, this topic carries both personal and professional significance. Personally, this topic is significant because I am deeply committed to urban education. I feel that my life experiences as a child who grew up in poverty while living in an affluent suburban city, created unique opportunities for me to relate to my students and I believe contributed to my ability to more easily bridge barriers of race and class. As this research began, it was important for me to reflect on my biases toward people of privilege and my perceptions of their relative abilities to “get” the lives of urban students, much less want to help break cycles of poverty and discrimination. Sharing the same race as my participants and then discovering similarities to my own experiences, allowed for ease of conversation and allowed for the collection of rich data. To assist with understanding by biases, I wrote anecdotal notes to record moments in the research process that challenged or surprised my thinking or led to new understandings of myself and others. This reflexive writing helped address my subjectivity and provided another dimension to pursue in my analysis.

Professionally, this topic is significant because I believe strong relationships with urban students are a precursor to academic success. I believe a teacher’s willingness and ability to connect with her students is important to all educational contexts, but imperative in urban settings. Students and families need to sense and believe that their child’s teacher is truly interested in helping them grow socially and academically. The high level of care and
commitment a teacher shows for her students is essential for creating strong relationships. Additionally, a non-judgmental mind set and openness to personal exploration of identity and bias is important to this work. The terminology of “social reproduction” may not be understood by urban students but the implications are readily felt and part of the lived experiences of poor and minority students and families. My bias professionally is that I believe that teachers who are successful in forming strong relationships are more open to self-reflection, critically examining power structures and finding ways to be involved in and learn about the lives of their students. Professionally, I have sought these teachers for employment in my school and have removed teachers who have not been able to form adequate relationships or who have had poor relationships with urban students. With these biases in mind, I hoped to be able to identify and study them in my analysis and discussion of this research. I believe working with teachers who have been identified as successful in their ability to form strong relationships will lead to less bias than if I had chosen to examine the lived experiences of teachers who were unsuccessful in forming these relationships.

The early childhood experiences of the participants were unexpected as they situated the teachers’ early life experiences closer to those of the poor and minority students they would teach. Research states that White, female teachers comprise 80-90% of the population that works with poor and minority students in our schools (Nieto, 2003). I believe this research also assumes that this demographic is typical within a White demographic of upper to middle class women who may have had limited exposures to race and class as children and adolescents. The participants selected for this study proved to have very different growing up experiences than anticipated. I expected to encounter women who grew up in suburbs and who had limited exposures to diversity with race and class. Linda was the closest to my expectations since she grew up in a wealthy suburb and
attended schools in that suburb. However, her family involvement at the corner store on the other side of town was unexpected and served to “open her eyes” to race and class as she traveled between worlds of privilege and poverty.

The women I expected to encounter and the women I actually met also prompted me to rethink my biases and make sure my own growing up experiences were re-examined in light of the stories the participants told. Coming into this study, I felt I was able to form strong relationships with my students because my family struggled financially and I could relate with many of the circumstances of my students. I grew up in a wealthy suburb close to Linda’s suburb and attended similar high performing, predominately White schools. Both of my parents had higher education degrees, but gaps in employment caused by my father’s addiction to alcohol created situational poverty where I was one of a handful of students at my school that participated in the Federal Free and Reduced lunch program, knew what food stamps were from first-hand experience or understood that government cheese is actually pretty good. Similar to Sharon, I came to resent people of privilege as my classmates would make fun of me for wearing “floods” instead of Guess jeans and playing an old silver clarinet given by a friend of the family so I could participate in the band program. And also like Sharon, I had a teacher who took time to get to know me and saw that despite my circumstances, I had artistic and academic potential.

For this study, I was expecting to meet women closer to the students who made fun of me and not students who mirrored many of my own experiences. I was expecting to have to examine my biases toward women of privilege in light of the stories they told. I expected that I might question the true strength of their student relationships and the validity of their stories of critical consciousness of race and class. As the stories unfolded in interviews and during analysis, I was
continually struck with the similarities of their situations to my own and ways we might be uniquely different from most White, female teachers.

For many of the participants and myself, poverty was a common experience we shared with our students. However, it should be noted that our poverty was situational and that of our students is more often generational. One explanation for this difference is race and the fact that the American Dream is easier to attain through White privilege. This is a concept that neither the participants nor I critically explored until we entered our first teaching assignments and learned through our relationships with minority students. Common links to poverty were openings for the relationships to develop, but the students themselves were the ones to open our eyes to the role of race in generational poverty and ways systems of power such as schools were structured to keep minorities poor. Even Vickie, the teacher with the most significant experiences with poverty and diversity was partially blinded to the role of race until her relationship with De’ante helped her understand ways that his experiences as a young Black man included additional obstacles caused by discriminatory practices such as his treatment in the courts or handing him toilet paper to use the restroom in a school to prison mentality.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it is important that urban students have teachers who can relate to them and create a classroom culture where student achievement is most likely to occur. Understanding the role identity development plays in this process is important as colleges of education seek to prepare teachers for service in urban environments. Pre-service curriculums that help future teachers unpack their prior experiences with race and class and then build on those understandings might better prepare teachers to relate to children from different
backgrounds. This reflective work might also allow teachers to continue to explore issues of race and class, both in college and out in the field, to find ways they can act as agents of empowerment through their relationships with their students and with their curricular decisions in the classroom.

Limitations

This study was limited to the stories of the five, White female teachers who agreed to participate. Their stories and common themes found within them cannot be generalized for larger populations of teachers.

Additionally, the stories the participants were asked to tell centered on difficult subjects of race and class. Despite sharing the same demographic as the participants, it could be possible that chose to tell stories that were most comfortable for them to share and left some stories unspoken because they did not want to be perceived as racist.

Also, as a member of the demographic of this study, it was important that my own biases were noted throughout the study. This was achieved through frequent conversations with my chair and methodologist so biases could be checked and bracketed.

Conclusion

This methodology sought to understand the lived experiences of White, female teachers as they related to their abilities to form strong relationships with minority students. A qualitative methodology with a narrative approach was best suited for understanding those experiences and situating them within a context of critical consciousness and reflection. The purposive selections of sites and samples allowed the best opportunities to find places and participants who would
best be able to fully explore the research questions of this study. The use of interview and observation allowed the participants to tell their story and for the researcher to gain understanding and co-construct meaning with the participants. Data analysis measures that employed open coding strategies allowed for data to be categorized and contextualized within and around the research questions of the study.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to collect the stories of teachers who have been successful in forming strong relationships with urban students to explore potential common themes and moments of critical consciousness as they negotiated issues of race and class. For this study, I believed it was important to consider both the childhood and pre-service experiences that may have helped White, middle class teachers explore and negotiate their identities and which may have resulted in their ability to form strong relationships with their students. To this end, the following research questions guided this study:

What are the childhood and pre-service experiences of White, female teachers that cultivated critical consciousness of race and class and how may have these formative experiences been further developed in the profession, leading to an ability to form strong relationships with poor and minority children and implement practices and pedagogies of empowerment in urban classrooms?

a) What childhood and adolescent experiences with family or friends allowed participants to establish a positive view of their own identity and the identities of people from diverse contexts?
b) What experiences as a pre-service teacher allowed participants to examine their identity and its potential relationship to power structures and pedagogies encountered in urban schools?

c) What experiences as a teacher allowed participants to explore White identity and negotiate power structures of race and class in their classrooms?

d) What other experiences prepared the teacher participants to work in urban environments, form strong relationships with their students and explore practices and pedagogies of empowerment?

Major themes that developed from this study include:

1. Color-blind views toward race despite early childhood exposures to diversity
2. Meritocratic views of class that link effort with class advancement
3. Mismatches between experiences with university teaching curriculums and practical applications in school settings that serve minority students.
4. Moments of critical consciousness of race and class in early teaching experiences that helped form strong relationships with minority students
5. Commitment to urban education and care for students
6. Implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices that support minority students
7. The role of school principals as mentors and their efforts to establish school cultures that supported culturally responsive practices of the participants
8. Positive views of parental involvement and support in schools

The analysis begins with descriptions of each participant and narrates their experiences in early childhood, pre-service teaching, and teaching careers as they negotiate race and class and
form strong relationships with minority students. From these experiences, emerging themes are presented and analyzed. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

The Participants

The five White, female participants for this study all teach at different schools within the same large, urban school district. The school district serves approximately 40,000 students where approximately 70% are Black, 15% are White and 15% are Latino. All students are considered economically disadvantaged and qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. The participants range in age from forty-one to fifty-one years of age and have been teaching for fifteen to twenty-eight years. Four out of five participants work with upper elementary/middle school age children and the fifth participant teaches primary age students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Grade level/subject</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Heidi”</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Primary All subjects</td>
<td>Military bases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Linda”</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Middle School English/Social Studies</td>
<td>Wealthy Suburb outside of current school district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sharon”</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Middle School Language Arts/Science</td>
<td>Rural, same city as current students and wealthy suburb outside of current district</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Heidi - “Teaching to Empower Students to Own their Learning”

**Demographics.** Heidi is in her early forties and grew up on military bases around the world as her father was an officer in the Army. She attended civilian schools in middle and high school in a large city in the Northeastern part of the United States and eventually attended a Catholic college in the same city to pursue a major in education. Heidi has taught for over twenty years in the Southwestern part of the United States and here in a Midwestern city. In her present assignment, she teaches primary children in a K-6 school that uses an International Baccalaureate curriculum. The school has a diverse racial and socio-economic population as it draws students from all over the city and downtown professionals also choose to send their children to the school.

**Early childhood.** Heidi grew up on military bases around the world and moved frequently to follow her father’s career as an officer. In first grade alone, she moved three times and vividly remembers the concern expressed by one of her teachers that she might not pass the first grade. Her mother, however, insisted that she would pass and worked closely with the teacher to make sure she had mastered the skills required to move on to the next grade level.
First grade I moved three times and I live in two different countries…and immediately they wanted to retain me because when I got to, I can’t even remember the last place, they said that I wouldn’t be ready…and my mom said “Oh no, she’ll be ready so be ready.” And sure enough the teacher was able to work with me, and my mom was able to work with me, until I felt so successful.

On the bases, Heidi had opportunities to attend classes and play with children of many races and socio-economic statuses. In her narrative, however, she says that it wasn’t until she was older and entered civilian life, that she realized the housing on the base was separated by rank. Differences of race and class were not discussed in her family and ways the base may or may have not been divided by race or class.

I grew up as a military child so I did not see race. I don’t know why that is…I mean on the base everyone as far as socioeconomic were all pretty much the same. My dad was an officer. Unfortunately, the way we lived I didn’t realize at the time that there were different areas on the base where there were different ranks of people…I didn’t know any of that. It wasn’t discussed. And as far as race everybody was equal and I know that sounds really Pollyanna but it just wasn’t an issue.

Heidi describes the base as a “melting pot” where people of different races, classes and religions were able to coexist in a way where she didn’t see any differences. It wasn’t until she left the bases and entered civilian schools that she realized how “judgmental people could be depending on how much money you had or didn’t have.” This was a “surprise” to her. Heidi credits her parents for being “very open-minded” and also the community feel of living on a military base for her early exposures to race and class that did not include judgmental views.
So maybe because it was middle school and that’s when people start getting picky about that stuff or is it because it wasn’t all inclusive and that’s where people start viewing others so you shouldn’t hang with that person or you shouldn’t dress like that. I still don’t know what would have transpired or if it would’ve been different growing up if I had only attended civilian school as a young child. I don’t know…race was not an issue. My parents were very open-minded and obviously my dad was in the Army.

Heidi knew from third grade that she wanted to be a teacher and credits growing up in a family of teachers as an early influence for this decision. She had aunts and uncles who were teachers and also a grandmother who had an elementary school named in her honor. And though she had limited contact with them due to her military life, she remembers their stories and the impact her grandmother must have had to have a school named after her.

She had an elementary school named after her and that was really neat so I just remember from her stories…. I lived far away from them….. I just remember her impact in that school and how they named it after her.

**Pre-service teaching.** Heidi followed through with her third grade decision to become a teacher and enrolled in a Catholic university that espoused Vincentian philosophies of mission, charity and care for the Poor. This “open-minded” approach exposed her to teaching “a lot of kids,” but there was no specific emphasis on urban, suburban or rural populations. Similarly, classes focused on general pedagogies and explorations of race and class, of both self and others, did not occur. When asked, so, were you challenged to think about racial identity in college? the response was, “Nope. It was all the same.” When asked about a college professor who might have talked about practices or pedagogies that best serve minority kids, the response was silence.
Instead, Heidi credits deliberation over pedagogy in an urban setting with the Vincentian philosophies of the university and ways they were integrated throughout the entire college program as ways she was encouraged to understand differences in people.

I would say that the philosophy of my college helped with that. It is a Vincentian college. So it’s all about giving to the poor and giving to the needy and I do believe that that was something that was drilled into us across the board and in every subject no matter what profession you are going into…that it was your job…to make the world a better place and to reach out and to bring people up.

With limited exposure to diverse settings or students, Heidi left the university with feelings that well written-lesson plans would be the foundations of good teaching for all children. Once in her first teaching assignment, Heidi quickly realized a need for flexibility in both planning and delivery as well as the physical and emotional demands of teaching full time.

Well I guess I’ve always been a pretty flexible person but I never ever thought I would have to be as flexible with my views on lessons, on kids, on the way you want to have a year. I guess in my mind I just thought that teachers should plan their little lessons and then teach their little lessons and go home…but it’s just this evolution every day every minute and I don’t know if it’s just because I teach primary that that happens…it’s just not as cut and dry as I thought it would be. But it certainly makes things more interesting. And a lot more exhausting!

**Current teaching.** Heidi’s first teaching assignment was in a border town in the Southwest. From her experiences on military bases, an assignment in another part of the United States did not faze her. She chose the school based on the reputation of the principal as one who
was “tough and had high expectations for kids.” Some of her friends thought she was crazy for seeking employment with this principal, but Heidi felt she wanted to teach under her.

[The principal] was fabulous. She held the highest expectations for every child at the school and it didn’t matter if they had just walked over from Mexico where they had lived there their whole life. Students and her staff moved from all over to be a part of that school. She had a terrible reputation and everyone said “Why do you want to go work for her?” but I knew she was great and to be a part of that school was nothing I could have ever fathomed…and to watch those children…all the tests were like 98% [passing] which was great and we all worked for it and it was expected and we were in it together so she really showed me that it didn’t matter…that anything is achievable.

In this school she taught fourth grade writing and science to a largely bilingual population. One of her fourth grade students stood out to her as this student was having troubles at home. They formed a relationship through the girl’s writing and journaling. Four years ago, the student invited Heidi to her high school graduation and informed her she would attend Texas A&M University. Heidi attended the graduation and was deeply touched that her student would take the time to look her up on Facebook and include her in the day. They maintain the relationship via social media to this day.

After the assignment in the southwest, Heidi moved to the Midwest and took a position at a juvenile corrections institution (administered through the school district where she currently teaches) where she taught middle school boys. She admits that she “never saw [herself] teaching at a youth corrections facility and nobody else I knew would either”. But once inside, she was exposed to a “whole other world” that served to dispel stereotypes she held about troubled youth.
In this position, she worked with boys who were low-level offenders with violations related primarily to drugs, theft or gang related violence. She remembered one particular boy she helped improve academically. She spoke to the day she read his file and couldn’t believe he did the things that placed him at the corrections facility. This experience taught her to “look beyond the label” and be “open-minded”. She was transferred out of the facility mid-year by the district and wonders what happened to the boy and what her relationship would be with him on the “outside”.

I just couldn’t read reports and think “really?”… how could he have done that and if we had seen each other elsewhere would he have treated me the same way as he was treating me in the classroom?…Would he have been as receptive I wonder?…and for me it was like I was able to cross a ton of barriers with this child and get him to achieve and so for both ends…he was academically successful and I was just able to be surprised.

These early experiences of building strong relationships with students from very different backgrounds from her own helped Heidi put the Vincentian philosophies she embraced in college into practice in real and tangible ways. In her transition from a challenging but supported experience in the Southwest to the Midwest, where she encountered high levels of violence and classroom discipline issues in her school, Heidi describes a turning point moment where she understood and accepted that she was placed in her assignment “for a reason” and that she would “stop crying, stick to it and make it work”. This belief that she has been placed in her teaching assignments by a higher power drives her motivation and feelings of efficacy.

But then you start thinking about why am I here and what led me here and I know it might be a little hokey, but I just believe that I was put here for a reason and amazingly
even though I have moved a bazillion times [within the district] two different grades in two different schools…you just you bloom where you are planted and I believe that I’m there for a reason and I’ve been able to have a lot of nice success with my kids.

Another critical moment in Heidi’s career occurred fifteen years ago when as a kindergarten parent herself, she was invited to attend a parent workshop on Love and Logic. According the website, Love and Logic is a philosophy created in 1977 by Jim Fay and Foster Cline, M.D. It is an approach that provides “practical tools and techniques that help adults achieve respectful, healthy relationships with their children” (www.loveandlogic.com). Heidi felt the program was helpful in her parenting to her young boys so she brought the program into her classroom where she also felt it was very successful.

I think that was a big turning point that you can see what you can do with your [own] kids and then bring it to so many others and show them there’s a way to build those strong relationships and get children to achieve and put the power back on those kids and their control…it’s a whole different discipline technique. It’s nothing that I learned in undergrad but as a parent and then as a teacher. I think it’s a big part of what I do and a big part of the growth and achievement that I see with my kids.

Inside the classroom. In her current assignment, Heidi blends Love and Logic and International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculums to help her students grow socially and academically. Her classroom was bright and busy with signs all around the room with words associated with the IB Learner Profile such as “Inquirers, Knowledgeable, Thinkers, Communicators, Principled, Open-minded, Caring, Risk-takers, Balanced and Reflective” (www.ibo.org) Heidi describes the learner profiles in this way:
“The learner profile is the umbrella of the IB curriculum and what we strive to be. So with every book or activity, you will hear us come back to “What attribute was this character displaying, or I noticed that you were asking a lot of great questions, what an inquirer you are being.” Thursday we are going on a field trip and they know the purpose of going is to learn so before we go we will generate questions as inquirers who are going with a purpose. It’s the language of the school. You could relate it back to character education, but IB has a very standard terminology for it.”

Heidi’s room has a high-tech, Google company feel to it, with learning stations all around the room and students moving freely to gather supplies, consult peers for help, look more closely at the Smartboard, which projects images of a Pilgrim village, or to view scrapbooks Heidi brought in of her family’s trip to Plymouth Rock many years ago. She doesn’t have a desk in the room and says she doesn’t have room for one. Her cell phone sits out on a table and her purse and jacket are tucked away in a corner of the room. When asked about her personal belongings in the room, and her level of concern that students may steal from her, Heidi refers back to the IB learner profile of integrity that she is committed to cultivating.

Somebody asked, “Do you leave your cell phone out at school?” And I said, yes, I’m lucky if I put my purse away. But yes, they act with integrity, so what else would they do? Trying to make sure that all students can act in this way and see that the kids really like it when I follow the essential agreements and follow the learner profile. They see the freedoms they get and how independent they are…they start to own it.
During the observation, her students were working at tables of all sizes. I was greeted by several students and told excitedly that they were “building a Pilgrim village!” When asked about her choices around the layout of her room, Heidi said:

I think that being able to have a classroom where the kids are fluid, can move around the room and be able to work in groups. You maybe noticed that I don’t have true assigned seating, there are no nametags on the desks or any of that. They are almost always in centers so I like to have high tables, tables where they can stand, tables with pillows if they want to sit, clipboards to use so they can go wherever. So it’s all about student comfort and the activity…so whatever works for them in that moment.

Additionally, Heidi’s commitment to the IB curriculum emphasizes “essential agreements” and one of those is to be “inclusive” which for her means including others in learning. In this way, cooperative groupings where students make decisions and drive their own learning is important. In the lesson observed, the students were applying learning of shapes to make three dimensional structures. Students were gluing, taping and painting cardboard boxes of all varieties of shapes and sizes. They consulted each other in the group for construction ideas and even though there was a teacher and parent volunteer in the room, the students rarely asked an adult for help. When they did ask for help, they were directed to ask someone else in the group.

I think one of our essential agreements is to be inclusive and even at [an early age] they know what that word means and having that flexibility…they own the classroom, they know their friends, they know they can learn from each other and that is ok… I think that
is really important. They feel very comfortable in the classroom. It’s a busy room as you could see….It’s neat to see that at [an early age] because that is what is expected as they grow up and they need to understand that life doesn’t dictate everything. You have to think, be creative and problem solve. The teacher can’t be the person that holds all the answers. They need to know that their peers have answers too.”

When asked about her influences for this type of classroom arrangement and philosophy, Heidi does not credit a specific person, but instead discussed ways that Montessori, IB and Love and Logic approaches allow students to be active, comfortable and take ownership for their work.

This wouldn’t work in a very staunch environment. I want kids to own the classroom and own their work and to feel very comfortable….I have been a big proponent of [Love and Logic] and I think it ties in beautifully with getting the children to apply thought to their actions and being able to make changes as necessary. So, I was Love and Logic before IB.

**Building and supporting relationships.** The curriculum of Heidi’s school appears to speak to building relationships between teacher and students. To this end, the importance of group work is more than just of an academic nature, but also serves to build relationships. For Heidi, she uses group work to also learn about students and ways they interact with each other as well as ways they respond to the curriculum. She constantly makes decisions on when to intervene in a group and when to let them work it out and appears to err on the side of letting them work out problems whenever possible.
I think every group is so individual. Sometimes I just know the breaking points of certain students and how they might overreact. So then I might step in earlier. Students who are more mild-mannered, or who have had more opportunities to problem solve, then I will let it go. We talk a lot with the class that we tootle and not tattle. Tootle means we celebrate our friends’ successes instead of tattling. I tell them you are a communicator, an IB profile, if you have problem you need to talk to that person first. I am their last resort and they know that. For the past half of the year, it’s all been about getting them to see that they have that power within. They have the power to communicate, to problem solve, to celebrate, and to do all that with words.

For Heidi, building student independence is essential. She views her role in the classroom as a facilitator of learning with students in the driver’s seat of their own learning, even at age five.

My philosophy is about letting children drive the curriculum in a way where they feel ownership, but I can still get in the stuff I need. It does take some creativity, but they are going to want to learn more and do more and it’s going to have more meaning. When I just show them a blue or red cube from the box, they don’t care. But if they are making something out of it and turning it into something they are so passionate about…I mean, I did not start the two weeks prior thinking we were going to make a pilgrim village, but they were so enamored with the idea. We were just going to create things with the boxes. All the classes brought in boxes, but we are the only class that made a village, but that’s where the kids drew the inquiry.
On her role as a facilitator:

I think it goes back to letting them see how powerful they are and stop trying to be the one who controls everything. I think all too often teachers think they have to be the one in the front of the room and they are the one with all the answers and they are the ones making everything. But when you turn it over, kids start seeing…it just evolves.”

**Building and supporting relationships with parents.** Heidi views building relationships with parents to also be an essential part of her teaching that stems from her trainings in Love and Logic. All of her parents have her personal cell phone number and during one of the interviews, a parent texted her to ask if she needed any supplies for the following day. Most of the time, she says they just want to know about their child’s day and she is happy to tell them. She makes special efforts to emphasize the positive gifts each child brings to the room and will not initiate conversation on negative behaviors for the first two months of school. In this way, she believes that a foundation for a solid, positive relationship has been established and parents will be more receptive to constructive criticisms.

You can’t have Love and Logic without a great relationships. And that goes for parents too. You just saw a parent text me. They all have my cell phone number and will ask about their child’s day. I will let them know that their child was trying hard at this, this and this, please remind her to respect personal space of others and I gave some examples. But it takes so long before I feel comfortable…I don’t give any negative feedback to parents in the first two months of school. I want to make sure I have celebrated their child in so many ways. [Their children] are [young], they are learning, they are just trying to figure this out and [the children] are the apple of their [parent’s] eye so I don’t want to
start off communication negatively. If I know I am going to have trouble with certain children, I make sure to really find those positives with those children ahead of time and share them with the parents so they understand that I see the whole picture and everything they love too. Then, gradually, I will share things we need to work on. But you need to have positive relationships otherwise it falls on deaf ears.

**Support staff and volunteers that support relationships.** During the observation of the classroom, it became clear that Heidi’s work in the room and the relationships she was cultivating with her students were also being supported by a dedicated support staff and volunteers. During the lesson observed, a grandmother of one of the students was there to help with the construction of the Pilgrim village. She was a former teacher and interacted with all of the students to facilitate their learning. Parents are encouraged to come to Heidi’s room and the school has an “open door” policy toward visitors to the school.

It’s wonderful. There is an open door policy. They know they can come. They contact me all the time to be mystery readers or to come in and work with the kids. I have a parent coming tomorrow who is a DJ and it goes with their unit of inquiry. So it’s letting them see all the different ways they can share their talents with us. Last week was the holiday shop. Not only did the kids make a ton of what was sold, but they brought in other organizations that do crafts and things for people in need. All the money gets donated and goes back to the community. It was completely parent organized. It was amazing.

In addition to strong relationships with parents, Heidi spoke to a school culture where the support staff also embraces their ability to form relationships with the students. In particular,
Heidi talked about the security guard, custodian and in-school suspension teacher, who was not referred to by his title, but simply as “Mr. Thomas”.

During the observation, the school’s security guard came by and was also greeted by the children with, “We’re building a Pilgrim village!” He was engaged with the students and listened as they described the construction of their villages. Heidi told me that the security guard performs at school concerts and “hangs out” with the staff. Similarly, the custodian has embraced the culture of the school and sees her role as a facilitator of student learning. It appears that the culture of school, as one centered on student relationships and learning, has permeated to the support staff, who have been empowered by the principal to view their roles as supportive of children.

Isn’t he great [the security guard]….let me show you a picture. He is somebody who commands attention for sure but he loves them to death. This is him making Christmas ornaments with the kids. I love that they feel that yes, he will help with order and protection, but they also see him as somebody who really loves and cares for them and wants to help them achieve their best. But it always hasn’t been that way. He thought this was his role and we were all crazy. But about two weeks in he went to the principal and said, “I get you.” I got it figured out and he has been IB all the way. We just got under his skin. Same with the custodian. She thought this is the way things are and then she changed and said, “Alright I get you.” We don’t have to follow all the stupid rules other schools follow.

In this school district, all school are required to employ a “Planning Center Coordinator” who serves to provide socio-emotional support to students and families. Most schools use these
positions to supervise in-school suspension programs. However, at Heidi’s school, the student and staff simply refer to the position as “Mr. Thomas”. Mr. Thomas is the man who will take a student on a walk around the building if they are upset or who will call a parent to see if they need any help.

If I need a kid to take a break, they will go to another room or go for a walk with [Mr. Thomas]. He finds out more in that time. Some of our kids don’t have a family life that is conducive to all that we are trying to stimulate, so he makes sure he is making connections for the kids and bringing the parents in. The parents call him on the weekends. He calls them just to check in on them. It’s very positive. He started a group with some boys where they wear ties to school. He is just great. But there’s nothing that we call it. He’s just Mr. Thomas.

Finally, Heidi talked about the importance of the school principal in building, modeling and creating academic space for relationships to flourish. The principal is described as a “champion for kids” who fights for her students and parents and the type of education she feels they deserve.

[The principal]…I can’t say enough about her. Every parent has her cell phone number. And they use it. But without her, this school would not be what it is. She has fought some unreal battles with the district, who wanted IB, but didn’t quite understand what that meant and the immensity of it. She has never given up. She just keeps coming back. It wouldn’t be the same without her. Her relationships with the kids are phenomenal. They love her. At some schools, the kids were afraid to greet the principal. But here, they run
up to her and ask to read to her or show her things they are working on. There is no fear ever. She’s a champion for kids and they know it.

Heidi also talks about the principal and the academic space she creates for teachers to be creative and responsive to students’ emotional and academic needs. As a school considered to be “innovative” by the district, they are not required to follow district pacing charts or scripted curriculums. “We are exempt from all of that”, Heidi said. However, Heidi has not always enjoyed this experience in previous buildings and she has had to negotiate around scripted curriculums and pacing charts that move students through content.

I have been in schools where I have I hate to use the word forced but have been strongly encouraged to use the curriculum and not to deviate from it and that was very frustrating because when you go this isn’t working and you have a principal who doesn’t quite understand how you can adjust and modify and still get to the same end result that you need to adjust and modify and you might not be on the exact same page as your neighbor and that’s okay. That’s very frustrating.

She said that in those schools she just “closed her door” and contacted parents to “get them on board” and understand what she was trying to accomplish for their kids.

I made sure that I gave an appearance of being right where I needed to be but also doing what I needed to do. Does that make sense? You know sometimes you have to do the dance. Evaluations are important but the learning is more important. (Laughter) I tried to combine them when possible.

Building a strong relationship with the principal was viewed as important to Heidi so she could have the space she needed to be creative and response to the students’ needs.
It all goes back to relationships. I had a lot of trust from my principals. When you are new to a school that takes time. I probably didn’t go off the grid as dramatically as I do now, but I still make sure all the standards are being covered. In other schools, I had to teach with certain textbooks so that was harder to allow the children time to be little kids and get really creative and own it. I found ways to make it happen, but I also had to make sure they were doing all the requirements. That was worse. It just constantly juggling…Now we have tons of tours. [The principal] will walk in and she will ask them what they are doing and the kids can explain it because they own it.

“Linda” - “It’s All about Fresh Starts”

**Demographics.** Linda is in her early fifties and grew up in a suburban city fifteen miles outside of the city where she currently teaches. She attended suburban schools as a child and attended college for teaching in a rural environment. She has taught in the same city district for almost thirty years. She currently teaches middle school English and social studies to students in a predominately Black K-8 school on the eastside of the city.

**Early childhood.** Linda grew up in a wealthy suburb outside of the large city where she currently teaches. Linda attended schools in this suburb from kindergarten through high school. The district consistently ranks as one of the best school districts in the state and the median income is $68,000 according to 2009 census data. Less than 5% of the population lives at federal poverty levels and over 95% of the population identifies at White.

Linda’s mother was also a teacher who taught in the same district where Linda teaches and Linda says she knew by her eighth grade year that she also wanted to become a teacher in the same school district as her mother. Linda’s father attended school in the same city school
district and after graduating high school went on to pursue a career as a lawyer. Linda’s grandparents owned a corner store in a neighborhood that has changed from a primarily eastern European immigrant population to predominately African-American. Linda’s father’s father died when he was only five years old and he grew up helping his mother run this corner store. When Linda was a child, she and her father and mother would also help out in the store on the weekends and Linda would often play with the children in the neighborhood. Linda remembers traveling through the heart of the city to get to the store which was located on the eastside of town and seeing ways the housing changed from her home in the suburbs to the projects in the city to deteriorating homes by the corner store.

Just seeing the class difference and the type of housing that we lived in and the houses we saw in that area and going through the projects and seeing…my eyes were opened at a young age to that.

Linda credits her father’s positive attitude toward the city as important to the formation of her own opinions and realizations of ways the city was segregated by race and ethnicity.

I also realized how segregated the city is. There were a lot of mostly…..Hungarian neighborhood, Croatian, Black, Slovenian…but it was really racially divided. I came from an all-white suburb. We didn’t have pockets of ethnicity there. It was part of my dad’s “I love this town” and he showed us where Chinatown is and I really grew up with a multicultural background because we were exposed to all of that.

Additionally, Linda grew up during the Civil Rights Movement and vividly remembers traveling through areas on her way to her grandmother’s store where riots had taken place and worrying for her safety. She credits her father’s love of the city and its people for not deterring
their weekly trips to the other side of town. She says that those experiences also “opened her eyes” to differences in race and class.

At the time, there was a lot of racial tensions in [the city]. I remember the riots and driving through that area and not totally understanding what was going on but it was all part of the Civil Rights Movement. And I can remember ducking because we were afraid...we heard it on the news...we heard mom and dad talking about it…and my sister and I would duck in the back seat because we were afraid we were going to get shot, but the riots weren’t even going on when we were driving through, but that...just working at the store…it opened my eyes. There were so many ethnic cultures that were there. I realized that I am from a middle class family and very fortunate to have what I have…there was never any questions about paying for food. I saw food stamps for the first time and I realized that being at the store and helping her out on Saturdays…I realized how fortunate I am to not to struggle…but I knew there was a difference.

These experiences, as well as her mother’s career as a city teacher, influenced Linda’s decision at an early age to not only become a teacher, but to become a teacher in this same city.

We would go there every Saturday and Sunday to help them with their store in the [city] and my grandmother was always helping…there was always a new face at Sunday dinner that she would take in and I was like, “Wow, I want to teach in this area and help people”. So it was between…the contrasts between where I grew up and where my grandparents were from really influenced me and I knew I really wanted to help people who need a good teacher and need an education. So, I knew from eighth grade on that I wanted to be a [city] teacher!
Pre-service teaching. Linda attended a college in a rural area of the state to pursue her goal of becoming a teacher. The rural area was predominately White and Linda did not have any student teaching experiences with diverse groups of students. When asked why she chose this college when her goal was to teach urban children, Linda said, “No, I didn’t even think about it or put it all together. Back then folks didn’t even talk about urban education. It was all considered the same.” When asked if she had a professor that discussed diversity or pedagogies for minority students, the response was, “Nope. It was all the same.”

Linda’s first years of teaching coincided with the first years of desegregation and bussing practices that sent students across town to attend schools. She quickly learned that she would need to do more than just teach content to her students, but work to form relationships with her students and families.

There were a lot challenges with what I learned back then and all the classes about how to teach and really nothing had me ready for what I was about to experience. It was such an eye-opening experience on wow, these are fourth graders. They are little and I just realized then that I had to take it all and do a little more than just teaching. I really needed to know their situation and try the best I could to involve parents and it’s a lot… it’s a lot to get families involved and I think that whole relationship building…they just don’t teach you about that in college.

Linda was fortunate to find a mentor teacher in her first years of teaching that helped her negotiate the challenges of desegregation and create a classroom environment that attempted to alleviate the students’ stress and foster strong student-teacher relationships. This mentor heled Linda understand that weekends could be a time of instability for students when they didn’t
know where meals would come from or could be exposed to violence. Monday mornings were often spent helping students talk through difficulties encountered in their homes and neighborhoods.

She had really great relationships with her students and after a few years, kids would come back to visit her. She was a very warm person but she also would talk with kids and I picked up her whole way that she related to the kids...kids are going to have a bad day....especially Mondays. And she always had a little space in her room... and I have space now too. And kids will ask to go that space and when they are ready to come back to the group they will. But sometimes they just need a few moments and that makes a difference."

The mentor teacher also encouraged Linda to expose her students to a variety of experiences that would widen their worldviews beyond those of their neighborhoods.

So, we traveled and did things with them and she was the one that was all about experiences and relationships.

**Current teaching and “fresh starts”**. In her first years of teaching, Linda was able to form a strong relationship with one of her students that continues to this day. He came from a supportive Latino home and she also taught his siblings. He is currently in law school and keeps in touch regularly. A few years ago, Linda taught a middle school boy who was involved in the court systems and wore an ankle bracelet to monitor his locations. Despite this outward sign of potential academic and social trouble, Linda did not look into the child’s past records and gave the student a “fresh start”. At one point in the year, the student’s mother called with concern that she hadn’t been contacted by the teacher yet. To the mother’s surprise, Linda reported that he
was one of her best students. He is currently doing well in high school and keeps Linda informed of his progress.

He came in with an ankle bracelet on and was kind of quiet….and I don’t dig through their records unless a flag come up, because every kid deserves a fresh start and later on in the year he was one of my best kids. His mom called and asked, “Is he ok, I usually hear something” and I was like, no he’s one of my best students in here what are you talking about? He just had a fresh start and so at the end of the year I was putting records away and found this huge file and I was like, “What the heck happened”. And it was just having a fresh start and nobody asked questions about his past. He came here and he still keeps in touch. I think he’s in 10th or 11th grade and he will still pop by to see us…..but he’s doing really well.

This relationship taught Linda the importance and power that giving a student a “fresh start” could yield. It taught her not to “judge” her students and to believe that “every child deserves a chance”. She also learned to ignore her colleague’s opinions of students and not engage in conversations that discussed their past experiences.

They have to screw up pretty bad…every day is a new day and we start fresh. We talk it through and not in front of the class. I pull them aside and talk about it, but at that point, I usually just have to “give them the eye”. But it’s taught me that kids need chances. They have to be able to start fresh. It’s not about the labels put on kids. I can remember when I first started, people would say, “Oh, You’ve got the worst kids” and I would say, “Oh, don’t tell me that…let me decide.
Early in her career, Linda also had an experience where she felt judged by a parent of one of her students. This experience helped her understand ways that people of color can be victims of racism and can distrust Whites as a group. She remembers the support of her principal as important to understanding the dynamics of the relationship and not taking the comments of the parent and student “too personally”.

It was racial on that end and I had never experienced anything like that before. It was tough and I talked to the principal and asked “What am I experiencing here?” And he encouraged me to just keep being firm fair and consistent. But just getting a taste of that….it can happen anywhere….but I had never experienced that….but then just thinking about how many times my students had been judged before.

Along with better understanding ways to build relationships with students and families, Linda believes her involvement in her current school’s Student Support Team (SST) was a turning point in her ability to not only form relationships, but to serve the needs of her students and get to the root causes of some of the struggles in and outside of the classroom. She says that advances in technology allow the team to see a wide variety of data such as attendance, housing patterns and past academic performance. This allows the team to formulate intervention plans and enlist the support of the principal to bring in outside support groups that can also help the families as needed. This ability to know the “whole story” of a child helps the team move beyond serving just the academic needs of the child, but recognize the ways that physical and socio-emotional needs are related and many times supersede the academic needs of a student. Knowing the whole story of a child helps Linda be more empathetic to their needs and understand ways she can serve the needs of each child.
It opened my eyes….you need to know the whole child and what their story is.
You have to keep what they are going through in the back of your head and maybe they are giving you all they can today.

**Inside the classroom.** Linda’s views of a classroom extend far beyond the four walls of her classroom. With a understanding of the limited opportunities her students have to travel outside of their neighborhoods, Linda continues to build on the influences of her mentor teacher and makes field trips a cornerstone of her instructional approach. At each of the three schools where she has worked, she has collaborated with teams of teachers to write grants so students could go on as many field trips as possible. They have been to farms, creeks, plays and day trips to museums to name just a few places. These experiences serve to widen the worldview of the students and provide opportunities for the students and teachers to build relationships in a more relaxed environment from the classroom.

It’s all about giving our kids outside experiences and getting them out of their bubble. So when you are at the Underground Museum…and it all does tie in with the 8th grade social studies unit…but when the tour guide is pointing across the river and saying, that is Kentucky and the kids are like, “Wow, that’s Kentucky”…They were exposed to so much…and we also saw the University of Cincinnati. They need to have fun. The bus rides are fun and WE have a lot of fun and that builds relationships. And we had to be there really early…like 5am and they were all looking out for each other and calling if kids weren’t there yet to make sure they all went. It builds relationships.”

On days where learning occurs inside the classroom, students enter a room that is neatly decorated and has classical music playing softly in the background. The desks are arranged in
groups of four to six and there are a few desks off to the side for students who chose to work individually or just need some space away from others for the day.

I’ve always done that [played music] since I first started teaching. It soothes them. I always had music going on in my house and we had a large CD selection. They really like it. We have jazz back there and it’s interesting to see how the noise level will get a little louder with some of the music. But mostly it has a calming effect. They appreciate it…. I want them to feel comfortable. They like it. Sometimes I see high schools and am like oh, wow, there’s nothing in here. But I like to make it comfortable and give them choices. If they need to sit in an area or want to work alone, they have those options.

Collaborative group work is another cornerstone of Linda’s instructional approach and is guided by “essential questions” that focus discussion and research on questions generated by students or the curriculum. Group work allows students to build relationships with each other and allows Linda opportunities to engage with students in smaller settings. Students take on leadership roles in each group and are held accountable for keeping time, recording notes or making sure all voices are heard. When students were observed to be off topic, Linda would ask an academic question to the group rather than reprimanding them for poor behavior. Linda attributes her training in “accountable talk” as an important way she keeps a focus on academic language used in the classroom.

This focus on academic discourse minimizes a need for the implementation of an elaborate behavior management system. In fact, the rules of the classroom are tucked away in the corner of the room. The rules were developed by the students on the first days of the school year. Consequences and rewards are not posted, but students know that Linda will call home for
positive or negative reasons and that she takes anecdotal notes throughout the lessons. They also know their behavior can be rewarded with simple things like watching the student version of CNN, glazed donuts or enjoying Linda’s homemade banana bread. In this way, students are encouraged to self-monitor behaviors and keep the focus on academic learning through accountable talk.

So they asked for glazed donuts….that’s all they ever want….glazed donuts or my homemade banana bread. It’s just a little homey touch I can bring in…. I use accountable talk. They are kids and will get off track. But I try to refer back to the assignment rather than calling kids out. Calling out kids is counter-productive. They just get defensive and defiant. So, I just redirect them back to the work and throw out another question.

**Balancing testing, group work and field trips.** The new Common Core tests have meant new curriculums to learn and even more time spent on test preparation. Linda says that the new district curriculum is “Advance Placement-like” in nature but overall is good in that it stretches students to think more critically. She is worried however about the amount of testing students will have this year and ways the curriculum is geared toward scoring well on the tests. Field trips, an essential aspect of her teaching, will be placed on hold from January through April as students prepare for these high stakes tests. Similarly, favorite novels are also placed on hold until after testing. The curriculum is scripted in the selection of novels or excerpts to read so Linda must wait until after the tests to expose children to books she feels are relevant to them such as *The Outsiders, Holes and The House of Dies Drear.*

So many of our kids have low reading levels but I see the value in it and I feel our students are learning how to tackle challenging texts and how to take them apart. But I do
feel everything is toward the test and that takes some of the joy out of teaching. It’s stressful. They are taking an awful lot of tests this year….but there are certain books that I will do at the end of the year no matter what…because that’s what we do in [my] class”

**Building a sense of community.** Linda’s school has a palpable energy of a community of students, teachers, parents and volunteers that are dedicated to serving the needs of each student and working together toward this end. A team of college aged adults work at the school full time through a program called City Year. Every morning they “clap in” the students as they walk up the stairs to the school and make contacts with parents. They are paired with a teacher in the building and are able to take a student out in the hallway if they are having a bad day or teach a lesson so the classroom teacher can make calls or seek supports. The school also has a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club and students are able to go to the “Game Room” after school for a hot meal, tutoring and games. Parents are also visibly present in the school and were quick to greet visitors and welcome them to the school. The parents also plan and hold several events in the year such as Christmas movie night and a carnival. The teachers on Linda’s team eat lunch together and it is not unusual for students to be present in the room during their lunchtime who want a quiet place to stay or time to work on the computers.

They [City Year] know a lot of the stories of the kids and who needs extra attention. They really do build relationships. Mary, the one I have, is just a gem. She works well with all of the kids and will take a kid who is having a hard time…will take them on a walk. And it really helps with the school climate.

**Leadership and a change in culture.** Linda attributes the positive, student-centered changes in school culture to the leadership of the principal. Every morning the principal holds a
morning meeting with the students to talk about school issues and celebrates student success. He coaches a boys’ dance team and looks for ways to involve students in leadership opportunities and service in their community. The atmosphere of the school is relaxed where the “kids feel free” and the staff is “all on the same page”. Students are not required to walk in lines to and from class and parents are encouraged to help out in the classrooms.

Yes, the culture has completely changed and the people who want to be here are here. And not everybody who was here a few years ago are here today…. The staff gets along and like our middle school staff is nuts and we have a lot of fun. And the kids see that….and the kindergarten teacher will come up too. Nobody takes anything too seriously. The kids feel free.

Sharon – “Rooting for the Underdog”

**Demographics.** Sharon is forty-two years old and has been teaching in the same city school district for all fifteen years of her teaching career. She has lived in rural, city and suburban environments and experienced desegregation bussing practices in elementary school. Due to layoffs and transfers, she has taught at eight different schools in the district from grades two through eight.

**Early childhood.** Sharon was born in a rural area about two hours east of the city school district where she currently teaches. Her family struggled financially and she remembers eating rabbit and venison on a regular basis. When she was five, her dad was offered a job in the city where she currently teaches and they bought a home in the city as well. Her elementary school was across the street from her house and her playmates in the neighborhood reflected the diversity of the west-side of the city. Her best friend was African-American and she says that
race was “never a big deal” for her and that “people were people”. Sharon loved her teachers and especially remembers her third grade teacher for the ways she presented multiple ways to solve problems in math.

Sharon discusses her understanding of social class through her family stories. She speaks of her dad’s quick climb up the career ladder at his new job and associated the pressures that led to divorce. Sharon’s mom then started working fifty to sixty hours per week as a nurse to keep the house across the street from the school. Sharon’s dad moved to an expensive house in a wealthy suburb west of the city. Sharon would visit her father on weekends and began to realize the importance of money. Sharon points out that despite her dad’s new wealth, he did not wear expensive clothes and even wore shoes with holes in them. Sharon and her sister were made to pay for everything they wanted with allowance money and ten percent of their allowance was tithed to the church. She and her sister even had to pay to drive the family car in high school. She remembers her father saying, “It’s not what you have, but who you are” and that “nothing in life will ever be handed to you”. These values appear to be important to Sharon. She notes she has passed down these values to her own daughter who also pays for everything she needs with her allowance and tithes to the church. Sharon’s emphasis on her understanding of her social class background and her family’s attention to personal integrity over wealth is evident in the following statement:

So I think I figured out that money mattered pretty early for me. But even though my dad moved up the ladder, I still remember going shopping with him and he would have holes in his shoes….and I would say, “Dad, you are not poor”. And he would say, “It doesn’t matter” It was drilled in our heads that “It doesn’t matter what you have, it’s who you are.
Sharon speaks to ways her life changed dramatically in fourth grade when district-wide desegregation practices transferred her to a school on the eastside of the city. The bus ride to the school was forty-five minutes long and she was the only White student in her class. Her teacher yelled all day long and Sharon believes she first wanted to become a teacher that year because “I swore every day that I would never yell at children the way she held us hostage. She was just never happy. I always said that I never want kids to feel that way.” She also experienced bullying on a daily basis and the bus was especially difficult as it was less supervised. One day on the bus ride home, she had enough of the bullying and hit a girl with her metal lunchbox. Her mom was called up to the school and then transferred her to private school closer to her home.

I was bullied. The bus was ruthless. I remember that I always the smallest kid and I had a metal lunch box…but even though I had never had a confrontation with anybody this group of girls on the bus would just pick with me and put stuff in my hair and tease me. “You White girl, you little White girl”…and one day I had enough and hit the girl with my lunchbox because every day I would go home and my mom….because it was a forty-five minute drive to the school…couldn’t be up there every day. So, I didn’t want to bother her but I finally had enough. I did get in trouble though because the bus driver told the principal and my mom did have to go up to the school. So that was a turning point of pulling me out of the school as it wasn’t emotionally good for me.

Sharon started high school at a private school but her mother was not able to afford the extra expenses of the school so she transferred to the suburban high school where her father resided in her junior year. This experience also proved challenging as Sharon had a hard time relating to classmates of privilege and was then bullied for not wearing the latest clothes or driving a new car to school. She remembers, “People staring at me as the new kid and there was
nowhere to sit and people would actually say, “You are wearing that…you need to get new clothes and shoes…your mom dropped you off in that car”. She describes the experience as a pivotal moment that helped her decide the “type of people” she wanted to be around in life.

I don’t ever want to be around people like this and I want to make it part of my life to not come in contact with people like that. It’s not ok. I don’t care if you are a millionaire or make $20,000 per year, you are still a human and nobody should be demoralized because of what they have.

Sharon said she was thankful that she was able to connect with a teacher at the high school who she was able to talk with and who encouraged her to pursue a career in education. This teacher taught Sharon the power of student-teacher relationships and the importance of every child in the building having at least one adult with whom they feel a connection.

She just took the time to make a difference. She was rooting for the underdog. She could see that I was lost and it wasn’t just me…she would make a special point to help you if you were struggling even if she wasn’t my math teacher. It was just understanding that there is always going to be somebody and you have to find that one person that is going to be able to help you. That has carried through for me as a teacher. I tell the kids I’m not here to be your friend. You might not connect with me, but you need to find that one person here that you can communicate with… I tell the same thing to my own daughter. She needs to find that one teacher.

Sharon also had a “few” teachers at the high school who took the time to present content in multiple formats until the material “clicked”. These teachers were patient and didn’t make her
“feel like an idiot”. These experiences helped her understand that “people learn in different ways” and further sparked her motivation to become a teacher.

**Pre-service teaching.** Despite strong motivations to pursue a teaching career, Sharon went to college to obtain an occupational therapy degree. She graduated with the degree but “cried everyday” during her residency and eventually enrolled in the teacher education program at the university in the city where she currently teaches.

At the university, Sharon was able to take an urban studies class and she felt that issues of diversity were included in many of her education courses. However, she states that, “It is just conversation until you are actually in a school. And it is different from school to school and the administration and the staff communication. That makes a huge difference.” She felt her teacher from the suburban high school best prepared her for working in diverse environments from the conversations they had about Sharon’s experiences at the high school.

Sharon did not speak to a specific professor at the university that helped her understand issues of identity, race or pedagogies that would best serve minority students, but she did speak of cooperating teachers during pre-service experiences that taught her to be flexible and be able to change lessons in the moment based on student interests and needs. This was a change from her university practice lessons that were more “regimented” and her perceptions of teaching as “following the plans”. Sharon was also unprepared for the “emotional toll” of teaching: “I don’t think I realized how emotional it would be. I thought it was always going to be this happy, “We going to work on this” thing and then the reality of the different emotions came into play.” The cooperating teachers challenged her teaching and gave her real life scenarios that made her switch her entire lesson plans with no notice at all. In this realistic, yet supported environment,
Sharon rose to the challenges of daily teaching and found an appreciation for the unplanned, “teachable moments”.

I think that is what drives a lot of my lessons…the spontaneity and responding to the kids. It was all about teachable moments being able to be flexible…and it was something I really enjoyed and wasn’t expecting. I kept thinking that teachers were so regimented and that things always went the way they planned.

**Current teaching.** Upon graduation, Sharon applied only to the city district where she currently teaches because she did not feel she would be comfortable teaching in any other district. “I just felt that I would do a better a job where my passion was and where I felt more comfortable.” She was assigned to a second grade classroom in the middle of December and was the fifteenth teacher the students had that year. She describes a situation where she went from “having this dream world of student teaching to children underneath their desks, banging their heads on the desks, hiding in the closets. It was instant having to learn on your feet and knowing what to do. You had to adapt to the situation.” Sharon did adapt and successfully finished the year. The school had an Afro-Centric curriculum and every Friday the students and staff were encouraged to dress in Afro-centric clothing and recite a school creed. Sharon tells a story where “One day, one kid said to me, “Did you know that you are White?” I said, “Oh my gosh, when did that happen?” and he said, “I don’t know, do you think it’s ok?” So we had a big conversation about it but I don’t think I’ve ever made an issue of it.” Sharon’s comfort in her own skin opens doors of conversation for her students that continues to this day. In her current classroom, she confronts students for use of derogatory statements such as the use of the “N” word and “wife-beaters” to describe tank tops. She views all of these conversations as “teachable moments” that began back at her first teaching assignment.
I don’t really feel any tensions between the kids [talking about race], but if things do come up, we talk about it because they heard it somewhere but can’t really explain it. For example, kids call tank tops “wife beaters” but they don’t even know what that means. It is all just teachable moments.

At her second teaching assignment, Sharon describes a turning point moment that led to new pedagogies that she uses in her classroom to this day. At the end of the day, she observed one of her second grade students climbing out of the dumpster and filling his book bag with food.

That really made me realize that we need to be more in tune with…it’s not all about a test or what needs to be done…I really need to take more time to balance. How can I expect a kid in second grade to study for a math facts test when he doesn’t even have a meal at night? That was early in my teaching and since then I made a positive effort every day to make sure I made time for socio-emotional time.

This time set aside for socio-emotional care includes allowing students time to write in journals, place anonymous notes in a box on her desk and holding daily “family meetings” where students can talk about anything on their minds. Sharon believes these meetings give students a voice in the classroom and they are better able to focus on academic tasks when they have “gotten things off their chest”. With the advent of cell phones, all students have her personal number and are invited to call if they have a problem.

So it doesn’t matter what standards they have to learn, if you don’t build an environment…a comfort zone, where we can have family meetings and communicate
about things and what’s going on. They feel safe and know that people won’t judge them.

We do this daily.

The practices of journaling and daily “family meetings” has allowed Sharon to form strong relationships with her students and she was able to talk about many former students who she still keeps in regular contact. One of these students is a former sixth grade student who is now twenty-six years old. When she was in sixth grade, her father was incarcerated and then the family became homeless. Through journaling, the student was able to share her feelings and Sharon was able to respond in “little ways without the rest of the class knowing”. Sharon also says that she was able to encourage the student without “babying” her either. She was able to demonstrate empathy for her situation, but also made it clear that her expectations for her academic performance were not going to be lowered.

My attitude was very much tough love where I’m not going to feel sorry for you or baby you…you are going to be accountable to yourself and be responsible to yourself and I’m sorry but some people just get dealt a crap hand and you have to deal with it. And I would help her think of what to do.

The relationship continued after that school year as Sharon taught the siblings and formed a close relationship with the mother as well. The relationship grew to the point where the girl accompanied Sharon’s family on camping trips and they had just visited the week prior to Sharon’s first interview for this study. Sharon believes this relationship further helped her understand the balance needed in the classroom between content delivery and care for the child.
We still stay in touch…but it really opened my eyes to it’s not just about what they need to know, you also need to take time to learn who they are. You have to do that with all of them, but she is one that I still stay in touch with.

**Inside the classroom.** Sharon’s classroom has a mixture of tables of all shapes and sizes to seat her Language Arts and Science classes of twenty to thirty students. The table assignments change on a weekly basis depending on the learning and emotional needs of the students. At times students are grouped by academic needs gleaned from pre-assessment data and other times they are grouped based on the personalities in the room. Collaborative work is a primary instructional practice and this allows students to learn from each other and gives Sharon an opportunity to work with students in a smaller setting.

I think it helps me go from group to group and have a more personalized relationship and have a better grasp of what they are understanding. I can bend down or pull up a chair and have different insights than standing in front of them and preaching to them. I can say show me how this works. They don’t get as intimidated in a smaller setting than answering in front of the whole class.

Additionally, group work is viewed as a time where students need to work together to solve problems. They know that only one designated person in the group can ask Sharon a question and that the entire group has to agree that the question is important enough to ask. Groups also know that they need to self-monitor their behavior and that if groups are not staying on task, Sharon will use whole group instruction. In this way, group work is viewed as a preferred instructional strategy that is also an earned privilege. Sharon says that it is rare that she
needs to move back to whole group and she usually begins lessons on Mondays in whole group and facilitates learning for the rest of the week in small groups.

The room is neatly decorated and Sharon explains that the students form committees at the beginning of the year and are in charge of the layout of the classroom and the content and decorating of bulletin boards.

The kids are in charge of the room as far as the colors and bulletin boards. We have committees so every month jobs are rotated. I tell them that the only board I need to stay the same is my Bloom’s board. Everything else is up to them. It’s your class, not mine. They set everything up. They decided where the books would go, how many tables were on each side, where the teacher’s desk would go. It seems to work. I adjusted well. They moved my desk and I like it better because I never sit at my desk.

A class set of rules is tucked away in the corner of the room and Sharon says that the rules are about “respecting others and communicating”. There are no posted consequences and Sharon has not written a referral to the office in two years. She doesn’t use the in-school suspension program in the school either saying, she’d “rather make them miserable myself”. She usually just “corrects a kid and then we drop it”. She also doesn’t use a detention system but will work with students and families who are assigned detentions by the office for dress code infractions and other minor infractions. She even drove to a student’s house to talk with the mother about her son’s dress code.

He ended up getting a detention and he didn’t show up. So I drove to his house after the second missed detention and his mom made him come back to school. His mom didn’t know he had the detention and really it’s better to just have a conversation with the kid.
than go through all the hassle of a detention. As long as you respect kids, 99% of the time they get it back to together.

In the course of the classroom observation, Sharon circulated to the different groups and made sure they were completing the elements on the rubric. At the same time, she told a student to tie his shoes, picked lint out of another’s hair and took a student out in the hallway who was upset that he got in trouble for dress code in another class. Sharon believes this balance of academic talk and nurturing behaviors is important and the specific kinds of nurturing actions are specific to each child after she gets to know them.

You learn your comfort levels with kids. I don’t feel I’m doing anything inappropriate. I’m stern, but I am also nurturing. I’m not going to let a kid walk around all day with fuzzies in his hair. And he knows I’m doing anything malicious. You just have to know your kids. There are some kids where they might be uncomfortable if I touched them. You just have to pay attention and how they respond to you when you are closer to them. You just naturally feel it...I don’t really think about it. I have a bond with Emmanuel. I had him in fifth grade and know his mom. He was a mess when he first came and his mom told me to treat him like my own…so I do. You just gotta do what you gotta do.

An interesting moment occurred in the observation that also spoke to Sharon’s emphasis on student leadership and ownership of their learning. One of the students in a group was absent and had important parts of the project at her home. The students in the group decided they really needed the components immediately and so they contacted the girl at home on one of their cell phones. Interestingly, the group was reprimanded by Sharon, not for violating the school cell phone policy, but for imposing on the student’s mother to come up to the school in the rain when
she had just had a baby. In my interview with her, I revisited that classroom moment. Sharon’s response is revealing in how she views school policies in relation to human lives, as noted below:

I feel like I’ve had my battles with phones in the past and I feel like if you create a respectful environment, they won’t push it and will be respectful. I only had one time where a kid had his cell phone out. They don’t abuse it with me….and it was kind of cool that they were concerned about the project and not having all their stuff and that they cared enough that they wanted the stuff up there. And the mom did come up. She got the baby in the car. But then they worked on the project for the rest of the day. So if the phone is in a controlled setting, I’m not going to argue with them about it.

When asked how the principal would have responded if she had walked in the room while the students were on the cell phone, Sharon replied that she “would have addressed it with me and I would have explained how much the project meant to them.” Sharon believes her strong relationship with the principal allows her to explain and negotiate her decisions in the classroom. “It’s probably not appropriate that I broke the rule, but my kids knew they had a commitment to each other and that they were going to keep each other accountable.”

Sharon is also frustrated at times by other school rules that seem unnecessary to her such as dress code and gum chewing. She believes the enforcement of these policies takes too much time away from instruction and building relationships with students.

I don’t have time in my day to argue about dress code…..so if they get mixed messages from the office, then it’s frustrating. To me, I tend to do the best I can with things that are out of my hands, but not to let it take too much from my class.
Similarly, Sharon negotiates between a scripted, district curriculum and the types of learnings she feels the students need. She particularly struggles with a desire to explore topics in depth and the expectation to cover a wide scope of content. She also has students who come in with significant gaps in their learnings and she feels she needs to “back pedal” and go off the script to get them caught up. These decisions are all negotiated with the principal with whom Sharon feels “trusts her judgment” in making curricular decisions.

I feel tension to a point but I also feel my administrator trusts my judgment and as long as I can support with my data, and back it up with test scores, if I navigate away from something away from the scope and sequence, as long as I can support why and show evidence of student success after, I feel she supports my decisions in doing what I think I need to do to get my kids where they need to be.

**School-wide supports.** Sharon enjoys teaching at her current school because it has a “family atmosphere” and the adults work hard to make connections with the students and to make sure that each student is connected with at least one other adult such as a teacher, custodian or cafeteria worker. The school has a tutoring program and many family events throughout the year. The teachers on her team regularly eat lunch with their students to get to know them better even though they are entitled to a “forty minute, interrupted lunch”. They sponsor gentleman and ladies clubs on their own time. Class meetings occur before school, after school or during lunch and helps each student feel like their voice is heard and gives them a chance to lead. They make decisions about the room and write a class newspaper which Sharon believes gives them “ownership” of their learning.
I also think that class meetings are very good. I’ve always had informal meetings, but now having committees and class meetings, newspaper, and each child in the room has a responsibility. Having that in place has really created a sense that each kid in the class has a role. The committees all take place before, after school or during lunch. But the kids go above and beyond and decide when they are going to meet. It becomes pretty self-directed and that has become a big improvement now that they have taken the lead. I don’t worry about class newsletters or bulletin boards because now the kids are in charge. I will give feedback, but it has helped them take ownership and feel more a part of things.

Carla – “The Arts as Empowerment”

Demographics. Carla is approximately fifty years old and has been teaching for fifteen years. Teaching is a second career for Carla. Her first career was in retail. She is a proud Italian-American and has a passion for arts education. She has taught upper elementary school grades for most of her career at the same school in the district that has a focus on the arts.

Early childhood. Carla grew up in a working-class neighborhood in a neighboring city to the district where she currently teaches. Carla describes the community as a diverse mix of several European immigrant populations such as Italian, Hungarian, Russian and German. Carla was an only child in a Catholic Italian family which she describes as unusual for a Catholic family to only have one child. She also said her family was unusual because her mother went back to work when she was six weeks old at a time when most mothers didn’t work at all away from the home. Carla’s father was a plumber and was murdered when Carla was twenty years old. She said the first thing the news reported was that her father was “Italian and a plumbing contractor”.

113
Carla attended elementary school with students of many ethnic backgrounds. She remembers opportunities the teachers took to recognize diversity although Carla feels many of those efforts were counterproductive. Carla remembers a fair the teachers sponsored where she and three other girls from the class were assigned to be gypsies. Carla, however, remembers wanting to dress in the German clothing because she liked the way it looked better than the gypsy outfits. She is proud of her “100% Italian roots”, but noticed that she and other ethnicities were grouped together by her teachers and she heard teachers say, “Does that one look Italian?” She also remembers teachers mispronouncing her last name, which is a common Italian surname. She says that as she entered middle school, she became “bitchy” towards people who would mispronounce her last name or single her out for her Italian roots. To this day, Carla takes exception to Italian stereotypes and wonders why society tolerates those stereotypes when others are questioned.

We talk about [Native American} sports logos but Mario costumes are going to be out for Halloween and some of the other caricatures of Italians are going to be out…there will be gangster and mafia people and nobody sees a problem with those.

When Carla was a teen, the movie “The Godfather” came out which she says further “challenged” her Italian-American identity. She said the movie was “ironically” her father’s favorite movie because he thought it was very authentic, but Carla felt the movie further served to stereotype her nationality. Despite these stereotypes, Carla’s family taught her to “accept all people”. Her father’s role as a plumbing contractor led to many invitations to weddings of co-workers, several of which were African-American. Carla remembers being the only White child at these weddings and appreciates the early exposures to other races and ethnicities her father
fostered. Today, Carla describes her extended family as “the United Nations” with many different ethnicities and races.

When people look at me they say White, but when they see my whole family they see my husband who is White and our kids are White but everybody else around us is something else….Hispanic, African-American, Japanese and Jewish besides your everyday European people.

Similarly, Carla’s family had struggles with finances and even declared bankruptcy “a few times”. She describes her dad as a “risk-taker” and consequently the family would “take a lot of hits and take a lot of gambles” such as her father’s investment in synthetic oil in the 1960’s “before it became big”. Her mother worked “because she had to and also because she wanted to” but Carla remembers people whispering that her mother’s work contributed to Carla getting in trouble in school.

My mother worked because she had to work but also because she wanted to work. So my friends around me would do better but I was never hungry and never wanted for anything but I was aware of the strife in our financial life. I was also aware that when I would get in trouble people would whisper that I was in trouble because my mom was working when she should be at home with me. So, economics were hard. We declared bankruptcy a few times and there was an issue getting my Communion dress.

Pre-service teaching. Teaching is a second career for Carla. Her mother was a purchaser-buyer and Carla grew up around the fashion industry. She attended a college in the area for fashion design and pursued a career in retail and fashion merchandise upon graduation. After five years in the field, Carla felt she had “accomplished everything that I wanted to” and
she became frustrated with the constant turnover of employees in the retail world that she was responsible for hiring and firing. She remembered that friends from college who were education majors “always seemed happier doing their homework” and so she told her husband that she was pregnant with their first child and that she wanted to go back to school to earn a teaching degree on the same day.

I don’t want to fire people anymore and I think I have something to give so I went into teaching. So, I woke up my husband one night and said I think I’m pregnant and I want to go back to school and become a teacher. So, I became a teacher because I wanted to help and I was done firing people.

Carla enrolled at a university in the city where she currently teaches. It took her two years to complete the program and she gave birth to two daughters within the same time frame as her degree program - while also working a part-time job.

Carla does not believe that the university provided enough hand-on experiences prior to entering the classroom. She had one practicum and one student teaching assignment. Additionally, she does not feel there was an emphasis on multi-cultural education beyond a literature class that talked about ways to incorporate diverse reading selections into the curriculum. She felt this class was worthwhile because the professor had recently left the classroom and had many relevant stories to share of her experiences as a teacher. She wishes she had more opportunities to take similar classes.

It was all about the kids and she hadn’t been out of the classroom for a long period of time so she really knew what it was like to be with the kids and she would share her experiences. She emphasized making the content real to the kids. She suggested they
bring in items from home that would connect them with the story. But this professor was young and fresh and gave us a lot of current resources and mixed it up a lot.

Carla believes she was able to overcome a lack of emphasis on diversity from the many diversity awareness classes she took when she was in retail. She also believes she has a natural affinity for working with minority people and has been recognized in both the retail and education environments for this ability.

So when I was a manager, I was told by people that I didn’t act like a west-sider and I needed to be on the east side. So I worked at [an east-side] shopping center for a long time since I worked better with Jews and Blacks and I understood them. But sometimes they would have me work on the west-side but then they would end up sending me back to the east-side to fix problems. I’ve always been thought to be better with minorities than White people. I actually had it written on my first year teaching evaluation that I didn’t do well with White female students. So in other peoples’ eyes I’ve always done better with minority students.

Carla’s student teaching placement was in a school in the district where she currently teaches that has a large Latino population. She describes her cooperating teacher as a good teacher who encouraged her to “talk loud and use her wit”. The overall experience was good and she was able to form relationships with many of the students because she could communicate with the bilingual students with her knowledge of Italian and its similarity to Spanish. She also credits her mentor teacher for helping her understand that students will be forgiving of mistakes made in the classroom if they “know you care” and “apologize for your mistakes”. Carla believes the experience was also important because her university professors were encouraging her to
speak to students in a calm and measured manner and the cooperating teacher empowered her to be herself use her “real voice” with the students.

It was trial by fire and I don’t believe [the university] prepared me enough because I had a practicum and student teaching but there was still a gap in some of the skills I needed. So, my thinking changed dramatically. When I got to my first school, my mentor said “you’ve got to use your voice” and if anyone would hear this they would never believe it. I was like this when I was talking to the children (very calm, soft voice). So then I started to use my real voice. So my teaching strategies went from being more calm and thoughtful in my speech to allowing my energetic and freethinking side take over.

**Current teaching.** Upon the completion of student teaching, Carla applied to the district where she currently teaches and was assigned to “the school from hell” on the eastside of the city. She was one of twenty new teachers hired to the building that year because the principal was “crazy” and teachers would not stay at the school for more than one year. Carla’s original thoughts upon entering the profession were to teach for five years and then become a principal. The experience at her first school soured her desires to leave the classroom and enter administration because she “didn’t want to become that person”. Carla also felt “uncomfortable” with the school’s Afro-centric curriculum because she felt it was like “throwing the baby out with the bathwater where we were going to ignore anything with European roots rather than merging the two together and giving it more balance.”

Like many of the teachers before her, Carla left this school after her first year and took a position at a school on the Westside of the district that had a focus on the arts. The change was “dramatically different” and she has remained at the school for the past fourteen years. At this
school, she describes having “two amazing principals in the history of the school even though they are distinctly different”. She acknowledges the founding principal as an influential person in her career who taught her how to talk to parents and demonstrate care for their children.

[The principal] would say, “These are their treasures. These are their gifts to the world and if you go there and you rip their gifts apart, what are you going to do?” So when I talk to a parent, even a parent of a child who has sent me and everyone else over the edge, I always talk about what is going well and what we can do to improve. I always try to mindfully know that those are their gifts to the world. I may have a litany of things we need to talk about, but this is their child. Now I do have three parents who would take me out and shoot me, but for the most part I have parents who would go into a walking fire for me and thinking this way enhanced the relationships.

Carla also believes that always being a parent herself for her entire teaching career has helped her work with parents. She doesn’t think that being a parent is a requirement for good teaching, but believes is helps in the ability to relate to parents and children.

I do think being a parent helps. We have a teacher here who is pregnant and I’m doing my own quiet longitudinal study to see if she speaks differently to the students and parents when she becomes a mother. But it may take a while.

Carla has been able to form many long term relationships with the students and families she has served at the arts school. She talked enthusiastically about a student who is now twenty-four years old and the same age as her own daughters. They bonded over the mutual “fear of math” and Carla was able to help her improve her math performance. The girl has sent a letter or email on teacher appreciation day every year since she left the school. She talked about a young
man who is twenty-six who came back to visit on parent conference day and the many families where she had the opportunity to teach siblings.

Carla, however, felt it was important to note that she is able to form relationships with all students and that she didn’t really think about race when working with any of her students.

When I started, [at this school] there was a lot more minority because it was an arts school and kids were bused here. I don’t know, I do see that they are a different color, but it is not significant to me. It’s significant in what their lives are like particularly, Black boys. I am aware of the trial and tribulations that they may go through….So it’s just a connection - a human connection.

And while Carla does not believe she struggles with race and her students, she does talk about ways that socio-economic differences and classism have been hard for her to understand. She feels that many of the parents are too dependent on governmental programs and are “creating a dependent society” culture that is picked up on and passed on to the students in the classroom. She talked about this problem as a growing one and is concerned that people in lower socio-economic statuses see their situations as an “embedded feeling of not being able to get out”. She referred to the struggles of her own family and their abilities to overcome hardships.

In the city that I live in (the same as the district she teaches), we are willing to pick up people and take them to vote when my grandmother would walk through eight hundred piles of snow because it was a privilege and a responsibility. I think we’ve taken some responsibility away.

Carla also talked about the ways she struggles over students who come in with money for school-wide events like bake sales and those that do not. Her perception is that the students who
come in without money is less a fact of their poverty and more attributed to parental feelings that students should not have to pay for such things. When these events occur, she will send the students who brought in money first and give money to the others. She understands that this contradicts her feelings on entitlement, but she also doesn’t want children penalized for the decisions of their parents.

If we have a bake sale at school, I send the kids who have money and then give money to the rest so everyone gets a chance to go. So I know that I said I’m worried about that sense of privilege however, I’m not going to let a child get punished or damaged because they didn’t have money because of a parental decision. So I really struggle with classism because it is embedded in the psyche of the urban culture.

**Inside the classroom.** Carla’s classroom is busy, with students coming in and out for various reasons such as to work with special needs teachers or the speech therapist. The room is lined with bookcases filled with multi-cultural books and current event magazines are tacked to the chalkboard. The room is generally cluttered and her desk cannot be seen through the stacks of papers and other debris. The students sit at tables so they can work with each other and so Carla can sit beside them as well. Carla believes this arrangement creates a “sense of community” in her room. She tells the students that “they can be really smart, but if you can’t get along with people it’s not going to do much good”. She constantly makes adjustments to table groupings and considers students abilities, special needs and personalities in her decisions. She addressed the busy feel of her room with students coming in and out by noting that she used to have the special needs students placed closer to the door, but reconsidered because she felt it was more important for them to feel included in the groups.
There are certain children who work well together and in the beginning of the year I had my IEP kids at a table closer to the door so they could move in and out better but then I realized that it was almost isolationist. Even though it made sense because they were fairly mobile, I didn’t like it so I moved them back. They are very integrated in the table. If you walk around you should be able to see each child’s strength and weakness and it should balance out. In the beginning the children migrated by themselves and then I watched and made adjustments from there.

Carla uses a group points system in her room where tables earn points for meeting behavioral expectations and accomplishing work in the groups. She says the points are a motivator and students can earn candy or other prizes. She doesn’t penalize a group if one student is having a particularly bad day and talked about ways it successfully encourages all students in the group to complete homework assignments.

Points are very rarely taken away. Subs will take away and others that come to my classroom. It has to be a really egregious error for me to take a point away. If one child is having a bad day, I don’t penalize the whole group. I will isolate that kid so he doesn’t destroy the rest of the group. I look for which group can get all their stuff together first, their homework together, the work is neat, they are doing their cooperative learning well, taking on responsibility for things, in the hallway. Things that I am expecting…..but I have certain groups that don’t do homework…I can use the group…because the group is motivating a kid….not bullying, just motivating.

Despite the fact that students were seated in groups, much of the lesson observed was spent in whole group instruction as students were working through the content of a current
events magazine and answering questions at the end of the article. The teacher and students took turns reading sections and talking about them. Upon reflection, Carla stated that the pressures of new standardized tests are leaving less time for group discussions with all the content that needs to be covered before the tests. In science, the class is planning a trip to Mars, but the time for planning keeps getting cut short with all the other content that needs to be covered.

We are working on it [the trip]. When technology was not messed up, we watched the splashdown. We talked about how some will sleep while others are working. We have now moved it to 2031 so I will be seventy-one years old!

Carla believes that the pressures of testing hinder relationship building as they allow less time for students to work together and use their imaginations. But she also is well aware that her building “can’t take another hit” in their scores and still be considered one of the better schools in the district.

**School-wide supports.** The school has a focus on the arts, but budget cuts and the return of the school to a neighborhood school from an audition-based school, provides less arts opportunities for students. These changes have deeply hurt Carla and she has sent letters and gave a presentation to the superintendent begging him to restore funding levels to the school. She believes the arts are an essential aspect of the curriculum, particularly for minority students and their learning styles. She feels so passionately that she has applied for an arts advocate position in the district which she believes might help her school and others keep the arts a priority.

Research shows that minorities in urban environments from poor homes need the arts more than anybody else and they can show the largest growth when they have the arts. I blame the CEO for not doing enough to save the arts here even though I think he does a
great job in a lot of other areas. I even created a twenty page PowerPoint and presented it to him.

Even with a diminished focus on the arts in her school, Carla believes that the supports from the principal and other staff help students feel supported. She talked of ways the current principal comes into the classroom on a regular basis just to talk with students and leads a student advisory group of older students to make school-wide decisions. She says the principal creates an environment that has high expectations, but does not have rigid rules and policies. Students walk in lines in the hallways, but Carla doesn’t feel pressure to march her students in complete silence like at her first school. She says the Planning Center paraprofessional is helpful in building relationships with students and families and the cafeteria workers go out of their way to make sure students are not bullied.

[The principal] is very open to the kids coming in and they like her. She comes to sit in my room and was even asking kids for gum. The kids feel comfortable coming to her. Mr. W, our PCIA guy and our cafeteria workers love our kids and they will talk to us if they see a need for a kid. We are welcoming. The support staff is a real support staff…they all seem to honor the children….especially the cafeteria workers. They point out bullying problems.

Vickie – “Teaching as One of Her Students”

Demographics. Vickie is forty years old and has taught for eighteen years in the city school district that she attended as a child. She grew up in an impoverished Westside neighborhood of the city that has been regentrified in recent years and is currently known as one of the trendiest places in the city. Vickie has taught at many schools in the district as a result of
layoffs and transfers, but currently teaches middle school girls at an all-girls K-8 school in the
district.

**Early Childhood.** Vickie grew up in poverty in an area on the near Westside of the city
where she currently teaches. She describes her neighborhood as one where “this street was the
poor whites, this street was the Puerto Ricans and the projects were mostly the African-
Americans, and that was a block away from my house.” Vickie says that poverty was the
unifying factor of the neighborhood and people didn’t spend much time with differences in race.
She had White, Black and Latino friends and they were all able to relate to each other because
the all shared the same socio-economic status.

It wasn’t even race, we all just identified as being poor more than being of a race because
we all struggled with the same issues whether it be a block away in the projects with
drunk moms who beat on them…those were the same issues that we all saw.

Vickie also believes her mother influenced her to look beyond a person’s race and make
decisions based on the quality of a person’s character.

My mom always taught me, she said in every race…I hate to be blunt….but she said “in
every Black race there is a nigger in every Hispanic race there is a spic and every White
there is a honky trash. You have to find the inside of people”. And that has always spoke
to me. I have always had diverse friends. I didn’t pick them based on color but on how
my mother taught me. Like…were they honest, trustworthy and those kind of
concepts…more of the inside qualities I guess.

Vickie’s mother raised her and her sister as a single mother and they never owned a car.
They took the city bus to go to the grocery store, church or anywhere they needed to go. Vickie
has great respect for her mother, but at the same time, was motivated at an early age to create a better life for herself and not fall into the traps of poverty such as drugs, alcohol or dependency on boyfriends.

I think what made me want to be successful is that we never had a car. We had to take the bus everywhere. To the grocery store or we had to walk and that was far. It was five miles to the grocery store or the Laundromat. And I would remember getting on the bus and going downtown to transfer and I would see all these successful women dressed nice and smelling pretty and their hair was all nice and I thought, “I want to be like that”. I don’t want to look like the women in my neighborhood and that look…their hair is dingy, they looked stressed out, they don’t look professional and It just motivated me that there are some people who have…and I want to be like that. I want my own car, I want to look nice. I want to be able to buy things, I don’t want to be stuck like my mother was. And I knew I didn’t want to rely on a boy to do that. I wanted to do it for myself. A lot of my friends would date the drug dealers and I would say, “What are you going to get? He’s either going to go to jail or die”. I didn’t get involved in that. I was always on the bus and then seeing everyone downtown and at businesses and seeing, that’s what I want and will try to get. On Christmas Eve, waiting at a bus stop for four hours on a bus that runs every hour or didn’t come at all. My mom would say, “count the cars” and other games and I just knew I didn’t want this when I got older.

Vickie attended schools in her neighborhood during elementary school but her mother pulled her out of the public school in middle school when busing for desegregation started and after her older sister was beaten in a girls’ bathroom at a school on the other side of town. The cost of private high school tuition, however, was too much for the family and Vickie was bussed
to a high school on the eastside of the city. Vickie narrated that this experience opened her eyes to even greater poverty, violence and differences in the quality of education received at predominately African-American schools. Her new classmates often struggled with the curriculum and Vickie found herself tutoring other students to help them pass courses. She says that she first wanted to become a teacher during high school because she felt she was good at helping her peers and she was angry with the teachers at the school for their low expectation of her classmates.

I think I decided to become a teacher when we were bussed. …I was bussed to [an eastside school]. I knew a lot of us were very smart but our teachers thought really poorly of us and I knew that learning didn’t have to be boring out of book. I was always helping my friends so I felt that I was good and it and they would always say “I understand when you tell me but with the teacher I don’t get it. So I just wanted to help people and I saw that I was good at it. And I just wanted to change...because I had really horrible teachers in high school.

**Pre-service Teaching.** Vickie enrolled at a university in the city where she currently teaches to pursue her goal of becoming a teacher for city students. At the university, Vickie felt disconnected with her fellow classmates and questioned their reasons for entering the profession. She wondered whether they could be effective in urban classrooms coming from suburban environments with limited exposure to diversity or poverty. She felt they entered the program so they could “get their summers off” and that teaching was all about learning “skills” that could be used in the classroom, rather than being able to “relate to children”. At the same time, Vickie believed that she would not be an effective teacher in a suburban environment because she had limited experience with the pressures associated with those environments. She was happy that at
the end of the program, most of her classmates took jobs in suburban districts and she was able to find employment in the city.

With my class, I knew who came from what area and I would think, “Oh they are going to die”, because they had no idea. They all thought it was all about the skill and that [the students] are going to be so happy just because you put M&M’s in front of them and graphed them. I think I learned early on that a lot of people were doing it because it was Monday to Friday job and they got the summers off, but there was no passion. There was no relating to the children at all. Where I was going to make a difference. It wasn’t about summer off. I did extra things and still do extra things, but because it will benefit them. I realized that I was the minority in teaching. How many of them could really teach in the inner city? And I was happy that most of them would end up in the more suburban districts. And I know that I would be the opposite and if you threw me in the suburbs with some kid who is crying because they didn’t get an “A” …I couldn’t relate to them either. I couldn’t relate to those kids or their parents going crazy over a 92% and not a 98%.

Vickie also felt isolated in the university program because she felt the professors treated all White students the same and discussions on inequalities were limited to the African-American experience and did not address her experiences. She said her classmates gave presentations that talked about how much they were read to as a child and Vickie’s presentations talked about ways her mother taught her to read “on the back of newspapers”.

I think I started to learn my identity there because we were all lumped together as White. But what does that mean? But I thought about being Irish and how we were oppressed.
Why was I only learning about oppression through African-Americans? That made me want to learn about who I was.

Like her classmates, she also felt her professors stressed the importance of developing engaging lessons that covered content rather than stressing the importance of forming relationships with the students, both inside the university classrooms and inside the schools.

Their focus was how to engage….they [teach that] engaging students was making activities fun or knowing the scope and sequence and content.

Vickie felt disconnected with her professors and feels that they labeled her as a White student without probing ways her experiences may have been different from her classmates. She said she used these experiences as a motivator to “prove them wrong” and as further proof that she needed to finish the program and go into teaching.

I had teachers and professors that motivated me to prove them wrong. I had a professor give me an F and tell me I would make a terrible teacher….and I almost quit. But I came back and the project I did made the class cry and the professor actually wrote me an apology letter because he had labeled me. I would say it was the opposite. Their lack of knowledge or hidden stereotypes….I picked up on them and I thought this is why I need to go in and be there.

Vickie also talked about ways that the theorists she was learning about in the university program had little relevance to urban environments and classrooms. She feels the stress was on general teaching strategies and engagement methods and little research was centered on strategies and engagement methods that would serve students who experience extreme poverty.
She wondered who “the Vygotsky for the hood” was and what they would tell her that would make a difference in the classrooms she attended as a child and where she was planning to teach.

We learn about Vygotsky and all these guys, but where is the theorist for the hood? We learn all about kinesthetic [learning] but where is the guy for the socio-emotional? Where is that theorist for us and what we go through as an inner city teacher? It was never addressed. If you teach this way and engage them…but what do you do with the kid who is reading four levels below or who has been at six different schools? What do you do with the kid….like one of my girls has been in residential for trying to kill herself because she was raped this summer? Where is the theorist for that? What’s the blueprint for that?

While working on a university project, one of her professors recommended that she read Jay MacLeod’s *Ain’t No Makin’ It*. Vickie says this book finally addressed some of the questions she had posed in the university program but it still didn’t provide as many answers as she had hoped.

I still have that book and I tracked myself and my boyfriend and my best friend who made it out and we tried to figure out why we made it and others don’t. And we couldn’t come up with anything. It was a lot of internal motivation and some kind of support system. I still had a strong mom…she wasn’t addicted to anything…none of them [moms of friends who made it out] were [addicted to anything].

**Current Teaching.** Vickie graduated from the teacher education program and was employed by the Catholic school she attended as a middle school student. After several years at the school she found employment at her current district where she attended school as an
elementary and high school student. Her first assignment was at an all-Black school on the eastside of the city. She says that all of the students were from different housing projects in the area and the students would “throw up gang signs” to show which housing project they claimed. Within her first year at the school she formed a relationship with one of her sixth grade boys that continues to this day. The student, “De’ante”, was gifted in math and Vickie says that although she didn’t feel she was a great math teacher, she was improving; and the student was picking up concepts very quickly. He was able to solve complex problems in his head, but also felt it “wasn’t cool to be smart”. He had behavioral issues in his other classes, but Vickie pulled him aside and told him that she recognized that he needed greater challenges and that she wanted to work with him outside of the regular class.

I was teaching math…and I wasn’t great at it, but I was learning…and he would get the answers so quickly. He was able to do it in his head, he was smart…but it wasn’t the cool or hip thing to do and he would act up in everyone else’s class but not mine because he loved math. He was really intelligent and I started pulling him aside and said I need to teach everybody and I know you get this. I’ll get back with you and challenge you.

In later years, De’ante would tell Vickie that he worked hard in her class opposed to other classes because he knew she cared and had high expectations that Black kids could learn the same material as White kids. He said he knew that she actually graded his work and took time to help him correct mistakes on this papers when other teachers threw his work away.

[De’ante said] “Because I knew you cared” You think the Black kids can keep up with the White kids and I love you for that”. He said a lot of other teachers had stereotypes or in his opinion would give work and throw it away without grading it. He always knew
that I graded their work and would pull them up to my desk. He was so smart. If he did make a mistake, I would ask him about it and I was one of the only ones that did that and he said the kids knew….that taking the extra steps showed you cared.

Teachers at Vickie’s school chastised her for working with “De’ante” and other students during lunch, planning periods and recess. Vickie, however, was not “at the school to make friends” and continued to work with De’ante and other students. At the time, her fiancée was teaching at a highly selective all male Catholic high school in the area. Vickie talked to De’ante and three other boys about attending the school’s summer academic enrichment programs. They did attend and were the only four African-American students in the program. The experience served to open the boys’ eyes to the academic possibilities that Vickie was trying to bring to life in her classroom.

They were the only four minorities at the program and they were in there will all the Caucasian kids from all the different dioceses. And that’s when he understood the complexity of wow, he realized what I was trying to get him to do. And when he stepped on the field [at the school] he just fell in love and it drove him. He just lit up and tried harder.

And although none of the boys would have the financial ability or the academic entrance scores to attend the school, they worked harder in the classroom as a result. Vickie offered to pay De’ante’s tuition for a less selective Catholic school in the area, but his mother said that would be “too much” for her to do. De’ante went to the public school in his neighborhood and was expelled for his involvement in a large fight at the school and transferred to an alternative school which also “didn’t work out”. He wanted to give up, but Vickie insisted that he get his GED and
helped him study for the exams, which he passed on the second attempt. At Vickie’s urgings, he attended a semester of college, but didn’t like any of the classes except math and dropped out. He enrolled in truck driving school and earned his CDL. He is making “decent money” and has moved to a nearby suburb with his six year old son and fiancée. Vickie is involved in the wedding plans and is thankful she has been able to be a “positive influence” in De’ante’s life.

It’s been rewarding. He never had that mom figure and he always wanted to succeed. He told me that I was the only positive person he knew. And for a while in high school he was into the drugs…he was looking at serving time and he had a child….and he said he didn’t want to go down that road and he asked for my help. And if someone is asking for help to improve themselves then it is up to me to help.

Vickie believes that her personal experiences made it easy for her to relate to De’ante and other students who have struggled with poverty, low expectations and poor self-esteem. Her ability to connect in very personal ways with her students creates trust and belief that she is someone who wants to help and can get results.

I think that always base it on my experience because I was one of my students. I came from a lower socio-economics and faced a lot of adversities and challenges of poverty. I saw a lot of my friends and myself have a lot of broken homes and low self-esteem when it came to education. We thought “Oh we are not smart enough for secondary school or college” so I reflect upon myself and use my experiences as a springboard for my students and let them know that it’s ok if no one in your family has been there because you can still achieve. I know that it’s scary and not something you have directions to but….I think that is why the students relate to me…because I share my personal
experiences with them. Then they can personally relate and they think “Oh, she’s not just up there for a paycheck, she actually cares and she is one of us.”

In Vickie’s classes, she now makes it a point to let the students know on the first day of school that she is not your “typical White teacher”. She gives each student a “Guess about the teacher” true or false quiz which has stereotypical questions such as “[the teacher] lives in the suburbs and like country music. The students end up answering “true” to all the questions and then are shocked when they learn all the answers, and their perceptions of their teacher, are false.

I think when I was at [my first school], the kids made a lot of assumptions that I came from a certain socio-economic class and background. I learned to diffuse that by doing a true/false quiz at the beginning of the year that said, [the teacher] grew up in the suburbs, [the teacher] likes country music, [the teacher] was wealthy. And they would pick true to all those things and they were all false. And they were so surprised and I would tell them my story and then they would see me differently.

Another practice Vickie quickly adopted at her first school and continues to use to this day is a class meeting for students to express their feelings and “get their baggage out”. These sessions were helpful for the students and also helped them form strong relationships with Vickie because she easily identified with the struggles they discussed in the meetings.

The kids would come in so angry, so I had to get their baggage out….so in the morning we would share about their weekends, and I would share stuff and that helped us bond and they would say, “Oh, you know what a project looks like, you used to live by one.” And I would say, yes, my best friend lived in one…there is a doorway and then a hallway that you go through” And they were like, “Oh my God, she knows about that.”
But for as much as Vickie believes she can relate to her students, she is also quick to point out that it is hard for Whites, even Whites with backgrounds similar to her own, to truly grasp the “extra complexities” that growing up as a poor minority, and especially a Black male can yield. She said that working with De’ante opened her eyes to the many barriers Black males face. When De’ante was in high school he was caught driving without a license or insurance. Vickie accompanied him to court and was surprised to see so many African-Americans and so few Whites at court and realized how the system was working against Black males in particular.

I went down there to help and saw “Oh my God, everyone is Black” that is getting charged. And De’ante would say, “A whole lot of pepper, not a lot of salt.” And the people who were White had lawyers and they went first. And I just watched one after another and I saw the system and how if you don’t have….how easy it is…especially for the males…to get caught up in incarceration…I think I learned the complexity…it was like hitting walls…hitting walls….because they didn’t know him like I knew him. They just saw a person who drives without insurance.

**Inside the Classroom.** After many years of working on the eastside and getting transferred to various schools, Vickie applied to a new K-8 all-girls school sponsored by the district on the far Westside of the city (the same building where Sharon attended as a child). Vickie is proud to have been selected as a teacher at this school as the interview process was competitive. Vickie’s room is decorated in zebra prints and pink. It looks like a college dorm room and that is exactly the feeling she was hoping to achieve. Pictures of her eighth graders are hung on the walls with written goal statements that include the high schools and colleges they hope to attend. Vickie wants the girls to feel that the room is “their space”.

135
I try to make them feel like scholars….like high school kids. The teacher stores are very primary oriented. When we went K-8 in the district I feel people try to baby the older kids and I don’t agree. I try to know my students and what they are in to. Even the parents have heard about our classroom. This my second year with this theme…but I may get sick of zebra and pink. But when I invest in the classroom…if you take time to put their work up and take time to make the room, then they take more ownership in the room too because they know you care.

The room has desks that are in groups of four that are easily moved into a circle for class meetings and literature circles. The choice to use cooperative grouping and literature circle goes back to Vickie’s commitment to form relationships with her students and create opportunities where the students can talk to each other and to Vickie in smaller settings.

If I see them struggling in group they know they can talk to me. They know I have an open door policy that they can talk to me if they are having a problem…So I just try to set up an environment….I am able to be more of a guide and as I walk through I can see if they are having trouble or if personalities are not getting along. So that helps me because they are more engaged and I can see their processing and what problems they are having.

Similarly, daily class meetings are an important aspect of Vickie’s classroom. Students sit in a circle and begin the session by giving other students compliments. These range from “I like your hair” to “you really helped me out in the cafeteria yesterday”. In this way, every girl has their “moment in the spotlight”. These meetings are also used to make decisions for the class. In the meeting observed, the students were planning an event that would bring the seventh and
eighth grade classes closer together. As they plan the event and trade ideas, Vickie sits and listens, occasionally asking a logistical question, such as “how many invitations would you have to send”. She says that the idea to bring the classes together was entirely a class decision and that last year’s group focused on honoring local heroes. Vickie believes that anything she would come up with would be “boring” so she just lets them take charge. She even turns her back when they vote on ideas so the girls don’t feel she is influencing decisions or ideas. She also believes this is an important outlet for the girls because the small size of the school does not allow for many extracurricular activities.

It gives them a voice in the classroom. It helps them build relationships with their peers. Maybe they wouldn’t compliment otherwise…They all get a chance to be in the spotlight. At this age, everything we create is boring so I take that out and put it back on them. So they create things and then they buy-in, take ownership and are proud of it. Last year the kids wanted to honor local heroes. So every year it is something different. Each class is unique. It’s important especially in a K-8 there is nothing else for them. I try to make it incorporate into social studies too. The colonists fought the British because they didn’t feel they had a voice…so we try to tie that back in the classroom and talk about it and give them a voice.

In the meeting, Vickie would also interject to praise students for their thinking and vocabulary. She said she praises academic behaviors because she wants them to “feel like scholars” that belong in secondary and higher education.

I want them to be scholars and go onto high school and keep that as my focus. I talk to them as I know they are going to go out there and be successful so I highlight it when I
see it in the classroom…. I just try to build them up because I know that for many of them they haven’t had that perfect route or that perfect parent that did well in high school and went to college. So for them this is a whole new thing. To get accepted to a high school of choice…or college…because even though they do well in school they might not feel smart enough for college so I try to build them up and point out things that are good.

Additionally, Vickie’s focus on academic praise minimizes the emphasis on rules, rewards and consequences. She was able to point to a class set of rules that the girls wrote at the beginning of the year. She refers to it as a “policy” that was created and says that she works with students to problem solve when a violation of the policy is observed. Vickie rarely rewards behavior and says she want the girls to internalize success and not do things for extrinsic reasons.

They are intrinsically motivated and can see that I made it out and have a good life and they are motivated to get the same….not a piece of candy.

Vickie also says that she has a difficult time accepting the “rigid rules” of the school such as walking in lines and dress code. She doesn’t feel that either policy prepares her girls for high school.

I also hate fighting dress code. The kids say, [the teacher] cares more about what we say than what we are wearing. And I tell them to cut that out that I’m going to get in trouble for that. I just don’t look at their clothes….I just care about what is coming out of their mouth and what they are writing. I’m just not good at following all these rigid rules, but I do it…”
These strong feelings can be traced back to her earlier experiences teaching at the eastside schools and the ways Vickie felt the schools were preparing the students for prison rather than college. At her first school, the students also had to walk in lines and go to the restroom as a class. The teachers had to keep toilet paper in their room and hand it out as the students entered the restrooms. This policy was started because students were clogging the toilets with tissue, but the practice was demeaning, especially for the boys.

I realized how schools are set up for prison. You walk in a line, it was so bad…and I’ll never forget this…for the boys especially…we had to hold toilet paper in our rooms. And if they went to the bathroom, we had to give them so much…and think about the stigmatism for a boy. But at the same you had a principal saying, “They are clogging the toilets, they are clogging the toilets.” And that would bother me. And it was like one little thing, but God, girls are going to use tissue regardless but boys you know exactly what they are doing and that really bothered me.

Vickie is similarly sensitive to the ways support staff speak to the students and ways they interact with each other. At her current school, she feels the primary teachers and support staff such as cafeteria workers are “afraid” of her middle school students and even the principal comes from a primary background. She feels her girls are missing out on opportunities and is angry they were “excluded” from participating in the school musical.

Well we just had a musical that only the K-5 was in…6-8 was not invited to participate. The teacher is less comfortable with the older kids. And the kids don’t like her selections either. So I’m slowly going to work it in….like ok, we have been excluded…and maybe in the spring when all the testing is over and the pressure is down, maybe we will do a 6-
8 play and invite the little kids to see. Another hindrance is that they are treated like babies. They can’t be expected to be excited about the same things and this is just a very primary building. The principal always taught primary. I am like the only middle school focused person besides our sixth grade teacher.

Vickie also feels that the new curriculum of the district stifles her creativity as a teacher and opportunities for her girls to bring “teachable moments” into the classroom that build off their interests. She worries that the curriculum is too focused on non-fiction materials and that the girls need more opportunities to “escape the harsh realities of life” by reading fiction selections. With scripted curriculums, Vickie believes it is hard to bring her personality into the lesson and it leaves little room for the girls’ voices as well. She is thankful that her principal supports her teaching methods and does not require her to use every aspect of the new curriculum since she has demonstrated results through high test scores in the past.

They do like fiction and they like to get away from the harsh realities of everyday life. They don’t always want to read about dead, old people in non-fiction. But I’m blessed that I’m not in a school where everything is scripted and I have to be on the same page with the other teachers. I think with my principal I’ve demonstrated enough and have a good rapport with the students and she sees in their work that there is rigor there. It might not be exactly day 2 of the Springboard curriculum but she has enough confidence and faith in me and my test scores have spoken volumes…but being in a different situation where you are told what page to be on…I hate that because I’m creative. I don’t think you are meeting student needs in a scripted curriculum.
Overall, Vickie enjoys teaching at her current school, but struggles with the relative ease of the assignment in comparison to her work at the eastside schools. She sees her girls as a “class full of me” where the students are motivated to succeed and care about their academic success. She wonders however, if these are the students she entered the profession to help – students who “would make it out with or without” her. Vickie says she entered teaching to “motivate the unmotivated” and wonders if she is staying true to calling by staying at her current school.

It was actually like a dream because they are a class full of me. Motivated and want to succeed but are Cleveland kids. They care about their academics. You won’t come in a classroom here and hear kids say, “I don’t want to do this” but sometimes I feel like I’m not hitting the kids where I got into education for the first place….to motivate the unmotivated. But I landed here and I do love it, but in a way…I’m still helping them….but I think these kids will make it with or without me….and I was just so tired of getting bumped around so much and I’m not going to lie, I have to think of my livelihood too. I had to really apply for this job and it was really hard to get this job and I make a lot of money at this job. And I also got tired of going to funerals, too. I just said to myself, “How can I help so many?” But out of De’ante’s class [a few] have CDL’s. Another works for Cleveland Public Power…so there are a few….and those are the ones I sent to [the Catholic school summer program]. They are making $30-40K coming out of high school. But I buried so many more.

**Thematic Analysis**

This study seeks to understand the childhood, pre-service and current experiences of White, female teachers who have been able to form strong relationships with poor and minority
students in their classrooms. The study explores moments of critical consciousness of race and class and ways these formative experiences may have been further developed in the classroom and manifested as pedagogies and practices of student empowerment. From the data collected and analyzed, themes have emerged which inform the research questions of this study. These themes center on the moments of identity development and understandings of race and class during childhood and adolescence, opportunities to examine identity, race and pedagogies of empowerment in pre-service experiences and moments of critical reflection in current teaching that influenced participants’ adoption of pedagogies and practices that would best serve poor and minority students. Themes found are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Area</th>
<th>Related Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race was not a big deal</td>
<td>Early exposure to race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened my eyes to differences</td>
<td>Moments of critical consciousness of race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look to the inside of people</td>
<td>Parental influences on race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can’t understand because you are not Black</td>
<td>Critical consciousness of race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in life will be handed to you</td>
<td>Critical consciousness of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nope. It was all the same</td>
<td>Opportunities for critical consciousness in university settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s just a conversation until you are actually in a school</td>
<td>University curriculums and opportunities for reflective practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than just graphing M&amp;M's</td>
<td>Mismatch of university and school pedagogies</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theorists for the Hood</td>
<td>Mismatch of theory and practice from university to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than just teaching</td>
<td>Developing relationships with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t apply anywhere else</td>
<td>Commitment to urban teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You bloom where you are planted</td>
<td>Teaching as a Calling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to look beyond the label</td>
<td>Development of high expectations for student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I knew you cared</td>
<td>Role of caring in relationship development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing the whole story</td>
<td>Pedagogies and practices that support strong relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the baggage out</td>
<td>Pedagogies and practices that support strong relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a comfort zone</td>
<td>Creating an environment of empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's your class not mine</td>
<td>Developing student empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The power within</td>
<td>Curriculums of empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let the children drive the curriculum</td>
<td>Teachers as facilitators of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A commitment to each other</td>
<td>Development of collective student identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting then out of their bubble</td>
<td>Envisioning many possible selves in contact zones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes you have to do the dance</td>
<td>Negotiating pedagogies and practices with principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A champion for kids</td>
<td>Role of the principal to establish school culture and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open door policy for parents</td>
<td>Attitudes toward parental involvement in schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These are their treasures</td>
<td>Teacher and school attitudes toward parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected with one adult</td>
<td>Systems of support in schools to develop student relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Early Exposures to Race**

**“Race was not a big deal”**. All of the participants had early exposures to diversity from their first memories of childhood. Sharon and Vickie attended schools in the city with minorities and spoke of their best friends as being Black and Latino. Heidi also attended schools with minorities on the military bases and reports have friendships with minority students. Linda played with minority children when she helped out at the corner store and Carla attended an ethnically diverse school with students with European immigrant roots and was a guest at African-American weddings of her father’s employees.

The ways that the participants framed these early exposures and their views on race as “not a big deal” or “not an issue” could speak to their comfort levels with diversity. This may
have been influenced by their parents who were described by Heidi as “open-minded” and Carla as “accepting of all people”. Vickie’s mother taught her to “look to the inside of people” and ignore stereotypes and Linda remembers that there “was always a new face at Sunday dinners” when she helped out at the store.

It is interesting to explore the extent to which comfort with diversity and acknowledgment of differences in race may have been informed for each of the participants. For Heidi, she describes life on the military base as a “melting pot” which could imply a general de-emphasis on race in the military in favor of “esprit de corps” attitudes. The importance of unity in military environments makes a point to minimize individual differences. This emphasis may have allowed Heidi to grow up in a color-blind bubble where race was not as salient. Also, the frequent relocations may not have allowed Heidi to form as many close friendships as civilian children. With so many changes in schools and friends, she may not have had time to develop close friendships where any differences in race might have become more apparent. This point in racial identity development is consistent with the work of Helms (1993) and the “contact stage” where participants are exposed to racial diversity, but do not acknowledge or understand differences.

Similarly, Carla states that “race was not an issue” and talked about ways her family was included in Black weddings. She does not consider, however, that her father’s role as the supervisor may have resulted in invitations that may have been more obligatory in nature than genuine expressions of inclusion. This is another example of the “contact stage” where race is understood without acknowledging differences and the ways power of her father may have influenced these contacts.
Vickie and Sharon’s original understandings of race placed a greater emphasis on socio-economic status than race where Vickie said, “We were all just poor” and Sharon said, “People were people”. These women grew up in the city and experienced financial struggles that were similar to the minority populations in their neighborhoods. Similar to the “esprit de corps” of the military, poverty was a unifying factor that may have de-emphasized the salience of race.

**Moments of Critical Consciousness of Race and Class.** As most of the participants grew up in close contact with minorities but still held color-blind views, it is interesting to explore the moments, experiences and people that helped them better understand their own identity, how it related to minorities and “opened their eyes” to inequalities of race and class. As Freire’s (1994) framework suggests, moments of critical consciousness allow participants’ opportunities to “see, judge and act”. The extent to which they “see” race opens opportunities for them to “judge” or critically reflect on what they see and then move to “act” upon what they have seen and have judged to be unequal and unfair. Delpit (1998) also suggests that the ability for teachers to explore and negotiate their group memberships in relationship to the students they teach as important as teachers seek to form relationships in their classroom. The ability to maintain a positive individual and collective identity as a member of the dominant group, while at the same time recognizing the inherent struggles of membership in out-groups is important for teachers who cross barriers of race and class on a daily basis (Delpit, 1998).

**“Opened My Eyes to Differences”.** Linda articulated an early understanding of the differences of race as it related to power and privilege. As a child, she grew up in a suburban neighborhood of privilege. Her experiences with minorities came not in her neighborhood, but in traveling through the city to help out at her grandmother’s corner store. In these travels, she “realized how segregated the city was”. These realizations were further informed by her father
who loved to take the children to Chinatown and other ethnic areas of the city. The family also
drove through the city during times of intense racial tensions where riots that gained national
attention occurred. The negative ways these events were broadcast on the news and the family’s
continued travel through these same neighborhoods was a powerful demonstration that even
though the girls would “duck in the backseat”, their father and mother were not deterred from
their weekend trips to work at the family store, nor was race negatively framed by her parents in
light of these riots and tensions. On the contrary, Linda’s father stressed his “love for the city”.
These views are consistent with Helm’s “disintegration” stage where Whites become aware of
the social implications of race on a personal level. Her time spent at the corner store also
informed the “immersion” stage where Linda had extensive contact with minorities. Her travels
through the city opened her eyes to the differences between her neighborhood and which was
predominately White and wealthy and the neighborhood of her grandmother which was
predominately Black and impoverished. The ways race was framed by her family may have
allowed Linda to form positive views of other races and a sense that she could comfortably travel
between and negotiate her weekday life in the suburbs and her weekend life in the city.

“Look to the Inside of People”. Sharon and Vickie were students in the city where they
currently teach during court ordered desegregation and resulting bussing practices that
transferred students across town to create more racial balance in the schools. This practice,
however, resulted in the parents of many White students, including Sharon and Vickie, pulling
them from the public schools due to travel and safety reasons. Sharon experienced violence on a
first hand basis and was bullied at the school and on the bus ride home. She went from playing
with her best friend in her neighborhood who was Black, to girls who looked like her friend
shouting, “You little White girl, you little White girl”. Despite these experiences with bullying,
Sharon did not form negative perceptions of African-Americans. Consistent with Helm’s “disintegration” stage, Sharon became acutely aware of race on a personal level. It appears, however, that her negative experience with her fourth grade teacher, contrasted with her positive experience with her third grade teacher, may have allowed her to develop a level of empathy for her Black classmates. Additionally, she did not reference any negative racial comments made by her mother toward the students in her class who were bullying her. Her mother removed her from the school for safety reasons, but race was not emphasized as a reason for the transfer. This experience was similar to Vickie’s experience where she was assigned to a high school on the other side of the city from her home. The experience helped Vickie understand inequalities in education and the low expectations teachers often held for minority students. This realization is also consistent with Helm’s “disintegration” stage where the social implications of race are felt. Again, her mother’s views did not characterize the negative aspects of the experience as attributed to race. Vickie may have been able to negotiate this experience by being able “to look to the inside of people” as her mother taught.

“*You can’t understand because you’re not Black*”. Heidi and Linda did not experience race on a personal level until early in their teaching careers where they felt parents of Black students in their classrooms judged them or other White teachers based on their race. They described these experiences as “tough” and “difficult” to be labeled for qualities of a group they belonged to but did not feel that they represented in the ways the parents assumed. Heidi did not have a personal story, but has heard parents tell colleagues that they “can’t understand because [they] are not Black”. Heidi says she tries to “create a classroom culture where [race] is not an issue” and admits that she can’t possibly understand what it is like to be a Black parent, but tries to create a culture where parents know she cares for them and their children. Heidi feels the use
of Love and Logic curriculum has been an important way she has been able to create a culture of inclusion.

Linda attributed Blacks’ distrust of Whites to “not being exposed to different cultures” and being “taught to hate”; but she did not relate these comments back to the riots she had driven through as a child and the reasons for those riots as possible underlying reasons lack of trust from Black parents. These comments do little to acknowledge White power to oppress and the resulting “hatred” of this oppression by Blacks. Her comment of “not being exposed to different cultures” seems to demonstrate that Linda believed Blacks were just naïve to White culture, when it is more likely that their perceptions were informed through very concrete interactions driven by racist intents. Linda’s principal was able to help her understand the dynamics of parental distrust of Whites and encouraged her to remain “firm, fair and consistent” in her interactions with the students. With this strategy, Linda could demonstrate to her students that she was committed to equality in her classroom and did not embrace the racist views of other Whites which the students and parent had assumed she held based on her race. Linda said the experience was “eye-opening” and helped her think about “how many times [her] students had been judged before”.

Carla’s experiences with race were centered on ethnicity and celebrations of her Italian heritage in a community that included many European ethnicities such Italian, Hungarian, Polish and German. Her family were “proud members” of the Italian-American Club and Carla could speak and understand some Italian. She encountered challenges to her ethnicity in elementary school when teachers singled her and others out for being Italian. They also made fun of her last name. These experiences served to further empower Carla to embrace her ethnic identity with a defiant pride. From these experiences, Carla rejects ethnic stereotypes and is quick to point out
that “people don’t have a problem” with Italian stereotypes of gangsters and Mafia culture but are against Native American depictions on sports logos. It is interesting that Carla’s strong Italian roots and ways it has been celebrated and maligned by others, has not contributed to deeper understandings of the ways race in America could be even more challenging and salient than differences in European ethnicities. Her “I don’t see race” stance appears to be an effort to reject stereotypes and not judge people based on genetics. This belief situates her within Helm’s “contact stage” where race has not been explored at levels that would provide greater opportunities for critical consciousness. Using Freire’s framework, it appears from Carla’s narrative that her lack of focus on race, and ways Blacks may encounter unique struggles compared to European immigrants, may limit her abilities to “judge” and “act” on what she has experienced in ways that will serve to empower her students. According to Chubbuck (2004), these views may create “internal obstacles to the implementation of both effective pedagogy and curriculum” (Chubbuck, 2004).

“Nothing in life will ever be handed to you”. The participants were also awakened to socio-economic differences at relatively early points in their childhood. Vickie lived in the city from birth and her mother did not own a car which forced the family to take public transportation. Vickie’s primary motivation was to escape the poverty of her neighborhood and have a life closer to the well-dressed professional women she saw downtown. Vickie’s experiences at high school showed her ways that low expectations from teachers could serve to keep students in poverty regardless of their motivations or abilities to advance in status. She learned ways that schools were set up to keep poor kids poor. These early understandings and experiences are consistent with the tenets of social reproduction and ways students are able to penetrate the ideals of capitalism and concepts of meritocracy (MacLeod, 2009, Freire, 1998,
Willis, 1977). The experience inspired her to tutor her classmates and aspire to a career in urban education to help students like herself to be successful and overcome academic environments set up for their failure.

Likewise, Sharon’s early personal experiences with financial struggle helped her understand the “type of people” she wanted to be around. Her father’s work ethic and “nothing will ever be handed to you” philosophy can be compared to American Dream concepts of meritocracy where hard work and effort is required to advance. Sharon was able to internalize these ideals as she was made to use allowance money to pay for clothes and entertainment she desired while tithing ten percent to their church. Her experiences in her wealthy high school served to dispel the American Dream by showing her that for some, privilege is just as ingrained as poverty is for others. Her work hard, no frills philosophy was rejected at a school where the latest jeans and new cars were considered rights and requirements of social success. Sharon’s high school experience opened her eyes to a desire to be with people who were still aspiring to the American Dream rather than people who took it for granted. In this way, Sharon began to reject and distance herself from a White identity of privilege.

Carla also grew up in a hard work and effort home where her father was a plumbing contractor and her mother worked outside of the home in an era where that was less socially accepted. Carla’s father gambled on the American Dream with several investment successes and many other failures that led to bankruptcy. Carla remembers the struggle to buy her Communion dress as a result of these financial ups and downs. She also remembers understanding her family’s financial situation by listening to people whisper about her mother working outside of the home and ways that contributed to Carla’s disciplinary troubles in school. Carla embraced a work hard ethic and even worked a part-time job while she was pregnant and student teaching.
She says she struggles with the students and parents at her school and the “dependent society” that appears to be growing. From these statements, it appears that Carla’s underdeveloped awareness of race may contribute to concepts of meritocracy and feelings that economic advancement is attainable through hard work and effort, regardless of race. These feelings are consistent with concepts of White privilege where Whites do not consider or acknowledge the power their Whiteness plays in opening doors for social advancement (Romano, 2008, Chubbuck, 2004, Delpit, 1998). In Carla’s narrative, the absence of stories that helped her “judge” the struggles minorities face to advance through systems designed to oppress may limit her thinking in regard to pedagogies of empowerment for students of color.

Heidi’s understanding of class was awakened when her father retired from the military and she started “civilian school”. On the military base, issues of race and class were not discussed or emphasized. Looking back, Heidi now realizes that officers were housed in different areas on the base, but that was not discussed in her home and did not appear to affect the children she played with or her interactions at school with either teachers or students. When Heidi enrolled in civilian schools she began to notice the ways students worked to exclude others based on outward appearances. “[Civilian school] wasn’t all inclusive and that’s where people start viewing others…so you shouldn’t hang with that person or you shouldn’t dress like that.” In these experiences, Heidi began to realize the power that money and status can hold over people. And while her family did not struggle financially, they also did not place value on material possessions or social connections. Military values of unity and care and service to others were deeply ingrained values that Heidi experienced on the military base and held to even when she left the military environment. Her family did not struggle financially and she had the means to keep up with civilian expectations and become a member of her school’s in-group. It appears,
however, that Heidi quietly rejected the opportunity to assume this identity and maintained her military identity and its related values of unity and service to others over power and exclusion that can be freely exercised by dominant groups.

**Pre-service Teaching**

The collegiate years are often characterized as periods of self-reflection with opportunities for extensive cognitive and emotional growth. Three of the five teachers in this study expressed a specific interest in working in urban education as influenced by their growing up experiences. The experiences they had in childhood uniquely positioned them to continue their critical explorations of race and class into the collegiate setting to best prepare them to serve low income and minority students. However, the curriculum and opportunities provided by their respective universities provided limited opportunities for the participants to continue this critical exploration.

“Nope. It was all the same.” Linda enrolled in college to pursue a degree in education so she could help the community she served as a child at her grandmother’s corner store. For this degree, Linda attended a small college in a rural environment about one hundred fifty miles away from her hometown and fifty miles away from the nearest urban center. When asked if she considered that the college might not be positioned to expose her to urban classrooms, she responded, “I didn’t think about it or put it all together”. She says that the prevailing thoughts of the time were that “kids were kids” and that pedagogies were universal to all students. When asked if her college experience included any considerations of pedagogies for minority students, her response was “Nope. It was all the same.” Ironically, these were the exact same words used by Heidi to describe her college’s lack of differentiation of curriculums that might best serve
minority students. She said the college talked about “good teaching for all children”. As predominately White colleges, it is interesting to note the ways that White institutions can also embody phases similar to Helm’s framework. In these examples, it appears the philosophies of the colleges were in the “contact” stage where they did not acknowledge race. Heidi’s college emphasized Vincentian philosophies which are consistent with Catholic teachings of mercy, justice and service to the needy. However, these teachings appeared to have occurred within a color-blind system where differences in race and class and structures of power were not discussed. Consequently, both Linda and Heidi had limited exposure to diverse teaching settings and were not challenged to critically explore issues of race and class in schools and pedagogies of empowerment that might best serve minority students. When they finally reached diverse classrooms in their first years of teaching they were surprised that their days were not “as cut and dry” as they thought and how tired they were at the end of each day. The flexibility required of their work was also described as an “evolution” that grew from the students’ needs and that “not everything went as planned”.

“It’s just conversation until you are actually in a school”. Carla, Sharon and Vickie all attended the same university in the city where they currently teach. As a university in the city, almost all of their field placements were in the city school district. However, they all described having only one multicultural education course required in their degree programs. The courses encouraged them to be “conscious of multicultural literature” and make the content “real” for the kids by asking them to connect aspects of the stories with their lives. Carla described the professor as “young and fresh” with recent experiences in the classroom that she was able to share. Vickie’s multicultural professor encouraged her to read “Ain’t No Makin’ It” by Jay MacLeod (2009) as a reference for her project for the class. Vickie’s overall thoughts of her
professors, however, were negative and that they “motivated [her] to prove them wrong” in their perceptions of her abilities to become a successful teacher.

**“More than graphing M&M’s”**. Carla, Sharon and Vickie also agreed that the focus of the teacher education program was to write engaging lesson plans that followed a scope and sequence for each content area. Sharon and Carla both expressed appreciation for having cooperating teachers during their pre-service experiences that encouraged them to be prepared with well written lessons but to be “flexible” in their teaching and ready to look for “teachable moments” where lessons would need to be adjusted based on student needs and interests. Sharon describes teachers who “didn’t sugar-coat anything” and “threw [her] into the fire”. Similarly, Carla appreciated her cooperating teacher and ways he encouraged her to “be loud and use her wit” which was a way of telling her to just be herself in the classroom. He also stressed the importance of apologizing to students when mistakes were made and working hard as a way to show the students that she cared about them. These experiences demonstrate a “mismatch” between the curriculums taught in the universities and the curriculums in practice at the schools (Cochran-Smith, 2012).

**“Theorists for the Hood”**. The advice and practical experience from the cooperating teachers is aligned with culturally responsive pedagogies, but it does not appear that the participants had opportunities to connect these experiences with pedagogies and theories learned in the university classrooms. In fact, it seemed that the two environments were working against each other with the university encouraging universally applicable lessons with engaging activities like graphing M&M’s and the schools stressing lesson flexibility and engagement through demonstrations of care, hard work and humility. Vickie was especially frustrated that
theorists like Vygotsky were studied but not connected to practical examples she knew she
would encounter in urban classrooms.

“More than just teaching”. Overall, aside from some strategies learned in a
multicultural literature class, the participants did not feel their professors and the curriculum of
the universities prepared them well for the realities of daily teaching in urban environments. The
color-blind curriculums and views of student needs as “all the same” did not allow the
participants many opportunities to explore race and class and pedagogies of empowerment. An
emphasis on skill development did not create space for conversations around relationship
building with students and ways those relationships might be fostered. As Sharon stated, “they
just don’t teach you about that in college”. The work of Cochran-Smith explores the concept
that “becoming a teacher” is a “process and not an event” where teachers need time in their
university programs to engage in “reflective practices” (Cochran-Smith, 2012, p.109).

Current Teaching

“I didn’t apply anywhere else”. The participants all currently teach in the same large,
urban school district. For Sharon and Carla, this district is the only one to which they applied and
they have spent their entire careers within schools in the district. Linda and Vickie taught for two
years in Catholic schools in the same city as their current teaching assignments and have also
only sought urban teaching assignments. Heidi taught in the southwestern part of the country for
her first years of teaching and then relocated to teach in her current school district.

With gaps in opportunities during pre-service experiences to further explore and develop
the critical awakenings to race and class that the participants experienced in early childhood and
adolescence, their first years of teaching began important times for the participants to engage in
critical reflections on race and class and form important relationships with students and mentor teachers. The relationships with these individuals helped awaken them to new understandings and inspired many of the participants to respond with pedagogies and practices that are considered culturally relevant. These practices were further supported in school environments that also embraced culturally relevant practices and allowed the participant’s classrooms to be an extension of that culture, rather than be viewed by the participants as islands of empowerment.

“You bloom where you are planted”. The participants all chose to serve in low-income, predominately minority teaching contexts. Several only applied to their current district and others taught briefly in parochial or out-of-state- schools that were also low-income/high diversity. Heidi’s dedication to Vincentian philosophies of mercy, justice and care for the poor influence beliefs that teaching is a Calling where she trusts that in each assignment, God placed her “for a reason” (Philpot, 2012; Palmer, 1998; Serow, 1994). She was also more comfortable moving to unfamiliar parts of the country to teach because she moved all around world as a child to follow her father’s military career. These experiences influence her “You bloom where you are planted” feelings that echo her confidence in new surroundings and trust that those placements were divinely inspired. Linda, Sharon, Carla and Vickie all followed their “passions” to teach in the city and spoke to wanting to teach in environments where they felt most “comfortable”. Their comfort with working in low-income, minority environments speaks to their early experiences in childhood and adolescence where they lived among or had meaningful interactions with this population. The participants also talked about a desire to “help” low-income and minority students experience success in school and life (Gay, 1995). Vickie also spoke to desires to “motivate the unmotivated” and use her life experiences as motivators for her students.
Learning to “Look Beyond the label”. The early student-teacher relationships the participants formed provided valuable insights and opportunities to critically consider race, class and pedagogies of empowerment they could adopt in their classrooms. For Heidi and Linda, their experiences with students who had been “labeled” as juvenile delinquents gave them opportunities, as the relationships strengthened, to “look beyond the label” and see the children as people with unique gifts and potential. For them, their early experiences and parents who were “open-minded” may have influenced their abilities to consider the best in people and not dwell on negative aspects. These attitudes and high expectations were felt by the students and allowed them to experience success in the classroom. Linda has carried the lessons learned in her early relationships with “difficult” students to allow all children in her class to receive a “fresh start”. She doesn’t look at student records at the beginning of the year and will not listen to the opinions of colleagues, asking that they “let [her] decide” her thoughts on students. Similarly, Heidi has deepened her commitment to “look beyond the label” with the primary students she now serves and understands the ways that her early judgments of a child could remain with the child for their entire school career. She consciously looks for the strengths of each child and makes sure her assessments of these strengths are communicated to the child, their parents and her school community. These views are closely aligned with definitions of culturally responsive teachers (Nieto, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

“Because I knew you cared”. Carla, Sharon and Vickie learned from their early student-teacher relationships the power of caring and ways it could also communicate high expectations to their students (Noddings, 2006). For Sharon, her relationship with her student taught her to “take the time to learn who they are” and balance empathy for their situations with “tough love” that communicated expectations that the students could and would overcome their hardships.
This “tough love” approach adopted by both Carla and Sharon may have been influenced from their early experiences with struggle and ways their parents influenced their thinking that “hard work and effort” were required to overcome challenges. This approach, softened by a true desire to understand and form a “human connection” with their students, communicates high expectations to the students and has resulted in life-long relationships with many of their former students.

Additionally, Vickie demonstrates care to her students by sharing very personal aspects of her life in efforts to motivate her students and help them believe that they too can be successful in the classroom and in life. Her telling of personal stories helps her students know that she is “one of her students” and that serves as an entry point for building strong relationships. Her relationship with De’ante opened her eyes to the ways that their struggles were similar and also very different when race was considered. De’ante taught Vickie that shared experiences of poverty may have been understood differently by poor Whites and poor Blacks because poor Blacks have barriers of racism to fight in their efforts to advance economically. De’ante’s experiences in an all-Black neighborhood with pervasive crime and his interactions with the legal system, opened Vickie’s eyes to the “school to prison” pipeline that is representative of social reproduction in our schools and other institutions of power (Delpit, 1998; MacLeod, 1994).

“Knowing the whole story”. The relationships the participants formed with students early in their careers influenced pedagogies and practices they employ in their current teaching. For Heidi and Linda, the desire to “look beyond the label” necessitated a need to find ways to understand their students and be able to help in non-judgmental ways. Heidi found that the Love and Logic approach gave her a framework to form caring relationships and empower students to
take the initiative to make positive choices that would result in strong self-image. Love and Logic provides an approach that allows both the teacher and student opportunities to care for each other and make choices that could improve student efficacy and dispel stereotypes of student failure in urban schools. Similarly, Linda’s involvement in the School Support Team (SST) provided a forum where student concerns could be discussed and understood in ways that did not judge or label the student, although a recommendation of the team could include a referral for suspecting a disability. “Knowing the whole story” gave the team opportunities to connect students and families with needed resources. These demonstrations of care served to strengthen relationships with students and families.

“Getting their baggage out”. For Sharon, Carla and Vickie, their early relationships influenced pedagogies where students could better talk with them and their peers in the classroom to “get their baggage out”. For Carla, this has meant cooperative grouping where she can “sit right beside” a student and have a conversation that is either academic or socio-emotional in nature. Group work allows flexibility for both teacher and student to address concerns in a setting that is small and where the attention of others is not directed at the student with the concern.

Vickie and Sharon’s relationships with students has opened their eyes to a need for them to “take time for socio-emotional” learning and the many “teachable moments” that can arise in a school day. To address these needs, the teachers have adopted “class meetings” or “family meetings” to give students opportunities to share concerns and problem solve solutions. Of the participants, Sharon and Vickie had early life experiences that most closely resembled those of their students, so it is interesting to see ways that they have dedicated large amounts of class time to providing opportunities for student voice and socio-emotional health. Using class meetings as
a guiding pedagogy demonstrates care to students and also a belief that their voice is important and needs to be heard and considered.

**Creating a “comfort zone” for students.** The formation of strong relationships with students also influenced ways the participants demonstrate care and concern through the arrangement of their classroom to be a “comfort zone” for their students. In general, the participants’ rooms were neatly and brightly decorated with color themes such as Vickie’s pink and zebra stripe or interesting home-like details such as Heidi and Linda’s Japanese lanterns or Sharon’s curtains. Linda’s room has classical music playing at all times because she wants the “students to feel comfortable” in the room just as she felt comfortable in her home as a child when her father played classical music. Vickie wants her room to communicate an older, more sophisticated style that is closer to a college dorm room than a primary elementary school classroom. Her room communicates these college expectations in its look and with the display of framed high school and college goal statements written by each girl in the class. Heidi’s room demonstrates comfort by allowing students to choose their own seating, whether it be sitting or standing at a high top table or sitting on a pillow on the floor. Heidi feels that enabling students to feel comfortable in the classroom better allows them to focus on the academic assignments she provides. The efforts by the teachers to create “spaces of comfort” is aligned with the work of Moje & Martinez (2007) where schools and individual teachers create opportunities for students to “engage and persist” in their academic studies by providing supports that are culturally responsive (Moje & Martinez, 2007).

“**It’s your Class, not mine**”. Creating a room that is comfortable sets the stage for students to make choices and “own the room”. For Vickie, it is important that she first demonstrates care for her students by spending time to decorate the room and make it a space
that is both age appropriate and communicates high expectations for student success. From this basic design, the students are then empowered to make it “their space” with displays of their work, statements of their goals and personal touches. Vickie says that the girls pick up after themselves and treat the room with great respect because they know she took the time to set it up nicely and they are also proud of the contributions they have made. Similarly, Sharon allows the students to design the layout of the classroom and make decisions on the placement of tables, the content of bulletin boards and even the location of the teacher’s desk. When Sharon tells her students that “it is your classroom, not mine” she is communicating powerful statements that help students see themselves as decision makers with important voices in the classroom. These practices also help students take “ownership” for their classroom and feel that the teacher is listening to them and values their thoughts. As Heidi states, “they start to own [the classroom]” and this leads to their ownership of their learning.

“The power within”. When students are allowed to take ownership of their classrooms, this shift of power from teacher-directed to student-led has important implications for student learning as well. The ways in which the participants have embraced this shift in power speaks to their deeper understandings of empowerment and ways they can provide opportunities for student voice and decision-making in their classrooms. Group work, projects and class meetings give students chances to “communicate, problem-solve and make decisions” in the words of Heidi and Sharon. For Heidi, these words are further embedded in an international baccalaureate curriculum that stresses the power of the individual to become a learner. For Vickie, her class meetings allow every student “a chance to be in the spotlight” and “take charge”. Class meetings send a message that all of her students are important and capable of “going out there and being successful”. In these ways, the classrooms become the “generative spaces” discussed by Moje &
Martinez where students are able to explore “new understandings of self” where classrooms can serve as a bridge between “home fronts” and “contact zones” (Moje & Martinez, 2007).

“Let the children drive the curriculum”. These pedagogies demonstrate ways that in Freire’s framework, the participants have “acted” upon practices they have “seen” and “judged” to be unjust such as “labeling” students or legal systems that discriminate against young Black men. The actions of the participants serve to shift power away from themselves as White teachers and empower their low-income and minority students to seek and use “their power within”. To this end, the participants view themselves as Vickie stated, “as more of a guide” to the students’ learning. This teacher as facilitator role helps the students “drive the curriculum” and the teacher responds to their needs. The facilitator role also communicates that students have options for their learning and can make choices such as building a Pilgrim village to demonstrate their understanding of geometric shapes.

“A commitment to each other”. When the teachers step aside and become facilitators of learning, student voices become more powerful and they are encouraged to seek out their peers for answers. This concept that their peers, who often share their same race and class, are capable of answering questions and sharing knowledge is another important way the participants empower student learning and the beginnings of collective action. Both Heidi and Sharon have classroom policies where students must ask each other for answers and help before asking the teacher. This practice tells the students that their “peers have answers too”. Sharon says that her group projects help students form a “commitment to each other” and was powerfully demonstrated when her students called an absent student on a cell phone to ask her to bring in needed supplies and the student did bring in the supplies. Similarly, Linda told a story where
students called each other at 5:00am to make sure they would all be on time to school for the bus trip to the museum and university.

These practices, however, could be contrasted with Carla’s philosophies on group work that are not as liberating. Carla uses a group point reward system to track positive behaviors of her students. This collective compliance pedagogy could speak to her less developed commitment to student empowerment and views of group work as more of opportunities for her to engage with small groups than for the students to engage with each other and make decisions. She often frames student engagement with an emphasis on the development of perceived weakness rather than strength such as her statement that “It doesn’t matter how smart a student is; if they can’t get along with each other, it doesn’t do much good.” Her class trip to Mars has students make choices for the trip such as what to bring, but they did not select the project or demonstrate ways they took ownership for the learning. As previously stated, Carla has had fewer critical opportunities to “see” race as distinct from ethnicity. Her views of meritocracy also make it hard for her to “judge” ways that her students may be oppressed by their school curriculums and environments. Therefore, it would make sense that she does not “act” with as many intentional pedagogies and practices of empowerment as the other participants in this study.

“Getting them out of their bubble”. As the teachers step aside to allow students to “drive the curriculum”, it is important to consider the curricular frameworks the participants have selected as spaces where students can flourish and explore “many possible selves” (Collins, 1998). For Linda, she learned the value of field trips from her mentor teacher as an important way for students to “get out of their bubble” and experience new places and concepts. Trips to the lake, farms, museums and universities opened the eyes of her students to worlds outside of
their neighborhoods and gave them opportunities to play in a lake, hold a frog or see another state from across a river. Heidi’s international baccalaureate curriculum also emphasized field trips as a way students could be “inquirers” in their environments. The IB learner profile of “risk-taker”, “inquirer”, “thinker” and “communicator” also empowers students see themselves in the curriculum and ways they embody these traits. This “problems-posing and solving” curriculum shows students that they are valued with high expectations rather than traditional banking methods discussed by Freire (1994). The global perspective of the IB curriculum naturally lends itself to going out to explore and critically think about the world in a wider context than the limited travel radius many poor and minority children experience. Additionally, Vickie encouraged her students to enroll in the summer enrichment program at the Catholic high school so they could engage in challenging work and sit next to students from backgrounds very different from their own. As her students participated in the program, they were able to envision themselves on the campus as students and consider wider options for their lives than they may have originally held. This is consistent with the work of Stanton-Salazar (2011) where teachers act as mentors and “gatekeepers” that help students move between structures of power and widen their access to educational opportunities. The strong abilities of the participants to relate to their students has, according to Stanton-Salazar, opened their eyes to the need to provide access to these experiences (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

For Carla, the arts are the curricular framework that she believes best serve children, and “especially minority children”. The arts create a space for creativity and expression that allows minority children a way to engage and interpret curricular content in ways that value their voice and ideas. The arts allow students to also “see themselves” in the curriculum and gives them a
space to express and find their voice. For Carla, the arts are vital for students to truly learn about themselves, others and the world.

Sharon and Vickie hold closer to using the district curriculum as a guide but both work to infuse the curriculum with “connections” that help students relate the content to their worldview. Both teachers use their personal stories as examples to help the students make connections and relate new learnings to ideas they already understand. They are able to capitalize on the many shared experiences they have with the students to find connections that other teachers, who come from backgrounds very different from their students, may not even realize exist. These connections also help students find value in the knowledge they already bring to the classroom and see ways they can consider “other possible selves” with the application of this and new knowledge they acquire in the classroom. These connections are consistent with culturally responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

“Sometimes you have to do the dance”. The participants also addressed the relationships they had with principals and ways the negotiation of these relationships allowed them to have the freedom to make curricular choices and feel supported by a building culture that was aligned with their values. For many of the participants, trust from their principals was earned after they demonstrated an ability to “get results” in the classroom in terms of academic achievement. In their early years of teaching, the participants spent time explaining and negotiating with principals so they could understand and support curricular decisions. Heidi spoke to having to “do the dance” to balance district initiatives and practices she felt benefited students so she could earn high marks in her teacher evaluations. With more experience and demonstrated success in the classroom, the participants discussed ways the principals’ “trusted [their] judgment” and gave them more freedom to make decisions as long as they continued to
achieve academic results. Linda talked about ways the “dance” was now structured around testing and accountability where principals are more likely to allow deviations in the curriculum at the beginning and end of the year when testing is either far away or completed for the year. These times were windows of opportunity for field trips and reading novels Linda felt were important such as “The Outsiders” and “The House of Dies Drear”. Vickie was also thankful that her principal did not require that she teach from the scripted curriculum at all times. Vickie feels her principal understands the value that Vickie can bring to student learning by sharing her personal experiences and allows her to “go off the script” to help students make real and relevant connections. Again, Vickie feels her principal “trusts her judgment” and allows her to be a decision-maker rather than a script reader.

“A champion for kids”. The participants also talked about ways their principals formed relationships with students and created a school culture where “the kids felt free”. Heidi, Linda, Sharon and Carla all felt their current principals were “approachable” and could be seen talking with students in classrooms and hallways. Upon a visit to Carla’s school, I found the principal’s office filled with students preparing to give the morning announcements. One student sat at the principal’s desk and others were using markers and pens off her desk to take notes. The principal was nowhere in sight and the comfort the students had in a space usually considered in negative lights was evident. The clear trust the principal placed in the students to honor the space and use it for its intended purpose of broadcasting the announcements also spoke to her commitment to student voice and empowerment. At Linda’s school, the principal begins each day with a morning meeting to celebrate student success and talk about important school-wide issues. When recent shootings of unarmed Black men swept the nation, the principal used the morning meeting to talk about safety and ways to interact with police officers. He then started a club for seventh
and eighth grade boys that meets during breakfast to continue the conversations. At Heidi’s school, students follow the principal around the Pied Piper, eager to tell her what they are learning in class. She is rarely in her office and can most often be found on the floor with the students working on a project or asking them questions about their learnings for the day. Sharon’s principal strives to create a “family atmosphere” at her school and the school holds many family events such as carnivals and movie nights. Recently, the principal was highlighted on the local news for allowing students to smash a pie in her face for meeting a school-wide charity fundraising goal. The attitudes of these principals create a culture where the work of the participants can flourish. The participants spoke of school-wide rules, but most did not feel the rules were excessively overbearing. The teachers did not like dress codes, cell phone rules or walking in lines in the hallway; but they also did not speak out in ways that would demonstrate that those rules were interfering with an overall positive school culture or that those rules and issues of compliance were a focus of the culture. Vickie was the least positive toward her principal but she also was quick to add that her principal had an “elementary school mindset” and many of her criticisms were that she did not understand the importance of adjusting policies for middle school students.

“Open door policy” for parents. The attitudes of the principals also informed school-wide views on parents and their involvements in and outside of the school. Heidi and Linda talked about “open door” policies where parents were encouraged to come to the school and the classrooms to help or observe. A grandparent was present during the observation of Heidi’s room and she spoke enthusiastically about the Christmas Cupboard the parents organized. At Linda’s school, parents were observed in the breakfast room and helping in classrooms. Parents went out of their way to greet me each of the four times I visited her school. The pride and ownership they
had in the school was clearly visible as they asked if I needed help locating the office or were just wishing me a good morning. Sharon’s school did not have as many parents visible during the day, but did talk about family engagement activities that occurred after school. Carla talked about parents at her school being former students at the school and how she taught many of them when they were students. The efforts of these principals to create a school culture that is welcoming to parents could speak to their understandings that the parents may not have had positive experiences when they were students. The efforts to engage both generations shows a commitment on the part of the principal to value the role of the child’s parent and view them as partners in their child’s education.

“These are their treasures”. The attitudes of the principal could also support the positive attitudes and proactive contacts made by the participants. Carla said that a pivotal moment for her was her principal’s statement that the children were their parents’ “treasures to the world” and therefore, teachers should treat those treasures delicately and with great respect. Carla took these words to heart and says her relationships with parents are so strong that most would “walk through a fire for her”. The participants made regular contacts with parents and Sharon gave an example where she went to a student’s home to talk to his mother about his missed detentions for dress code violations. Heidi does not call parents to give any kind of negative feedback for the first two months of school. During that time, she focuses her attention on the positive qualities and academic successes of each child. She says that she is sensitive to the fact that each child is “the apple of their parent’s eye”. Every parent has her personal cell phone number and one parent texted her during one of our interviews to ask if she needed any supplies for a project for the next day.
“Connected with one adult”. The participants also addressed ways that a positive school culture helped them form relationships with students and families. The idea that every student is “connected with one adult” in the building was shared by Sharon and was echoed by Heidi, Linda, Vickie and Carla. The cultures of each of their schools helps to ensure that these connections are realistically possible. At Sharon’s school, her middle school team meets on a daily basis to discuss student needs and to make sure that each child is feeling connected to the school. Linda’s school participates in a program called City Year to mentor and form relationships with students. Carla and Vickie spoke positively about the cafeteria workers and ways they looked out for bullying. Carla described the support staff at her school as people who “honor the children” and take time to get to know them. Carla and Heidi also commented that the school’s planning center coordinator, formerly known as the in-school suspension aide, were excellent resources for building relationships with students and parents. The planning center teacher at Heidi’s school is simply known by his name, indicating that his role is centered on building relationships rather than punishing children. Additionally, the security guard at Heidi’s school is known by his name and the students love to invite him to their classrooms to participate in projects and see their work. They understand that he has a role to keep them safe, but the emphasis is placed on getting to know the students and helping them feel connected to the school.

Summary of Chapter IV

Findings and analysis of data served to inform the research questions of this study. Themes were identified and analyzed that explored moments of critical consciousness of race and class in early childhood, pre-service and current teaching assignments.
Overall, their university experiences represented a gap in opportunities to explore race, class and pedagogies of empowerment. Universities held “color-blind” views on teaching and promoted the development of skill and theory over culturally responsive pedagogies and practices. These gaps were addressed when the participants became teachers and learned from mentors and when they formed strong student relationships early in their careers.

The participants were unique in their selection of urban settings as their first choice or only choice for placements. They felt a “need to help” and felt their placements were a “Calling”. Again, early relationships with students further opened their eyes to race and class and helped them develop even greater critical consciousness. They also fostered a desire to “look beyond the label” and hold high expectations for their students. These understandings helped inform the adoption of pedagogies and practices that are aligned with culturally responsive teachings. In these ways, student empowerment was evidenced through problems-posing curriculums that fostered leadership and decision-making.

Finally, the larger school culture was established by principals that also embraced culturally responsive pedagogies and this allowed the practices of the teachers to feel supported. Additionally, positive attitudes toward parental involvement created a family atmosphere and served to empower families as well. School support staff also embraced the culture of the school and were committed to forming relationships with the students.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the stories of White, female teachers who were successfully able to form strong relationships with minority students through an analysis of their stories in early childhood, pre-service teaching and current teaching experiences. For my study, I believed it was important to consider both the childhood and pre-service experiences that may have helped White, middle class teachers negotiate their identities, form strong relationships with their students and implement pedagogies of empowerment in their classrooms.

Research Questions

To this end, the following research questions guided my research:

What are the childhood and pre-service experiences of White, female teachers that cultivated critical consciousness of race and class and how have these formative experiences been further developed in the profession, leading to an ability to form strong relationships with poor and minority children and implement practices and pedagogies of empowerment in urban classrooms?

a) What childhood and adolescent experiences with family or friends allowed participants to establish a positive view of their own identity and the identities of people from diverse contexts?
b) What experiences as a pre-service teacher allowed participants to examine their identity and its potential relationship to power structures and pedagogies encountered in urban schools?

c) What experiences as a teacher allowed participants to explore White identity and reconcile power structures of race and class in their classrooms.

d) What other experiences prepared the teacher participants to work in urban environments, form strong relationships with their students and explore practices and pedagogies of empowerment?

From the stories of the participants, common themes emerged around race and class, university curriculums and current teaching practices. This study is guided by critical race theory and culturally responsive pedagogies as levers of empowerment for minority students. As such, this chapter seeks to discuss the findings of the study, implications for practice and recommendations that could foster spaces for critical reflections in early childhood, university teacher programs and school settings.

**Race and Class**

**Discussion around Race**

In the stories of the participants, a theme of “race was not a big deal” emerged. From Heidi who recalled playing with minority children on military bases to Vickie who grew up in a racially diverse neighborhood, the salience of race did not emerge as a theme that was critically explored in early childhood by the participants. Several factors, including parental views on race
and a lack of opportunity to discuss race in their predominately White schools and faith-based settings may have influenced these colorblind views despite early exposures to minorities.

The stories the participants share of their parents and their implied views on race are important to the participants’ personal racial identity formation and ways they view racial differences (Delpit, 1998). In Heidi’s stories, it appears her parents were accepting of other races and allowed her to play with minority children on the military bases. This early exposure to diversity may have allowed Heidi to interact more comfortably with persons of color later in life because she had prior experiences and unspoken parental approval. However, despite these early interactions, Heidi recounted that “race was not discussed” in her family. Heidi’s father was an officer and it can be assumed that considering the time period of her narrative, minority children lived on a different part of the base due to the rank and employment status of their parents. The assumed separation by race on the military base was absent from her narrative. One explanation for this absence could be that Heidi’s parents wanted her to grow up with positive attitudes toward minorities and also positive views of herself as a White child. Parents naturally want to build the self-esteem of their children. To discuss race as salient would require conversations of power and privilege that could be difficult for a young child to process and could result in feelings of guilt or anxiety as described in Helm’s “disintegration” stage (Helms, 1993). Without a clear strategy to discuss race with White children in a way that does not make them feel guilty or anxious, many parents may opt for silence as the best way to communicate racial acceptance. (Delpit, 1998). In this way, color is seen but not discussed as a way to convey acceptance of minorities while still preserving a positive identity as White.

Similarly, Carla told stories of attending African-American weddings as a child, but it appears her parents did not engage her in conversations around race and reasons she may have
been the only White girl at the wedding. Again, her narratives were silent on race which is interesting to note since many of the stories she told reflected her feelings of discrimination as a member of a European immigrant minority population in her city. In these stories, it appears that the struggles of her parents to gain acceptance as members of a European immigrant population influenced positive associations with Blacks as fellow members of an out group. However, the stories do not discuss ways the struggles of the Black guests at the wedding may have been compounded by race and the racist views of Whites. This could possibly be explained through the family’s lack of positive association with Whiteness and a refusal to be categorized in the dominant White group that they felt marginalized their family as well (Collins, 1998). These feelings could be traced through Carla’s narrative where she talks about “getting along better with Jews and Blacks than Whites” in her job after college. In this way, Carla can acknowledge color, but still hold colorblind views by refusing to associate with and have her personal identity framed by White dominate culture.

Linda, Sharon and Vickie shared experiences where race was more salient and framed in positive ways, both by what was communicated by their parents and what was not communicated in words and actions. Linda drove from her wealthy suburb through areas where riots were taking to place to her grandmother’s store in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. Linda recounted stories of her father’s pride in the diversity of the city and the act alone of driving through communities where riots were taking place to work at the corner store, must have sent a message to Linda that Black communities were not places she needed to fear. Sharon and Vickie were bussed across town as part of court ordered desegregation efforts. During those times, many parents placed their children in private schools to avoid bussing their children long distances and in exposing them to racial diversity. In contrast, Sharon and Vickie’s parents did permit them to
travel and gave the intentions of desegregation a chance. This action must have communicated a positive parental view of racial diversity to the participants. When the situations did not work out and both participants were exposed to racial hostilities, they said their parents removed them from the schools but it did not appear that negative discussions of race occurred. Certainly, some parents in that time period might have said, “You are not going back to that Black school.” However, the silence of the parents in the narratives in regard to race also sends powerful messages and presumably left limited opportunities for the participants to make sense of their situations. Sharon spoke of being called “You little White girl” but she did not speak to ways her mother may have helped situate her race in the context of the intentions of desegregation. Again, parents naturally want to help their children develop positive self-identities. To discuss race at such an early age could have left Sharon with feelings of guilt or anxiety regarding her race and ways it has been used to convey power and privilege (Delpit, 1998).

In contrast, Vickie’s mother did not shy away from conversations about race with her children. She openly discussed the stereotypes of each race and stressed that people should be judged by their character and not their skin color. It appears from Vickie’s stories that Vickie associated her identity as a “poor White” more closely with her Black and Latino neighbors than the White students she would later attend class with at the university. Similar to Carla, she rejected her association with dominant White culture. This represents the “immersion” stage of Helm’s theory where Whites try to understand what it really means to be White in America (Helms, 1993). It appears that Vickie’s self-identification as poor allowed her to align more closely with minorities than with Whites because she did not feel she grew up with the same power and privilege as other Whites from more affluent neighborhoods. She carried this identity to her predominately White university where she described challenges relating to her White
peers and professors. In many ways, Vickie might struggle to reach the level of “autonomy” discussed by Helms until she is able to form positive associations with White culture and seeks opportunities to learn from people who share her same skin color but do not share similar life experiences.

**Implications for Practice**

From the narratives, it was evident that early childhood experiences allowed the participants to “see race” through colorblind lenses influenced by unspoken parental views on racial diversity, but did not give them outlets to “speak race” in ways that would awaken critical consciousness. Talking with children about race is not usually a chapter found in parenting books. When my own daughter came home from kindergarten distraught from learning about Martin Luther King Jr. and that “White people didn’t used to like Black people”, I was at a loss for words and angry that a teacher had punctured her colorblind view of the world that I was nurturing by bringing her to (but not speaking about) events at my all Black school. I wasn’t prepared for the conversation and reassured her that those events happened a long time ago. (Oh, the lies we tell our children!) As I formed relationships with both minority students and colleagues at my school, I was able to engage in dialogue that not only helped me understand Black perspectives, but served to strengthen my identity as a White woman working in an all-Black school and as a parent. Conversations with students and colleagues of color became more comfortable and a safe space was created where I could ask questions with less fear of seeming racist or having to internalize feelings of guilt (Ladson-Billings, 2007). A few years later, when my daughter was upset that neighbors would not allow her Black friend to play with them, I was better prepared to engage in a conversation that was far from colorblind.
But without a space to engage in conversations around White privilege and White guilt, silent, colorblind stances become the most socially acceptable option. It is possible that even though I shared the same race as the participants, they chose to only tell stories that were colorblind because they didn’t want me to think they or their families held racist views. Race is not a comfortable topic and it is easy to see why White parents who hold generally positive views toward persons of color would opt for “colorblindness” as a middle of the road solution. This stance protects the dominant class from negotiating feelings of guilt or risking saying the wrong thing and being perceived as racist. However, this stance still represents a strategy situated in power. Whites can choose to engage in these conversations or to ignore them. Black parents must hold conversations regarding race with their children at very early ages. These conversations serve both to empower and to protect Black children. I instructed my daughter not to mention the racist feelings of the neighbors with her friend; but I would guess that if the conversation had occurred, her eight year old friend would not have been surprised. I could guess that her mother might have even prepared her for this reality on the car ride over to our house. I don’t know if she did – I was too embarrassed myself to talk about the day with her. I didn’t want her to think I lived in a racist neighborhood or associated with people who wouldn’t let their children play with hers. I regret not having the conversation; I could have learned more about myself and been better able to talk with my daughter. Without continued exposure to diversity and inclusion of diverse perspectives in conversations, opportunities for critical reflection for all races will remain limited.

In classrooms, these colorblind, silent views of race also serve as subtle ways to preserve White privilege, despite a teacher’s best intentions (Chubbock, 2004). The White teacher at the front of the classroom is able to influence the conversations of her classroom. If a teacher says
“race is not a big deal” that is effectively the end of the conversation. But for her Black and
Latino students who know race IS a big deal, her silence serves to contradict the narratives told
to them by their parents and their personal experiences with race at an early age. Ignoring the
salience of race could also influence a teacher’s ability to form strong relationships with her
students because they may feel she is out of touch with their realities. It is possible that the
students might like the teacher because she treats them fairly and provides opportunities for them
such as field trips; but without open conversations about race, power and privilege, students
might not feel the teacher is helping them celebrate their ethnicity, see themselves in the
curriculum or believe they possess power in the classroom to express their views. Heidi and
Sharon both stated that “race doesn’t come up in my classroom.” What they may fail to
understand is that the topic of race most likely does come up in the classroom – they are just not
engaged in the discussion. Students in the classroom may interpret this silence as another form of
subtle racism (Chubbock, 2004). White teachers need to recognize subtle forms of power and
ways they can unintentionally disenfranchise children from schools. Conversations around race
may be difficult; but spaces for them to occur must be initiated and created so students feel
valued and empowered.

**Discussion around Class**

From the narratives, it appeared the participants were better able to “see” and “speak”
about differences in class, although stories that emphasized the role of race in class mobility
were noticeably absent. Carla, Sharon and Vickie recounted stories where money was limited
and hard work and effort were encouraged by their parents as a means to advance socially. From
the stories they told, they have used their financial struggles and their success in overcoming
them, as a means to identify with their minority students and inspire them with a belief that hard
work and effort can pay off with class advancement. However, the stories lacked a discussion of a realization that their poverty was situational rather than generational and the role of White privilege in their relatively rapid social advancement. Sharon speaks of feeling out of place in her wealthy, White high school, but does not discuss ways this experience may have helped her unlock the cultural capital she always held as a member of the dominant class when she went off to attend a predominately White university. Similarly, Vickie spoke to feelings of being “labeled as White” in her university teacher education program, but did not speak to ways that being White may have helped her challenge her White professor about her grades and which led to her attaining a degree that advanced her class status to that of a working professional.

These meritocratic, “American Dream” views of class are the colorblind equivalent to discussions of race (Chubbock, 2004). The notion of hard work and effort as a means to social advancement is embedded in American culture. These are easy conversations to have around the dinner table and teach our children in school. However, social reproduction theory states that minorities have already penetrated these views of capitalism and know that the American Dream is not as easy to attain as a minority (Willis, 1977). White privilege clouds the ability to understand the role of race in class advancement and may impede efforts to form strong relationships with minority students who already understand and acknowledge the power of Whiteness (Delpit, 1998). White privilege might also explain why Vickie could read Ain’t No Makin It by Jay MacLeod in college and still not be able to articulate why she and her boyfriend “made it out” when so many others did not. As strongly as Vickie identified as poor in her stories, she did not speak to ways her Whiteness may have leveraged opportunities not afforded to her minority peers in her neighborhood to “make it out.” Perhaps Vickie de-emphasized her
Whiteness to avoid White stereotypes of racism just as Carla may have highlighted her European immigrant identity to demonstrate a bond with discrimination caused by ethnic origin.

In contrast, the stories of Linda and Heather highlight the importance of “giving back” as a response to their class status. Linda’s family made a commitment to work at the corner store every weekend and Linda’s mother was a teacher in the same urban district where Linda teaches. Linda stated that these early experiences shaped her thinking of teaching in an urban setting as a way to “make a difference” and help students advance. Similarly, Heidi attended a Catholic college that held Vincentian philosophies of helping the poor. In both these instances, it appears that Linda and Heidi were encouraged by their families or faith institution to use their social status as a means to help others. However, the narratives show an absence of families or faith institutions to create spaces for the participants to critically explore ways race could impede class mobility for minorities. They also did not share stories where they were encouraged to use their race or class status to empower those in low class statuses through collective action.

**Implications for Practice**

Similar to critical consciousness of race, critical consciousness of class is also vital for White teachers to explore so they can best serve poor and minority students in their classrooms. From the stories of the participants, it is clear the teachers utilized many practices that could be considered culturally responsive. Group work, field trips to the African-American history museum, advocacy for the arts and time set aside for class meetings are just a few examples from the narratives. These stories highlight many aspects of the role of the teachers as empowerment agents as described by Stanton-Salazar (2011). These aspects include an awareness that low-status youth require advocates to navigate dominant structures such as schools and that “going
against the grain” in their classrooms can challenge practices and pedagogies that reproduce class orders (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The practices and pedagogies, however, appear to be limited to the space of their classrooms and do not seek to challenge systemic structures inside and outside of the school that also may serve to oppress students. Overall, the teachers have negotiated space in their rooms to build relationships with students and implement culturally responsive practices and pedagogies. That their stories do not speak to a desire for systemic advocacy may speak to their evolving understanding of social reproduction theory or that they do not view their role in teaching as a political agent of change (Ladson-Billings, 2007). I don’t believe they lack a desire to serve in this role; they just may have not progressed to a point in their development of critical consciousness that moves them to this next level of culturally responsive teaching.

Stanton-Salazar’s characteristics of “empowerment institutional agents” include the following: (a) An awareness of social structures such as schools that can act to problematize the success of low-status youth; (b) A critical awareness that low-status youth require institutional support; (c) A willingness to not act on the established rules of the social structure that serve to oppress; (d) A commitment to serve an advocate for low-status youth to help them access institutional supports and (e) a willingness to be identified by a larger community as one who seeks to empower youth to challenge the very structures that oppress them and work with students to change these structural conditions (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Stanton-Salazar presents these points as “characteristics” and I believe they closely align with the stage/phase theories presented by Helms and can also be interpreted as stages. As teachers develop critical consciousness of race and class, they can move through these empowerment stages and become more effective in implementing culturally responsive
pedagogies. The ability for teachers to name practices that serve to oppress low-income and minority students might also be important as teachers might move into practices that speak to collective action. The extent to which colleges of education and schools might help teachers name oppressive practices as “social reproduction” might help teachers like Heidi connect their acute understandings of standardized testing as evidence of low expectations with a desire to engage in efforts to enact systemic, political changes that might better serve her students.

Many of the participants spoke to an awareness of social structures that serve to limit opportunities for low-status youth and could speak to ways their school or their classrooms worked to provide institutional supports. Heidi’s school is designed in part to mix socio-economic statuses. A non-scripted, IB curriculum provides students of all races and socio-economic backgrounds access to a rich curriculum with highly trained teachers, support staff and parent volunteers. Carla spoke to an awareness of the power of arts curriculum for minority students and her efforts to keep the arts alive at her school and in the district. This ability to “see” class differences is similar to Helm’s “disintegration” stage where Whites acknowledge race through a personal experience. This experience serves to “open their eyes” to race and could also serve to “open their eyes” to class differences as well. Sharon’s story about the little boy eating from the dumpster also served to “open her eyes” to the need to include socio-emotional discussions in her classrooms.

As the teachers progressed in their careers, they began to negotiate with their principals to go against the grain and provide access to pedagogies such as group work, democratic class meetings and project-based learning that are typically experienced in more affluent school districts. Similarly, participants began to see their role as advocates for students and wanted to help them access the cultural capital needed for success in a White dominated society. In this
way, Linda took her students on field trips, Sharon visited students in their homes and Vickie helped a student navigate the court system. These next levels of empowerment may have been possible as the participants gained experience and confidence in the classroom and had more opportunities to critically explore the ideals of capitalism through their relationships with their students. As their relationships with students grew, they could see ways that poverty, but not necessarily race, limited students’ abilities to be successful in school. Class status was a shared experience with Sharon, Carla and Vickie so it may have been easier to critically explore the role of class rather than race in schools.

Additionally, their growing confidence as teachers might have also influenced their relationships with their principals to allow them to negotiate time to implement culturally responsive pedagogies. From the stories shared, a mutual trust between teachers and principals seemed to exist that formed an unspoken alliance to provide culturally responsive practices on a room-to-room basis without drawing attention from district level administrators. As Vickie shared, as long as she kept her test scores high, she was permitted to go “off the script” and implement strategies she felt best for her students. This stage is similar to Helm’s “pseudo-independent” stage where Whites recognize race and want to help minorities “change themselves” so can assimilate better into dominant culture (Helms, 1993. 61). In this way, the participants are providing opportunities for students to access cultural capital but little is aimed at “transforming the consciousness” of their students and encouraging them to collectively challenge systems, such as the school they attend, to end oppressive practices (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Until these next levels of empowerment are reached, culturally responsive pedagogies may remain isolated in individual classrooms and systemic change may be difficult to achieve.
Recommendations: Creating Spaces for Critical Reflection on Race and Class

Without spaces and means to discuss the intersections of race and class in families, schools and other institutions, White privilege may not be penetrated by Whites (Willis, 1977). Race and class inequalities cannot just be the focus of conversations held around Black dinner tables, churches and schools. These conversations need to occur with people of many races and backgrounds sitting in the same space and engaging in conversation that seeks to understand and empower. These spaces are necessary to develop the critical consciousness of dominant groups and to progress to a point where the dominant group’s purpose shifts from one of helping minorities access dominant culture to collaborating with minorities through collective action to have an equal seat at the table without sacrificing their identities. This shift moves from “How can I help you join us?” to “How can we work together in ways that value differences and don’t require one group to sacrifice their identity to obtain power?”

Predominately White faith-based institutions could create space for conversations that do not stop at “helping the poor” but critically explore White privilege and ways structural forces perpetuate racism and classism. Partnering with minority faith-based institutions to create space for these critical conversations could foster mutual understanding and collective action. It is important that pastors reach out to fellow pastors to facilitate these conversations and mutually agree upon materials that would facilitate critical consciousness. It is also important that Black pastors don’t wait around for the White pastors to call. The responsibility is reciprocal and the possible results are mutually beneficial. Black leaders share in the opportunity to create spaces for conversations around race. Additionally, deficit-based literature such as Ruby Payne’s *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* have been commonly used in my observations of predominately White churches and faith-based social institutions that do attempt to engage in
conversations around race and class. These materials perpetuate deficit thinking and do not allow Whites to engage in critical reflection when their culture is presented as ideal (Brown, 2013). Social justice efforts in our faith-based institutions that create spaces for critical conversations and reflections might be better positioned to move beyond Band-aide, feel good solutions such as food drives and mitten trees and into spaces that foster relationships of empowerment and collective action with poor and minority people. In this way, faith-based institutions can serve the needs of minority communities while also working together to overturn the money changing tables in social structures that serve to oppress (Matthew 21:12).

In the classroom, predominately White schools could benefit from curriculums such as *Facing History and Ourselves* that openly discuss race and class and help students of all races explore their identities in ways that openly discuss power, privilege and empowerment. Similar to strategies suggested for faith-based institutions, schools that lack diversity in race or socio-economic status could partner with schools to create spaces where students of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds could come together to critically explore issues of race, class and structures of power such as the schools they attend. These conversations might move predominately White schools past school supply drives for poor schools and into conversations with their minority peers around scarcity of resources in predominately minority schools. Collective action could take the form of members from both schools contacting political institutions or attending school board meetings to advocate for proper funding and opportunities.
University Teacher Preparation Programs

Discussion

State teacher licensing requirements and university accreditation regulations have emphasized content knowledge and standardized pedagogies as solutions to the achievement gap for minority students (Kraft, 2010). Research shows that a minority student is less likely to have a teacher with a degree in the subject they teach (Kraft, 2010). Similarly, pedagogies that emphasize scripted curriculums with one size fits all learning activities seek to ensure a standardization of content delivery and levels of engagement for all students. In reality, however, efforts to ensure a universal curriculum for all learners, limit opportunities to celebrate diversity and address the unique learning needs and styles of minority learners (Sleeter, 2012). Standardized approaches also tend to operate from a deficit mindset that maintain students and teachers lack knowledge and skills to learn and teach effectively (Sleeter, 2012). With a greater emphasis on content knowledge and standardized curriculums, spaces for critical reflection such as social issues classes are being eliminated from licensing requirements and subsequently, university programs (Shuber, 2012).

This colorblind view of pedagogies as universally applicable by licensing and university systems fails to celebrate diversity and recognize the unique learning needs of minority students as described in culturally responsive teaching pedagogies and practices (Ladson-Billings, 2007). When I asked Heidi and Linda about the efforts of their universities to present curriculums that would best serve minority students, both responses were identical: “Nope, it was all the same.” What we are learning in recent efforts to reform “No Child Left Behind” legislation is that policy makers are realizing that the “same” curriculum doesn’t produce “same” results as defined by
higher standardized tests scores. States, districts and surrounding higher education institutions need autonomy to design curriculums that best meet the individual needs of the learners they serve. Case studies have pointed to the possibility that culturally responsive pedagogies raise student achievement for both dominant and minority groups of students (Sleeter, 2012). Further research is needed to better generalize these findings.

**Implications for Practice**

Sharon, Carla and Vickie all attended the same university program that is located within the city where they teach. The university offers a specialization in urban education which places it ahead of many other teacher education programs that do not offer this concentration. The premise is that urban teachers require different skills and experiences to prepare them for this work than their suburban counterparts. To this end, participants are largely placed in field experiences in city schools. However, it did not appear from the stories of the participants that the curriculums offered were differentiated and students who aspired to work with urban students were placed in the same classes as aspiring suburban teachers to engage students by “graphing M & M’s” and including “multicultural literature” in lessons. These strategies may address some elements of culturally responsive teaching such as group work and diverse literature, but it did not appear from the stories of the participants that these strategies were framed as culturally responsive or as part of an intentional sequence of pedagogies that placed student empowerment in the center of learning.

**Recommendations: University Partnerships Programs**

Culturally responsive teaching engages students by celebrating their ethnicity and encouraging them to challenge oppressive systems and structures. For these pedagogies to be
accepted as important by White, female prospective teachers, spaces must be created for teachers to critically explore White privilege, oppressive structures in society and ways to participate through educational institutions in collective action (Romano, 2008). Social issues classes, culturally responsive pedagogy classes and partnerships with current teachers in the field who are using culturally responsive pedagogies could help create spaces for White, female teachers to critically reflect on their identities, the identities of the students they plan to teach and ways they could work together to remove oppressive barriers. These spaces for critical reflection would serve to personalize the curriculum for the prospective teacher as they arrived at and were supported through critical moments of consciousness and help them understand the power of personalizing curriculum for the learners they will serve. In their stories, Carla and Sharon recalled a multicultural literature class and Vickie remembered the professor who gave her Ain’t No Makin It by Jay MacLeod. These classes are just a start and need to be planned in a sequence of learning experiences that place culturally responsive teaching at the forefront of urban education teacher preparation programs. In urban teacher preparation programs, culturally responsive teaching should be more than the title of a semester class; it should be the cornerstone of the entire program.

University teacher education programs might also be able to create spaces for critical reflection by involving pre-service teachers, mentor teachers and professors in shared spaces and experiences in the schools where minority students learn. If teacher racial identity development and understandings of minority learners are important to the ability of teachers to form strong relationships with their students, then early field experiences that connect pre-service teachers with minority students are essential in urban teacher preparation programs. Most teacher preparation programs begin field experiences in their third year of study. Students spend their
first years learning theory from university professors and their last years applying those theories in field experiences with mentor teachers. From their stories, the participants did not feel the theories and pedagogies taught in the university connected with the realities of the field. Vickie’s question of “Who is the Vygotsky for the Hood?” and Sharon’s comment that “It’s all just talk until you get into the classroom.” speak to this disconnect between theory and practice the participants encountered. Freshman and sophomore field experiences would bring preservice teachers closer to the students they will teach. The relationships built with students in these early collegiate years could also awaken critical consciousness at an earlier age and allow preservice teachers to better progress through stages of empowerment and identity as previously theorized. In these first years, students would focus on observations of pedagogy, looking specifically for the implementation of culturally responsive practices. The use of reflective journaling could help students record observations and situate their prior school experiences with those of the students in classroom (Romano, 2008).

Additionally, service learning classes where the focus is centered on personal reflection and critical understandings of race and class could create additional spaces for preservice teachers to explore their identities as they relate to power and privilege. In studies, service learning has demonstrated increased opportunities for preservice teachers to form relationships with their students and think critically about structures that may operate in oppressive ways (Romano, 2008). These service learning class would not replace field experiences, but would complement those experiences by exploring other areas in minority communities such as justice, governmental and health care systems where structural forces limit the power of persons of color. Outcomes of these experiences would center on the ability of students to “see, judge and act” with the members of the community. These experiences would be important to illustrate the
system implications of practices that serve to oppress and ways they intersect with each other to institutionalize poverty. For instance, health care access has a direct effect on student success in the classroom (Ickovics, 2013). Student attendance and their physical and mental health influence student achievement (Ickovics, 2013). Service learning experiences that would bring an immunization clinic to a local school might help pre-service students understand the other structural forces that can influence a student’s success and engagement in the classroom.

Another way to intersect theory and practice with the professors and mentors in the field would be the wider implementation of Lab Schools. Traditional lab schools have been placed on or near college campuses and allow professors convenient access to pre-service teachers and research subjects. I would suggest that a more fluid intersection of roles and responsibilities between professors and mentor teachers might benefit pre-service teachers. Carla shared that she felt her professors who had not taught in schools for a long time did not understand the practical aspects of the profession. She attributed her connection to her multicultural literature teacher in part to her “not being out of the classroom for too long”. In these new lab schools, professors and mentor teachers would co-teach students, both the pre-service teachers and the PK-12 students in the school. This side-by-side model might better help pre-service teachers see the connections between Vygotsky’s social learning theories and their practical implementations in school settings because they would not be experienced in isolation. In this way, professors would also remain engaged in the practical realities of teaching and be better positioned to act as facilitators of pre-service teacher learning due to the shared experiences that could become subjects for the theoretical aspects of the curriculum. When pre-service teacher and professor/mentor teacher share an experience with the same child struggling to read a story, they might better be able to connect theory and practice in evening classes as they work together to understand solutions.
This new lab school model could also create spaces and increased time for reflective practices for pre-service teachers, professors and mentor teachers. The work of Cochran-Smith explores the concept that “becoming a teacher” is a “process and not an event” where teachers need time in their university programs to engage in “reflective practices” (Cochran-Smith, 2012, p.109). This process could be extended to include professors and mentor teachers as side-by-side learners who model reflective practices through continuous engagement in school teaching and the study of theory. Experiences in these new lab schools would be scaffolded in a similar nature to residency programs of physicians. Freshmen and sophomores would spend time in lab schools observing practice and building relationships with students and mentor teacher/professors. Junior year students would focus on implanting culturally responsive teaching pedagogies in classrooms and seniors would spend their entire year in residence at the lab school. By this fourth year, their coursework would be complete and feedback would come from their mentors/professors who would have daily opportunities to observe their growth. Ideally, lab schools would be able to hire preservice teachers for a fifth year where students would have their own classroom, receive compensation and still benefit from the support network they built in their four years of residency. In the medical field, residents learn from doctors they encounter in the hospitals who have first-hand knowledge of the resident’s interactions with patients and their abilities to diagnose conditions. Moving professors into the school setting through lab schools would bring preservice teachers and mentor/professors closer together and allow each to continue to grow in the profession and provide greater opportunities to critically reflect on shared experiences.
Discussion

From the stories the participants told, many of their first opportunities for critical moments of consciousness came through relationships formed with students in their first years of teaching. These relationships “opened their eyes” to cultural differences and systems that serve to oppress minority students. These relationships changed the way the participants taught to include class meetings to address socio-emotional needs and culturally responsive pedagogies that emphasized group work, outside of school learning experiences such as field trips and student autonomy. In this way, the participants are much like the “empowerment agents” described in the research of Stanton Salazar (2011). They have become awakened to the barriers that students of color face and provide opportunities for students to experience autonomy, support and broader world experiences. However, it appears from the stories that the participants have not reached a level of critical reflection that would inspire them to engage in collective action with their students or with their colleagues to challenge the very structures that oppress their students as the “empowerment agents” Stanton-Salazar suggest. Perhaps until their own critical reflections of Whiteness penetrate concepts such as the American Dream as equally attainable for all through hard work and effort, they will remain in this phase of identity development where they understand their roles as providers of opportunities for minority students and not necessarily agents of social change. Culturally responsive pedagogies, fully implemented, require collective action. The aim is not for the dominant class to assert their power to bring about solutions, but for the minority class to realize their collective strengths and initiate change from within. Critical reflection manifested in collective action will take time to nurture and providing spaces for these reflections is important in our schools.
Additionally, the stories appear to explore relationships where teachers are helping students by providing opportunities through culturally responsive pedagogies. The stories share themes of class meetings where students are making decisions, projects where students demonstrate responsibility in group settings and outside learning experiences such as field trips. The participants credit the adoption of many of these pedagogies to mentor teachers from their early years in schools. Mentor teachers are commonly placed with new teachers; however the scope of their assignments often focus on content knowledge and implementing standardized curriculums (Cochran-Smith, 2012). It would appear from the narratives, that the spaces the mentors created for critical reflection was also important. Linda shared that her mentor teacher opened her eyes to the value of field trips and Carla’s mentor encouraged her to “use her wit” and be herself with the students. Mentoring programs that include culturally responsive pedagogies and intentional opportunities for critical reflection could act as systems of support for new teachers as they negotiate their identity development with the cultural differences of the students they teach.

As the participants shared their stories, the theme of principals as early mentors and later as educational partners also emerged. Heidi and Carla both told stories where their first principals encouraged them to persist and opened their eyes to culturally responsive practices such as Carla’s principal who taught her that each student is a “treasured gift” to their parent and “you don’t rip apart people’s gifts.” It appears these principals viewed their roles as mentors and instructional coaches for the participants in their first years. This is in contrast to principals that hold a more “sink or swim” mentality toward new teachers. Efforts principals make to create time for relationships with new teachers could help open spaces for critical reflections.
Similarly, as the participants gained experience in the classroom, they were able to negotiate with principals to employ the pedagogies they felt would best meet the needs of their students. It was interesting to note that in the stories the participants told, the pedagogies the participants negotiated were not disputed as wrong by the principals. They were merely acknowledged as not part of district curriculums. The extent to which teacher and principal “went off the grid” together as long as test scores were preserved, was interesting to note. The mutual risks teachers and principals take to employ culturally responsive pedagogies in an era of standardization and accountability highlight unspoken alliances formed for the benefit of children. Ways in which districts can empower principals to be the instructional leaders of their buildings and trust their knowledge of their students and teachers, could open further spaces for collaboration at building levels around student needs.

**Implications for Practice**

Culturally responsive practices and spaces for critical reflection in our schools could become ways for students to “see” themselves in the curriculum and ways for teachers to “see” their students as individuals (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Culturally responsive pedagogies are built around the individual students in the classroom. They teach content through the eyes of struggle rather than dominance and celebrate diverse cultures for their achievements and contributions to society. With a critical lens toward power and privilege, these pedagogies help tell the other side of the story – which is often the story of the child sitting in the classroom (Delpit, 1998). The wider implementation of culturally responsive practices in all schools could help students better situate their personal experiences within the context of the curriculum. This could make school real, relevant and empowering.
Efforts at standardization seek to level the playing field so all students have access to a same, high quality curriculum (Kraft, 2010). Standardization seeks to ensure high expectations for all learners and uniform ways to measure success so “no child is left behind.” These sentiments are not without merit and high quality, high expectation curriculums are essential for student success. However, the depersonalization of the curriculum for the sake of standardization leaves many students without a voice in the classroom, particularly minority students.

Standardization presents curriculum from dominant White perspectives and at best is hard for minority students to see its relevance and at worst disenfranchises them from the curriculum because they know it to be false (Willis, 1977). So while standardization may be testing children into uniform definitions of success, they are leaving the personalities and stories of our children behind.

**Recommendations: Critical Reflection in Schools**

Schools can become exciting spaces for critical reflection and collective action to develop. For these spaces to truly flourish, the following is required: (a) Teachers who want to work with diverse student populations and want to challenge themselves as teachers and individuals (b) A school culture that supports critical reflections and strong student-adult relationships and (c) School-wide culturally responsive curriculum and practices that serve as the cornerstone of student empowerment.

From the stories, the participants chose to work in the district where they serve so they could specifically work with poor and minority students. A desire to work with minority students might have better positioned them to form strong relationships and seek pedagogies that would best serve their students. Urban districts often have difficulty filling positions and can hire
teachers that want a job but may have little desire to work with students of color or challenge their own belief systems to become better teachers in these environments. Heidi and Sharon described teaching as a “calling”. A desire to serve and grow as a person, not just a professional, are important characteristics for work in urban schools. These qualities should be screened for in applications to urban schools. The use of the Haberman Teacher Screener is a good start to find candidates committed to working with minority students (Haberman, 1995). I have used it as a principal and have found the results not perfect, but compelling. I have also found that including students on interview teams also screens applicants effectively. Students seem to intuitively know which candidates would be best for them. The students ask all the questions and the adults on the team watch the interactions between candidate and students. Successful candidates are at ease with the power given to the students to choose their next teacher. Successful candidates also demonstrate an ability to develop rapport with students in the sample lesson they are required to teach as part of the interview. With these hiring practices, schools might better select teachers who want to serve diverse student populations and grow themselves as individuals and professionals.

The stories of the participants highlight the significance of strong relationships with their students. These relationships became mutually beneficial and led to moments of critical consciousness for the teachers and empowerment for the students. It is important that professional development in urban schools nurture the identity development of teachers and help situate race and class in the context of their personal growing up experiences and those of the students they serve. Opportunities to engage in book studies like *The Dreamkeepers*, hear from leaders in the community and engage in the community through participation at events or visits to churches could become meaningful entry points to critical conversations around race and
class. These conversations could then naturally lead into culturally responsive pedagogies as ways to meet the needs of students and the community.

A strong, student-centered school culture is also important for the development of relationships with students. The leader of school culture is the building principal (Cochran-Smith, 2012). The methodology of this study asked the superintendent to first identify principals who were able to form strong relationships with students and who had implemented practices that could be considered culturally responsive in their schools. With this layer of sampling, it was not surprising to hear participants speak to cultures in their buildings that supported strong relationships and culturally responsive teaching. The participants spoke favorably of their current principals and the cultures they led in their schools. Heidi spoke of a culture where support staff engaged with students in the classroom and visitors were always welcome. Linda’s principal held morning meetings with his students and Sharon’s principal sponsored monthly parent/family nights. The participants also credited their current principals for trusting them to teach in ways they felt best served their students – ways that could be considered culturally responsive. In her early teaching days, Heidi described having to “do the dance” with her principal where she would teach one way for her evaluation and ways she felt best on the other days. It appears from the stories told that the teachers and principals in this study are “doing the dance” together. In times where standardized test scores are tied to evaluations and employment “going against the grain” could cost a principal their job. Interestingly, the schools in this study have some of the highest test scores in the district. Perhaps as previously suggested, culturally responsive practices positive school cultures and strong relationships do more to raise student achievement than they receive credit (Sleeter, 2012). It might also be interesting to learn the extent to which the superintendent, who recommended the principals, is in on the “dance” as well. Further research
on the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogies will be essential in efforts to shift from standardization to personalization in our schools.

Finally, culturally responsive pedagogies should become the cornerstone of curriculum in our schools so students can “see”, “judge” and “act” in real and meaningful ways (Freire, 1970). Standardization has become a popular curricular response to closing the achievement gap in poor and minority schools. Standardization assumes that the problem of achievement lies within knowledge and skill deficits of the student and the teacher. Culturally responsive pedagogies understands the problem of achievement lies within the oppressive structures of governments and schools. Culturally responsive teaching treats students and teachers as valued individuals that already possess knowledge and skills. It also understands that the development of this knowledge and skill could lead to empowerment and collective action that could dismantle structures of power in our communities such as our schools. For this reason, teachers who employ culturally responsive pedagogies must be “critically awakened” to act beyond their individual classrooms to include participation in political spaces that advocate with poor and minority communities for school structures that serve to end social reproduction. The support and partnership of teacher unions and administrative organizations could act as leaders in these efforts so teachers and principals could safely move beyond “doing the dance” and change the tune completely for the benefit of the students we serve.

Conclusion

This study sought to inquire about the experience of White, female teachers who have been successful in forming relationships with minority students and implementing culturally responsive practices in their classrooms. From the collection of data, moments of critical
consciousness were analyzed to inform ways the participants viewed race, class, university teaching experience and current teaching assignments. Critical race theory framed the analysis in studying the identities of the participants with attention to the intersection of race and class and their understandings of structural forces of oppression such as schools. Findings spoke to a group of dedicated teachers whose personal explorations of race and class have informed the culturally responsive pedagogies they currently employ in their classrooms and ways they act as agents of empowerment (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). However, the teacher narratives do not reflect evidence of phases of identity development characterized by an awakened desire to engage in collective action where their efforts would move outside of the classroom and into political spaces. Future research would benefit from a return to the teachers of this study to inquire about their political engagement in spaces around educational issues. Additionally another study where the methodology would select not only teachers who had employed culturally responsive pedagogies, but teachers who had also engaged in wider political empowerment efforts would be recommended. An analysis of their prior life and pre-service experiences in comparison to the participants of this study might help identify opportunities and spaces for critical reflection not previously considered.
REFERENCES


